Understanding Influence: Statebuilding Research and British Policy in Fragile, Conflict-Affected Countries

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Structure of the Presentation

1. Project background and general findings

2. The country level perspective

3. Case study: SSR in Sierra Leone

4. Recommendations
Project Background

• Half way through final year of a 3 year project

• State building as a concept risen to the forefront of international agenda – development, security and human rights convergence around importance of fragile states and statebuilding as the consensus response

• Increasing demands to demonstrate research use in order to justify ODA spending – ‘should it go to saving children or more research?’

• “Understanding Afghanistan”, 2007/8
Aims and Scope

• Study the manner in which statebuilding-oriented research sponsored by DFID has influenced and can influence British policy in fragile, post-conflict environments
  – Focus on DFID-funded/commissioned research but placed in wider context, from which it can’t realistically be isolated
  – Linked focus to wider HMG departments with involvement in state building interventions (mainly FCO/MOD)
  – Not looking beyond policy influence to implementation – too complex
  – Less concerned with measures of influence than with process issues, dynamics, apparent challenges and opportunities for improvement. Not grading projects or centres
Research-Policy Nexus

• Despite its lengthy history, has thus far focused on commercial or scientific questions

• Increasingly expanding into arena of international development, but sectoral or thematic focus continued to revolve around scientifically-oriented issues such as natural resource management, health and agronomy (RAPID - special focus on developing countries uptake)

• Lack of studies exploring research use in statebuilding; despite millions spent on state building research (e.g. £23m spent on Governance between 2001 & 2010)
Anecdotal Assumptions

- Existing belief of generally poor relationship between research and policy in statebuilding – apparent in number of high profile works on the subject (Ghani & Lockhart; Collier; etc)

- Weak knowledge base and poor research use in state building

- Little if no influence on policy

- Policy is driven by other imperatives rather than evidence or research

- Research is always playing catch-up to policy in such a fast-moving field
Concepts and Terminology

- **Research**: disciplined enquiry contributing to a body of knowledge (ESRC, 2005) (wide definition encompassing books to analysis and evaluation)

- **Types of Research**:
  - **Academic Research**: Deep, long-term, comparative, generalised (books, journal articles, academic working papers)
  - **Grey literature**: think tank reports, working papers, policy briefs, discussion/occasional papers, synthesis papers
  - **Action oriented research**: country focus, ad hoc, short-term, directly commissioned in-country, problem-solving, or ‘action research’, analyses, evaluations
Concepts and Terminology

- **Policy**: authoritative and planned course of action

- **Types of influence**:
  - **Primary**: Formal government policy documents, (e.g. white papers)
  - **Secondary**: Somewhat specialised, programme oriented policy documents such as country plans, op plans, briefing papers or sectoral strategies
  - **Conceptual** (enlightenment): Widely adopted conceptualisations that frame the debate (e.g. concept of fragility, understanding politics of development)
  - **Policy relevant research influence**: Giving rise to further policy relevant research - multiplier effects on research and policy environment
Approach and Methods

• Extensive mapping of research & policy outputs on statebuilding, resulted in focus on three subject clusters: political settlements; understanding conflict and fragility; and tax as statebuilding

• Quantitative: Bibliometric (citation analysis) and content analysis, examining documents. We have used it as a foundation to understand the extent of influence, but majority of findings based on qualitative analysis

• Qualitative element involving in-depth interviews, documentary analysis, interviews and field visits

• Over 100 interviews in London and in 3 case study countries (Afghanistan, Sierra Leone and Nepal)
A Moving Feast

- Extensive changes in HMG research management, particularly within DFID – the ‘quiet revolution’ since 2008:
  - Increased resources towards improving evidence use (in general) and high-level commitments in WPs etc.; improved funding mechanisms (Centres & now Research Programme Consortia)
  - New research strategies (2008-13); new roles (e.g. Senior Research Fellows), teams (e.g. Evidence into Action Team, incl. evidence brokers - retrospectively examine quality of research and relevance to policy)
  - Organizational restructuring (e.g. creation of Research and Evidence Division, RED: colocation of policy and research teams);
  - New regional research hubs (South Asia Hub, West Africa Hub, etc)

- Fast-moving research frontier – proliferation of new research institutions, centres, programmes. More cases to study. As time moved on we have been able to reflect on greater degree of practice
Tentative Findings

GENERAL OBSERVATIONS

• Impossible to conclude measures of influence definitively, because influence is:

  – Complex: many perspectives, variables and factors involved given variety of forms of research, types of influence, levels and forms of policy and programming

  – Contingent on circumstances or more or less chance happenings – events (international or in-country), new Ministerial priorities, right person at right time, meeting the right person

  – Conditional on personalities of staff (HQ or country) and background or seniority, nature of specific issue or problem at hand, country conditions
Tentative Findings

“TWO COMMUNITIES”? 

• Aspects of the cultural divide certainly apparent ...

• Policymakers: accuse researchers of attacking mainstream development practice without offering alternatives; don’t understand pressures policymakers operate under; lack understanding of rationale of interventions; some research seen as hostile

• Researchers: Policy makers make decisions based on political reasons and not necessarily based on evidence. Policy makers are not open to criticism

• But not as bad as often assumed ...
Tentative Findings

“TWO COMMUNITIES”?

• General improvement of uptake over time since c. 2000 (Building peaceful state and societies, 2010)

• Deepening, widening and strengthening of research use (result of both improvements in research and the institutional change mentioned earlier)

• Growing trust: debate, exchange and extensive interaction

• Anecdotally – best donor in terms of evidence use
Departmental Cultures

- **DFID**: Appetite for deeper, longer-term research; use of research more institutionalised; more money available, etc.

- **FCO**: Little evidence of engaging with longer-term research. Like actor bios, political intelligence. Little sight of what DFID is doing (but appetite). Less incentive to show things are working as in DFID. Research Analysts (40-50) only real source of research & link to academia.

- **MOD**: Statebuilding activities (stabilisation & SSR). Main hubs: Development Concepts & Doctrine Centre, DCDC (JDP 3-40) & Directorate of Operational Capability (lessons). Evidence of active learning culture – seminars, etc. Demand for research tactical & solution driven. But concerns raised - ‘little knowledge a dangerous thing’ (re. governance); over-optimism thus overlook potential problems; lip-service to deeper issues.
Assessing Influence

• The following overarching findings derived from a combination of quantitative analysis, documentary analysis and interviews – judgement and interpretation

• It does not cover all statebuilding research – rather identified clusters of DFID-funded research

• Extremely tentative, not definitive or final – not a science

• Generalisations – do not apply to all cases
## Assessing Influence

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Type of influence</th>
<th>Academic</th>
<th>Grey Literature</th>
<th>Action oriented</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Primary policy</td>
<td>Med-high</td>
<td>Medium</td>
<td>Low</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Secondary policy</td>
<td>Low</td>
<td>High</td>
<td>High</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conceptual/ framing</td>
<td>High</td>
<td>Med-low</td>
<td>Low</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Leading to further Policy research</td>
<td>High</td>
<td>Medium</td>
<td>Med-low</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Grey Literature

Primary

Research

Secondary

Conceptual
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Introduction

• Areas I will cover:

  1. Factors promoting use and forms of influence
  2. Issues in policy, research and at the interface

• Case study countries

• High interest in the subject and often strong views
Factors Promoting Use

DEMAND-DRIVEN

- Problem-solving
- Corporate incentives and requirements
- Personal interest
Factors Promoting Use

SUPPLY-SIDE

• Circulation: pushed out by HOPs, RED, Centre newsletters, email bulletins, etc

• Network supply: through colleagues, retreats, seminars, etc
Forms of Influence

- Instrumental: direct uptake (analysis, surveys)
- Justificatory: retrofit evidence to existing policy
- Osmosis: ideas seeping in, shaping terminology, concepts and ideas
- Secondary: indirect via high-level policy papers
- ‘Travelling knowledge’: backgrounds, knowledge, training
- Ammunition – tactical use in negotiations with partners; leverage
Issues in Policy

OPERATIONAL

• Staff turnover: ownership; knowledge management; institutional memory

• Risk aversion (programmatic, security, political)

• Time pressures: linked to staffing issues; advisers as managers

• Policy context: UK-lead vs. subordinate partner (futility; super-tanker)
Issues in Policy

SUBJECTIVE

• Country management and leadership: promote active research environment

• Staff: background, interests, responsibility, seniority etc

• If research resonates with personal experience
Issues in Research

• Nature of the subject: evidence pointing in opposite directions, contested; difficulty of research in fragile states – trust due to methodological difficulties (access, etc)

• Research attributes: nature of conclusions; realism; presentation

• Research process: working closely; dissemination of findings

• Subjective issues: credibility of the researcher in eyes of policymakers – those who have ‘done it’; personal relationships and trust
Issues at the Interface

• Translation of general research into operationally-relevant findings or practical, concrete solutions

• Research-policy cross-over: both ways; exchange and secondments

• Intermediaries: knowledge services (GSDRC) and Research Analysts producing summary products/briefings.
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Case study: SSR in Sierra Leone

INTRODUCTION

• Retrospective analysis of a specific policy
• Backward tracking approach
• Holistic policy developed during and after the conflict
First Period: ‘fire-fighting’ solutions

THE COUNTRY CONTEXT

- “On our arrival we found Freetown in complete disarray and still in a state of virtual war. The functions of state were practically collapsed, with ministries in confusion and officials lacking clear aims and direction”

- “I walked into an empty building and about three people in there, who hadn’t really an idea of what they were doing. [...] There must be about 5 people in there. Three of those I had to get out, because they were just political placements”
First Period: ‘fire-fighting’ solutions

POLICY AND RESEARCH CONTEXT

• SSR policy and research agenda starting in late 1990s

• Direct relationship with researchers (Dylan Hendrickson, Nicole Ball – not always used for research)

• Efforts toward a joined-up approach; high amount of freedom at country level

• Importance of personal relationships for policy making

• Direct UK role in Sierra Leone policy making
First Period: ‘fire-fighting’ solutions

USE OF RESEARCH

• No role for research in the decision to intervene; lack of a pre-planned strategy; events and exigencies shaping policy more than research

• Importance of the background and experience of personalities on the ground

• Use of anthropological/historical books, or ad hoc, operational research, rather than academic research from universities

• Ideas and models coming from other experiences
Second Period: post-conflict years

THE COUNTRY CONTEXT

• Lift of the Presidential State of Emergency in Spring 2002

• Increased security in the country

• Reformed, reinvigorated, and new-born Sierra Leonean security institutions

• Three peaceful Presidential elections, with change of ruling party

• Reorganisation of some SSR programmes in the country (JSDP staffed by locals and in Moyamba: more security and more capacity)
Second Period: post-conflict years

POLICY AND RESEARCH CONTEXT

• Progressive institutionalisation of SSR policy and research

• ‘Post-hoc rationalisation’ of events on the ground

• DFID opening of the office in Freetown

• Problems in passages among programmes; Three layers: HQs, country offices, contractors and subcontractors

• Advisory, mentoring, supporting role for the UK; Collaboration with other donors in the country
Second Period: post-conflict years

USE OF RESEARCH

- Increased uptake and use of research (more time, access, availability)

- Examples of use of research: JSDP; ASJP; IMATT perception study; IMATT direct use of SSR book; ONS collaborations

- Formal and informal professional relationships with trusted researchers (Paul Jackson, Peter Albrecht, Richard Fanthorpe)

- Under-use of local researchers (Fourah Bay College; sometimes used as consultants, but mixed accounts)
Conclusions

- Context stability as the main variable shaping the influence of research into SSR policy

- Policy and research evolution as a second variable influencing the use of research

- Structural issues hindering the use of research in SSR: peculiarities of the discipline, lack of evidence of ‘what works’, political dimension
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Recommendations

• Improve awareness and communication of research output: who is doing what, what is DFID funded or not, country office feeding into the bigger research agenda better

• Enhance link-up across government (DFID, FCO, MoD) research functions and analysis (e.g RA in FCO and Advisors in DFID)

• Improve ownership of research and institutional memory – research management (people don’t know what has been done)

• Improve pre-deployment and induction
Recommendations

- Policy-research interchange, particularly at the country level
- Strengthen challenge function, reference groups and experts
- Intermediary functions key – strengthen
- Do more to build local research capacity