

Investigating capacity to use evidence

Time for a more objective view?

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Summary

Support for the use of research evidence has been a major feature of international development efforts in recent years. While much attention has been paid to strengthening the supply of research information, there is also a need to ensure that policy makers and other users are able to demand and use research. This has led to many capacity building programmes aimed at improving these skills. There is, however, relatively little research examining actual capacity to access, evaluate and use research evidence as a basis of deciding what skills need to be supported.

This reflective paper explores some reasons for this and suggests that such research is not being carried out simply because researchers are not used to using more objective methodologies to assess capacity. It then discusses some alternative methodologies that can be used to objectively assess capacity gaps.

Further research to understand capacity needs will allow future capacity building efforts to be tailored to actual needs.

In recent years, increasing attention has been paid to the use of research in the formulation of policy as a way of enhancing its effectiveness. The UK Government, for instance, in 1999 called for “better use of evidence and research in policy making and better focus on policies that will deliver long term goals” (Cabinet Office, 1999) and the Australian Prime Minister, in 2008, stated that “evidence-based policy-making is at the heart of being a reformist government” (Banks, 2009).

This focus on the use of evidence is not limited to high- or middle-income countries. Evidence-informed policy is growing in importance among policy makers and development practitioners in low-income countries. As the Director of the Tanzanian Council for Science and Technology was quoted as saying, “if you are poor, actually you need more evidence before you invest, rather than if you are rich” (Oxman, et al., 2010)

Promoting evidence-informed policy relies not only on supporting the ‘supply’ of research evidence but also the ‘demand’ from policy makers¹ (Audit Commission, 2009). The demand for research evidence is influenced both by

policy makers’ incentives or motivations to use research and also by their capacity to access, understand and use research (Newman, et al., 2011).

A research paper looking at how civil society can be more effective in policy engagement (Court & Young, 2006) found that two important, and interlinked, obstacles to research and evidence being used to influence policy are that policy makers are not used to drawing on research and that they have limited capacity to use and adapt evidence in policy processes. Similarly, Fred Carden, in his seminal book on development research and policy making (Carden, 2009), states that “weak capacity to absorb and implement research is a common and chronic contingency”.

The authors have noticed that while numerous researchers have attempted to understand capacity to make use of evidence, the majority have based their conclusions on perceptions and self-reporting rather than attempting to determine capacity more objectively. It is not clear why the question of capacity has generally been approached in this way: whether this focus is a result of funders’ preference for such methodologies or whether researchers themselves favour such subjective assessments.

Examples of studies which have focused on perceived capacities and needs include those that use questionnaires to analyse the information seeking behaviour of legislators for example, Members of the Kuwaiti Parliament (Mansour & Alkhurainej, 2011) and the Kwara State House of Assembly (Folorunsho & Ibrahim, 2010). Other studies have used interview-based methods to understand the information seeking behaviour of legislators for example in Pakistan (Nazli, 2008) and the United States of America (Jewell & Bero, 2008).

Finally, some studies have used mixed-methodologies, for instance Jones, Jones and Walsh which used interview, focus groups and an electronic survey to measure the perception of policy makers, researchers and intermediaries from a range of countries about use of evidence (Jones, 2008). The latter study of the science-policy interface in developing countries (ibid) concludes with several strategies to overcome the “tensions and obstacles at the science-policy interface,” and states that “there is a strong need for capacity-building, institutional reform and public education...Policy-makers need a better understanding of scientific information, along with civil servants in a number of ministries in national and local government.”

Context

In 2011 INASP launched a call for proposals to carry out research investigating the capacity and incentives of policy makers to access and use research. In particular, the following topics were highlighted as being of interest: assessing the demands of policy makers for research information; assessing the capabilities of policy makers/influencers to access and use research information; evaluating the use of evidence in existing policy making outputs; exploring the links between policy makers, research intermediaries and researchers; and evaluating efforts to build capacity for evidence-informed policy making. Despite the focus of the call for proposals on assessing the capacity of policy makers, it was interesting to see that very few of the proposals attempted any sort of objective evaluation of this capacity.

Of 63 research proposals, 15 (24%) mentioned policy makers' skills, abilities, capacity or capabilities as part of their research interests (figure 1).

However, only two of the proposals included any methodology which could give some objective assessment of capabilities; both of these proposed using a diagnostic test to determine knowledge and skills. The research methodologies that were most commonly suggested were more subjective: focus group discussions and key informant interviews.

To explore the reasons behind this, four grant recipients were interviewed to find out why more objective assessment methods were not included as a methodological approach in their original research proposals.

All of the interviewed recipients revealed that the main reason they had not used such research methodologies was that they were not familiar with them. For example, one researcher stated "I was not really aware of the existence of alternative 'objective' methods of measuring capacity in policy studies"

It would appear that questionnaires, interviews and focus groups are the methods that the interviewees are familiar with and therefore the methods they propose using in new research. For example one recipient stated: "We use questionnaires, interviews and focus group discussions - going out and talking to people to hear what they are saying, are our most common techniques. These come to mind as they are the most common methods that we use." This suggests that the researcher is starting with a methodology and considering how it can be fit to a given research question rather than starting with the question and considering which method could be used to answer it.

Why is this important?

Being able to critically recognise and understand one's own gap in skills and knowledge is a difficult process which takes guided thought. A report investigating adult skills measurement as part of achieving the goals of the European Union's (EU) Lisbon strategy (Haahr, et al., 2004), critiques the "survey-based self-assessment" that is "frequently used to measure skills." It goes on to say that "self-assessments are subject to self-esteem bias, may be unreliable, and are

difficult to validate".

Indeed, the few studies which have looked at both perception of needs and at more objective assessments of behaviour/capabilities have found a significant mismatch. For example, a study of the handling of scientific issues in the Parliament of Uganda revealed that while many policy makers rated themselves highly on their understanding of science issues, the actual abilities of individuals to understand and use scientific information was low (Nath, 2011). The report concludes that in that setting, "on the whole, MPs have low levels of scientific literacy, although the majority still consider themselves 'well informed'." Although almost 80% of Members of Parliament (MPs) who participated in the survey considered themselves well informed, an expert review of the debates in Parliament suggested that MPs' level of knowledge was significantly lower than reported by the survey (a finding that was also confirmed by interviews with some MPs).

The use of self-assessment is not just limited to assessing individual capacity needs; it has also been used in the context of assessing organisational capacity needs. The Canadian Health Systems Research Foundation recently released an organisational self-assessment tool (SAT) aimed at helping organisations "... identify how you gather and use research and where there is potential for improvement". The tool explores the ability to acquire, assess, adapt and apply evidence through a series of questions aimed at decision makers within the organisation. The suggested process involves key decision makers discussing, reflecting then responding to the key questions but again is ultimately a subjective assessment of capacity needs (Canadian Health Research Foundation, 2012).

Alternative methodologies

While there is a lot of merit in perception based capacity assessment, a number of methodologies can be used to more objectively evaluate capacity to access and use research. It is possible, for example, to commission experts to review the use of evidence in written policy outputs. This method was used in the above study of the Ugandan parliament. Policy briefs (produced by the parliamentary research department) and transcripts of debates concerning scientific issues were distributed to expert reviewers who were asked to comment on issues including scientific accuracy, use of evidence and bias (Nath, 2011).

A recent UK Audit Commission study used several research methods to understand how "councils can make better decisions by making the most of information they have or can readily gather" (Audit Commission, 2009). As well as conducting in-depth interviews, focus groups and surveys, they used more objective methodologies to assess the capacity of UK councils in making informed decisions; for example, they analysed data from Comprehensive Performance Assessments, data quality assessments, diaries and proformas.

Another strategy could be to observe the performance of tasks that require the use of research evidence and evaluate the ability to source and use such information. For example one could observe how the internet is used to find information

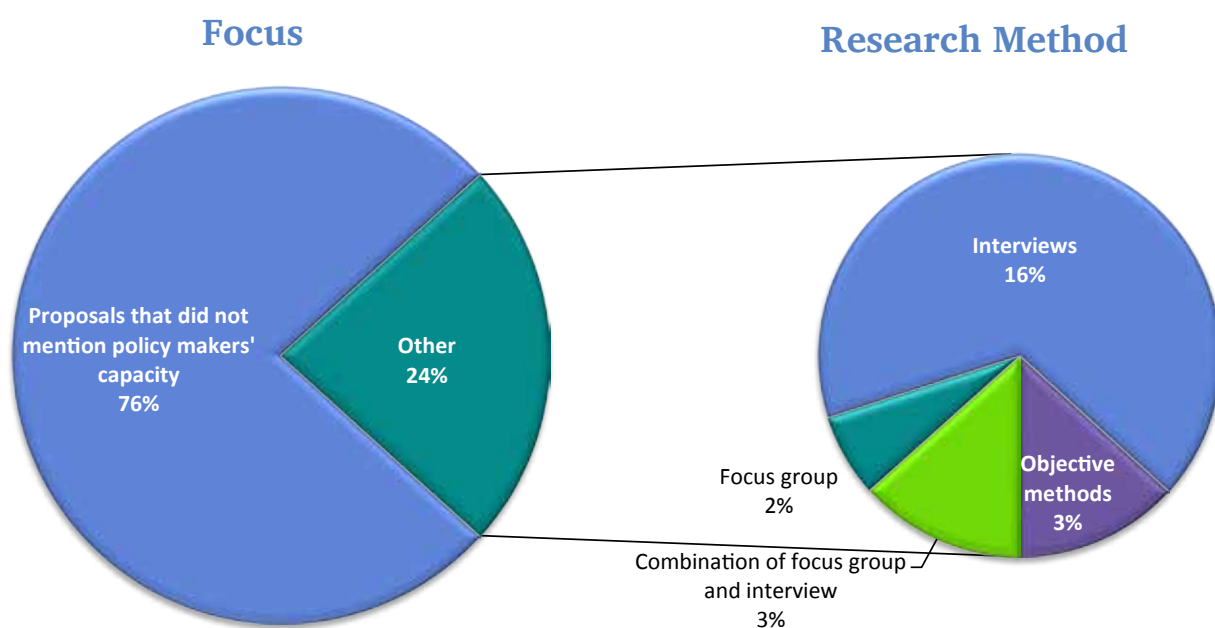


Figure 1: Breakdown of research proposals according to focus and research method. Left hand chart represents all proposals received and shows the proportion mentioning policy makers' capacity to use research. Right hand chart shows a breakdown of the methods proposed in those proposals which did mention policy makers' capacity.

on a given topic using 'screen capture' to record how they go about finding information. This could be analysed later to see how well individuals are able to search for good quality information. This technique was used in a study to measure academics' ability to find information (Harle, 2010).

Diagnostic tests

Diagnostic tests which evaluate how well respondents understand research methodology and/or current understanding of specific research topics could also be used. The report investigating adult skills measurement as part of achieving the goals of the EU's Lisbon strategy concludes that "direct testing is generally presumed to be the best method for assessing individual's skills, because tests are said to be objective" (Haahr et al., 2004). A diagnostic test, for example, was used at the start and end of an information literacy training initiative to assess the capacity needs, and the knowledge gained from the workshop (Hepworth & Wema, 2006).

A diagnostic test of specific capacity gaps in relation to accessing and using research by policy makers was developed by INASP, the Institute of Development Studies (IDS) and ODI in 2011². This test has been piloted by some of INASP's partners in Tanzania, Ghana and Uganda. The use of this methodology is illustrated in a recent report from Development Impact Limited, a Tanzanian development organisation working with policy support staff in local government. Combining a diagnostic tool with semi-structured interviews they were able to explore individual skills gaps such as scientific understanding and put it in the context of institutional gaps such as infrastructure and facilities³. Another example of use of this survey was reported at the International Conference on Evidence-Informed Policy Making. Data was presented from the parliament of Zambia

to show that even amongst parliamentary researchers who self-select as needing to use research evidence in their roles, there was a poor understanding of basic research issues (Newman, et al., 2013).

The questions in this survey can be tailored to respondents' specific context - for instance instead of exploring issues around science, the questions could focus on other health topics, education, economics or indeed any research topic of interest. The key thing about the tool is the type of questions and tasks used which test a number of skills and attitudes. There are questions that look at understanding of facts while others look at comprehension – the ability to read a report or document and draw out the main points. Some other questions explore the work environment to understand if individual skill issues are part of a larger problem like poor infrastructure or lack of equipment and connectivity. Together these results can help define where gaps exist and suggest what the most effective approach is likely to be.

One challenge with this methodology is the sensitivity around testing – people are less likely to want to take part if they feel they are being judged or selected based on the results of the assessment. The example from Development Impact shows how this assessment can be incorporated into semi-structured interviews to generate richer data and reduce such tensions.

Reflections

Capacity development is one strand of work that international development organisations⁴ are focusing on in order to enhance evidence-informed policy making. Such organisations use a variety of techniques to do this: sharing of information through publications; training workshops; mentoring; hosting and facilitating networks and knowledge

services; and participating in and supporting relevant research.

Before launching into capacity strengthening initiatives it is of paramount importance to understand what the existing capacities of policy makers are and which need to be developed. As the United Nations Development Programme states, “capacity assessments are an essential step in developing rigorous and practical capacity development responses” (United Nations Development Programme, 2009).

It is interesting to note the sample of applicants who were interviewed in the follow up by INASP suggested that the reason that they had not proposed more objective methodologies to assess capacity was that they were not familiar with them. This suggests that if funders and capacity building organisations want more objective data on capacity gaps, they may need to work with researchers on methods that can be used to gather this.

It is also worth noting that capacity to use research is necessary but not sufficient to achieve evidence-informed policy making. Many other factors (including but not limited to political will, funding constraints, corruption etc.) affect the likelihood of policy being informed by evidence. The Research and Policy in Development programme at the Overseas Development Institute provides a range of useful tools⁵ which can be used to map the context in which policy makers are working and understand the opportunities and constraints on use of evidence. Those who seek to build capacity for evidence-informed policy need to understand the actual capacity gaps of policy makers but they also need to understand the systems within which policy makers are working.

Endnotes

1. Please note that in this paper the term ‘policy maker’ will be used to refer to a wide range of policy makers and influencers including the various civil servants who support top level decision makers.
2. <http://svy.mk/19SR2fj>. This particular example focuses on science related capacity but the tool can be edited to suit other disciplines.
3. Information literacy assessment report. Bagamayo District Council, Tanzania. Development Impact limited. <http://devimpact-tz.org/index.php>
4. For example the Evidence-Informed Policy Making programme at INASP; the African Institute for Development Policy; the Research and Policy for Development team at the Overseas Development Institute ; the Mobilising Knowledge for Development Programme at the Institute of Development Studies; the African Technology and Policy Network and the Evidence-Informed Policy Network at the WHO.
5. <http://www.odi.org.uk/rapid/tools/toolkits/index.html>

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