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What Shapes the Influence Evidence Has on Policy? The Role of Politics in Research Utilisation

November 2010

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Contents

The Author	ii
Executive summary	1
1. Introduction	5
2. Overview of evidence-based policy	7
2.1 Background	7
2.2 Brief overview of research on evidence-based policy	8
2.3 Definitions and concepts	9
3. What are the assumptions behind and problems with the concept of evidence-based policy and what can be learnt from this?	11
3.1 What counts as evidence?	11
3.2 Assumption 1: Evidence-based policy improves the nature of policymaking	11
3.3 Assumption 2: Policymakers are problem-solvers and seek out information	12
3.4 'Hard facts' and 'what works': the development of rigid policy narratives and closed political spaces	12
3.5 Oversimplification and the loss of caveats	12
3.6 What be can learnt from these issues?	13
4. What prevents the effective utilisation of research in policymaking?	14
4.1. Lack of understanding of policy process in the research community	15
4.2 Weak demand from policymakers for research evidence	21
4.3 Poor supply of policy-relevant research	28
4.4 Improving research utilisation	30
5. How can we put into practice what we know about the role of politics in shaping how evidence is used?	31
5.1 What lessons emerge in relation to promoting the use of evidence in policymaking?	31
5.2 What additional analysis is required to apply this understanding?	32
5.3 How can political economy analysis be applied at different stages of research?	33
5.4 How can political economy analysis be applied at different stages of communications and advocacy work?	35
5.5 An integrated approach	39
6. Conclusions and implications	40
References and key readings	42

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About Young Lives

Young Lives is an innovative longitudinal study investigating the changing nature of childhood poverty. Young Lives is tracking 12,000 children in Ethiopia, India (Andhra Pradesh), Peru and Vietnam over 15 years through a quantitative survey and participatory qualitative research, linked to policy analysis. Young Lives seeks to:

- improve understanding of the causes and consequences of childhood poverty and to examine how policies affect children's well-being
- inform the development and implementation of future policies and practices that will reduce childhood poverty.

Young Lives is a collaborative partnership between research and government institutions in the 4 study countries, the University of Oxford, the Open University, other UK universities, and Save the Children UK.

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The views expressed here are those of the author(s). They are not necessarily those of, or endorsed by Young Lives, the University of Oxford, DFID or other funders.

Executive summary

What shapes the influence evidence has on policy? The key lesson that emerges from this paper is the primacy of politics in shaping how evidence is used. In order to influence the policy process, the research community must understand both the technocratic and the political aspects of policymaking, and how these shape the choices and incentives of policy elites. The paper proposes guidelines for integrating political economy analysis into different stages of the research and communication process. It addresses three main questions:

- What are the assumptions behind and problems with the concept of evidence-based policy and what can be learnt from this?
- What prevents the effective utilisation of research in policymaking?
- How can we put into practice what we know about the role of politics in shaping how evidence is used?

The paper draws on some examples from Young Lives, a longitudinal study of childhood poverty in Ethiopia, India, Vietnam and Peru, and contains case studies of how researchers on the project have engaged with policymakers.

The assumptions behind the concept of evidence-based policy

It is important to challenge the assumptions made by both researchers and policymakers about evidence-based policymaking, as this can help articulate the difficulties in connecting research with policy. A key assumption often made is that evidence-based policy improves the nature of policymaking by encouraging a more systematic approach to developing policy. However, this does not fit with what we know about hierarchies of evidence, the process of determining credibility and the politicisation of evidence. A second common assumption is that policymakers will seek out useful evidence to help tackle a problem and clarify uncertainty. However, they can choose to ignore evidence. Different incentives determine what evidence they use. There is a risk that a reliance on 'hard facts' and 'what works' can lead to the development of rigid policy narratives and close off political spaces.

What prevents the effective utilisation of research in policymaking?

This paper suggests that there are three main drivers of poor research utilisation in policy processes (see below). Important lessons emerge that should be considered by those trying to analyse the impact evidence has on policymaking.

Lack of understanding of policy processes and the political context

The formal and informal political processes that affect decision-making, bargaining and influencing within government shape how research is used or not used in policymaking. Policymaking is a random process, frequently based on what is politically feasible. Politicians and policymakers often have little room for manoeuvre in relation to policy. By the time evidence enters their filtering process, they may have pre-assigned policy objectives and be looking for evidence to fit within these. One implication of this is that we need to build informal relations with government and discuss previous policy decisions and the use of evidence.

Weak demand from policymakers for research evidence

What makes policymakers want to use evidence in their decision-making processes? Bureaucratic factors and the nature of decision-making can mould the behaviour of policymakers and their capacity to engage with new research, and can shape the hierarchy they give to evidence, the level of their demand for research, and the way they ration their attention. Policymakers make judgements about whether evidence is useful, credible or relevant. Their choices about what constitutes 'acceptable' evidence are political. It is therefore important to analyse how they frame debates, and understand who is successful in influencing government and how this relates to government views about evidence.

Poor supply of policy-relevant research

Problems with research supply do not relate only to the mechanics of 'getting the research out there', but also to the nature of the research itself. Research is often not contextualised in the current political environment, fails to ask policy-relevant questions, and is communicated in a fashion that doesn't take into consideration how target policymakers use evidence. Policy messages and communication strategies are often poorly framed and are over-reliant on a formal model of policymaking. It is useful therefore to create partnerships with government by involving them in the research process.

Putting into practice what we know about the role of politics

Mapping and diagnosing the political context is crucial. Political economy analysis tools and approaches can help with all stages of research and with communications and advocacy work. In relation to evidence-based policy, political economy analysis is concerned with analysing the interests and incentives of political actors and the role that formal and informal institutions play in shaping their choices, values and ideas and their relationships with non-government actors.

How can political economy analysis be applied at different stages of research?

A number of key questions can be considered at different stages of the research process.

- *Designing the research:* What do policymakers see as the key evidence gaps? How are certain policy problems and solutions understood? Who would be interested in your research and why? It is important to consider what level of policy influence is desired or achievable and how research questions need to be framed to achieve this.
- *Interpreting the research:* How have social and political processes affected or shaped your results? Political economy affects the design, implementation and outcomes of government programmes. Research that seeks to evaluate the impact of such programmes needs to acknowledge this and take it into account when interpreting results.
- *Developing recommendations:* Why does this research matter? There should be no automatic assumption that research matters for policy. Findings must be contextualised and framed. Research recommendations need to be politically feasible. This may mean developing second- or third-best recommendations that can be 'bought into' and adapted.

How can political economy analysis be applied at different stages of communications and advocacy work?

There are a number of key issues to consider when conducting communications and advocacy work.

- *Analysing stakeholders and audience:* Incorporating political intelligence-gathering into stakeholder analysis can help advocates understand how key stakeholders make political decisions. Assessing political space and how this frames preference for evidence can assist in understanding how much room stakeholders have to deviate from prevailing narratives, to make significant decisions or to absorb new research.
- *Developing a message:* Examining the incentives of policymakers to utilise research and their freedom to make brave choices is vital to frame research effectively and develop messages. Developing a theory or framework for how policy change occurs and how decisions are made helps to set realistic objectives.
- *Developing a strategy – outputs and activities:* Pragmatism is the basis of policymaking, but often not the foundation for policy influencing. Analysing the role evidence has played (or not) in previous policy decisions can help provide a realistic assessment of the barriers that need to be overcome.
- *Supporting researchers and liaising with policymakers – acting as interlocutors:* The role of interlocutors can be viewed as an ongoing process that supports other stages. Interlocutors can act as a bridge between researchers and policymakers.

The implications of integrating political perspectives into the research process are two-fold. Firstly that it is important to be realistic about influencing policy. Secondly, policymakers should be honest about the use of evidence in policy. Evidence can matter for policymaking, but often it is not as influential as policymakers state or researchers like to think. Researchers and advocates need to be pragmatic in the type of influence that they strive towards. It seems that, given the often informal and political nature of policymaking, aiming to influence the terms of the debates and the intellectual framework surrounding policymaking is a realistic approach.

This paper concludes that we could work more with government to improve *how* they use evidence – not necessarily trying to push for a certain type of evidence or for ‘evidence-based government’ per se – but for more inclusive and rigorous policymaking. Evidence-based policy engagement should be about working with government to increase their *pull* for evidence and *how* they use evidence to *inform* their thinking and decisions rather than necessarily promoting or overplaying the evidence-based mantra.

WHAT SHAPES THE INFLUENCE EVIDENCE HAS ON POLICY?
THE ROLE OF POLITICS IN RESEARCH UTILISATION

1. Introduction

It probably takes an extraordinary concatenation of circumstances for research to influence policy decisions directly – a well-defined decision situation, a set of policy actors who have a responsibility and jurisdiction for making the decision, an issue whose resolution depends at least to some extent on information need, research that provides that information in terms that matched the circumstances within which choices will be made, research findings that are clear cut, unambiguous, firmly supported and powerful, that reach decision-makers at the time they are wrestling with the issues, that are comprehensible and understood, and that do not run counter to strong political interests. (Carol H. Weiss, 'The Many Meanings of Research Utilization', *Public Administration Review*)

The concept of 'evidence-based policy' is not new. It has been around in the international development arena, in some shape or form, since the early 1990s. Much attention has been given in the literature to how to promote the utilisation of research by government, and a lot of energy has gone into discussing how to improve 'research-policy integration'. Various frameworks have been developed (Court et al. 2005) which outline factors that facilitate research uptake (Stone 2002) and determine the influence research has on policymakers. Work has also been done outlining the prerequisites for bridging the gap between policy and research (Jones and Villar 2008). These models have been incredibly useful in stimulating thinking and have arguably led to increased investment in the communication of research, as well as more demand from donors to demonstrate the impact of research on policy. However, there has been less discussion about the challenges of adopting these models when trying to engage with policymakers and improve the relevance of research to policy. How do researchers and advocates actually fare when attempting to use evidence to influence policy debates and bring about changes in government thinking and practice?

The objective of this paper is to shed some light on these challenges and provide reflections on using evidence to influence policy. This paper is intended to be of use to advocates and researchers who are striving to influence policy with their research evidence and to improve the relevance of their research to policy. The paper addresses three questions:

- What are the assumptions behind and problems with the concept of evidence-based policy and what can be learnt from this?
- What prevents the effective utilisation of research in policymaking?
- How can we put into practice what we know about the role of politics in shaping how evidence is used?

Based on reflections from Young Lives, a longitudinal study of childhood poverty in Ethiopia, India, Vietnam and Peru, this paper will suggest explanations for the under-utilisation of evidence-based research in policy. It synthesises some of the lessons that emerge from trying to strengthen the policy-relevance of Young Lives research and promote the use of its research evidence in policy. It also highlights the challenges Young Lives has encountered in the project's study countries when trying to follow best practice. The key lesson that emerges is the primacy of politics in shaping how evidence is used, which means that researchers, advocates and communicators must understand politics and the process of policymaking. If this is the case, what should researchers, advocates and communicators do differently? This paper proposes guidelines for integrating political economy analysis into different stages of the research and communication process in order to negotiate the political context.

This paper is structured as follows. Section 2 provides an overview of evidence-based policy in the context of the UK and international development sectors, as well as discussing key definitions and concepts relevant to evidence-based policy. Section 3 discusses assumptions behind and problems with evidence-based policy and identifies lessons that can be drawn from this. Section 4 examines the factors preventing the effective utilisation of research in policymaking. Section 5 teases out key lessons about the role of politics in shaping evidence-based policy and suggests guidelines for researchers and communicators. Finally, section 6 concludes the paper and identifies implications for how to improve the approach to evidence-based policy.

Why are these research questions so important for Young Lives?

Young Lives is an international study of childhood poverty tracking the lives of 12,000 children in Ethiopia, India (in the state of Andhra Pradesh), Peru and Vietnam over a 15-year period from 2000 until 2015. This is the timeframe set by the UN to achieve the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), and therefore the study has enormous potential to produce credible, authoritative evidence that will help policymakers understand which factors and policies make a difference (or not) and why. It also makes for an interesting long-term experiment in evidence-based advocacy. However, Young Lives recognises the real challenges that it (along with many other research studies) faces in linking up research and policy. Young Lives is a partnership of research and policy institutions in the UK and the four study countries, so making connections between research and policy is fundamental to the study's purpose. This paper was written partly in order to share the project's insights, experiences and learning.

As a longitudinal study, Young Lives needs to understand and acknowledge the social and political contexts that shape the lives of the 12,000 children it is tracking. The environment is changing in subtle but substantial ways, and it is important to take account of the factors that mould the choices and opportunities of the children. This not only contributes to the quality of the research but also helps to make it more relevant to policymakers. Young Lives recognises that producing credible and policy-relevant research is not just about developing good recommendations but also about asking the right questions and interpreting and situating results in the political context (including understanding how policies are made). This is a significant challenge for many research programmes. Now that Young Lives has reached the mid-point of its lifespan, it is in a unique position to share its experiences and the lessons it has learned in tackling some of the big issues related to evidence-based policy and trying to develop best practice.

2. Overview of evidence-based policy

2.1 Background

Evidence-based policy has gained currency as an approach within research and policy circles. Within the policy community there is increasing interest in improving the robustness of policy decisions by increasing the use of evidence of 'what works'. In the research community (which extends to include funders of research) the interest is shaped by the need to demonstrate the impact of their research on policy.

In the United Kingdom evidence-based policy can be linked to the establishment in 1993 of the Cochrane Collaboration. This initiative was set up to promote evidence-based decision-making in healthcare by providing a database of systematic reviews that interpret and synthesise medical research. The Cochrane Collaboration was instrumental in promoting evidence-based policy as a neutral approach to decision-making. Evidence-based policy gained significant strength at the start of the Blair government (in 1997), which is evident in the *Modernising Government* White Paper (Cabinet Office 1999a). The White Paper stated that '...policy decisions should be based on sound evidence. The raw ingredient of evidence is information. Good-quality policymaking depends on high-quality information derived from a variety of sources.' Since the publication of the White Paper, a number of government reports and speeches on professional policymaking (for example, Cabinet Office 1999b) and better policymaking (for example, Bullock et al. 2001) have been written. This approach was also driven forward by support and enthusiasm from the UK research community (Marston and Watts 2003) who created the Campbell Collaboration in 2000 to conduct systematic reviews of the best evidence on social and educational policies. Most recently it created a step-by-step guide to evidence-informed health policymaking (Oxman and Hanney 2009). In 2002 the Economic and Social Research Council, the UK funding council for social sciences, established the Evidence Network – The UK centre for Evidence-Based Policy and Practice to facilitate the exchange of research-based evidence between public policy researchers and practitioners.

In the context of international development, evidence-based policy gained momentum in the mid-1990s primarily in the context of development research. International development agencies were keen to see the impact of the research that they funded, and were also interested in improving the quality and impact of their overseas development assistance, leading to a rise in the evaluation of programmes and their impact. In the 1990s donors such as the UK Department for International Development (DFID) and the International Development Research Centre (IDRC) commissioned research on research evaluation and bridging research and policy. The latter became a new area of policy dialogue and research itself, which has led to a renewed focus on how research is communicated and on evidence-based advocacy. The methodology for DFID's new research strategy (DFID 2008b) is modelled on the approach employed by the Cochrane Collaboration in that the department now commissions systematic meta-reviews. DFID hopes that this 'neutral "bank" of evidence, selected and assessed in a transparent way, should be invaluable to busy policymakers...' (DFID 2010). The Overseas Development Institute (ODI) also made a significant contribution to defining what evidence-based policy means in an international development context with their large body of work in the mid-1990s in the DFID-funded Research and Policy in Development (RAPID) programme.

2.2 Brief overview of research on evidence-based policy

A considerable literature exists that addresses issues relating to the use of research evidence in policy processes. In particular a number of literature reviews (de Vibe et al. 2002; Garrett and Islam 1998; Jones 2009; Neilson 2001) provide overviews of research in this area. Table 1 briefly sets out the main bodies of work that address these issues in order to illustrate how evidence-based policy is currently understood and framed.

Table 1. *Main bodies of work that address the use of research evidence in policy*

Body of work	Overview of research questions	Examples of research actors
1. Approaches and frameworks for connecting research and policy	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What processes mediate and facilitate the use of evidence and knowledge in policymaking? • How does evidence contribute to effective policymaking? 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>Overseas Development Institute RAPID framework of research-policy linkages</i> (Court and Young 2003). Key influences: (1) Political context and institutions (2) Credibility and communication of the evidence (3) Links, influence and legitimacy (4) External influences. • <i>The British Government Cabinet Office</i> views the use of evidence as one of eight core competencies of professional policymaking (Cabinet Office 1999b).
2. Assessing the impact of research and research communication	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What factors seem to matter (or not to matter) for increasing the impact of development research on policy? • What role does the communication of research play? 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>International Development Research Centre (IDRC)</i> analyses different methodologies for assessing the impact of research on policy and examining the challenges of assessing impact. • <i>UK Department for International Development (DFID)</i> commissioned working papers and developed strategies /guidance notes in the area of research communications and research uptake (DFID 2008a; 2008b; 2008c; and Yaron and Shaxson 2008).
3. Theories of policy influence and models of policy change and policy processes	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What are the processes by which policy decisions are made? • How do political processes determine decisions? 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Models of the policy process contain assumptions in relation to how evidence is used in policymaking. These models are explored in more detail in Table 3.
4. Models and guidance for research utilisation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • How is research consumed by policymakers? • What are the different factors that influence how policymakers demand and utilise research? 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>Carol Weiss's</i> (1979) <i>six models that explain different types of research utilisation</i>: Knowledge-driven; problem-solving; interactive; enlightenment; political; tactical (see also page 12). • <i>Diane Stone</i> (2002) outlines 12 perspectives for improving research utilisation. These can be summarised into three categories of explanation; supply-side, demand-led and policy currents. • <i>Nathan Caplan's</i> (1979) <i>'Two Communities' theory of under-utilisation of research</i> focuses on the cultural gap between researchers and policymakers. Proposes two types of research use: instrumental and conceptual use.
5. Critique of evidence-based policy in the UK context	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Does evidence-based policy actually lead to an improvement in the quality of policymaking? • Does evidence-based policy close off or open political spaces? 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>Wayne Parsons</i> (2001 and 2002) challenges evidence-based policy and the 'what works' agenda in the UK government's model of professional policymaking. • <i>Phil Davies</i> (2004) asks (1) What factors other than evidence contribute to policymaking? (2) What different types of evidence have an impact? • <i>House of Commons Science and Technology Committee</i> (2006) states that the UK government should admit that, while evidence plays a key role in informing policy, decisions are ultimately based on a number of factors.

2.3 Definitions and concepts

Owing to the increasing amount of research in the area of evidence-based policy, knowledge utilisation and policy change, this is quickly becoming a crowded field. It is therefore important to have clear definitions of terms. How different groups define policy impact and how they frame evidence-based policy are quite different, and determine what they recommend in terms of practical advice for advocates and researchers. It is also important in terms of understanding certain assumptions about evidence and the process of policy development.

2.3.1 *Evidence-based policy: an approach or an aspiration?*

Evidence-based policymaking has come to be understood as both an aspiration and an approach to policymaking. Evidence-based policy as an *approach to or model of* policymaking can be conceptualised as a set of methods and principles that involve using evidence as part of the policymaking process. Evidence-based policy as an *aspiration* views the use of evidence in the policymaking process as a way to improve the quality of policymaking by enabling policymakers to make better decisions. It 'offers a set of aspirations and approaches that strive to support objective, systematic and rational decision-making that draws on evidence' (Sutcliffe and Court 2006: 1). Davies (2004: 3) describes evidence-based policymaking as a worthy aspiration that improves the quality of decision-making. It 'helps people make well-informed decisions about policies, programmes and projects by putting the best available evidence from research at the heart of policy development and implementation.' There are some assumptions embedded in these definitions in relation to the objectivity of evidence, the demand for evidence from policymakers, and the nature of the policymaking process.

2.3.2 *Evidence and knowledge*

Knowledge is a distinct concept and refers to 'information that has been evaluated and organised so that it can be used purposefully' (Perkin and Court 2005: 2). The term knowledge is now often used in place of evidence as the concept encourages discussion on *how* evidence is utilised and processed and includes tacit and informal sources of knowledge and understanding. However, as Young Lives is a research project, this paper is concerned with research evidence and the process by which research is evaluated, organised and utilised. It is the process by which evidence becomes accepted knowledge and the entire research-policy continuum that this paper wishes to examine.

2.3.3 *Utilisation and policy influence*

Often the terms 'utilisation' or 'use' are either left undefined or given many meanings. This may be because it is difficult to define them without beginning a discussion of theories of research utilisation. This paper employs the phrase 'using research' to refer to the process by which policymakers actively *consider, analyse, and engage with* research during the course of making policy.

In relation to understanding the concept of 'policy influence', it is important to understand not just *how* research has an impact, but also *what type* of policy impact has taken place. Policy influence, like policy itself, can be understood in both technical and political terms. If politics can be described as the process by which society decides 'who gets what, when and how' (Lasswell 1958), then it is crucial to define policy using a political lens and to view it as a process. This paper uses the term 'policy' to refer to the formulation of a plan or programme

of work in a specific area; the way a certain problem is publicly defined, shaped or understood in relation to activities of government; and a plan of action or inaction to address it. Policy influence must therefore be understood in both political and technical terms to include a broad spectrum of activities at all stages of the policy process.

Table 2 outlines four different types of policy influence.

- Influencing ideas and boundaries: influencing ‘policy horizons’ (Lindquist 2001) by influencing debate and policy thinking
- Influencing the technical aspects of policy: influencing programme design or implementation or the ‘re-tuning’ or modification of policies
- Influencing the definition of problems and policy success: transforming government policies and affecting the ‘policy regime’ (Lindquist 2001) by influencing the fundamental design of policies or discourse
- Influencing government capacity: building capacity and changing the way policymakers use knowledge and evidence to make policy.

There are significant areas of overlap between these types of policy influence. Framing the nature of the debate (ideas and boundaries) might subsequently shape how the success or impact of a policy is defined (problem and success definition) which in turn may feed back into agenda-setting (ideas and boundaries).

Table 2. *Types of policy influence*

Type of policy influence	Example	Type of policy influence	Example
<p>IDEAS AND BOUNDARIES</p> <p>Influencing ‘policy horizons’ by influencing debate and policy thinking</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Putting an issue in the policy domain • Encouraging dialogue and networking • Improving the intellectual framework surrounding policymaking (Carden 2005) • Broadening the parameters of the debate (widening the realm of possibilities to solve the problem) 	<p>TECHNICAL</p> <p>Influencing technical aspects of programme design or implementation</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Shaping specific features of policy/programme design • Reforming existing programmes or policies
			
<p>PROBLEM AND SUCCESS DEFINITION</p> <p>Transforming policies and affecting the ‘policy regime’ through fundamental design of policies</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Influencing policy or programme objectives • Influencing how the success or problem is defined and how the impact is understood • Influencing the nature of a policy by engaging with the values and ideology underpinning it 	<p>CAPACITY AND PROCESS</p> <p>Building capacity and changing the way policymakers use knowledge and evidence to make policy</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Influencing how policymakers approach decision-making • Influencing how they use evidence in the policymaking process • Supporting policymakers to develop innovative ideas • Supporting policymakers to understand research methods and processes

3. What are the assumptions behind and problems with the concept of evidence-based policy and what can be learnt from this?

It is important to challenge some of the assumptions made by both researchers and policymakers about evidence-based policymaking, as this can help articulate the difficulties in connecting research with policy and improve strategies to achieve it. Some of the challenges of putting key lessons into practice stem from issues in relation to the evidence-based approach that are not normally set out in frameworks and guidance on bridging research and policy. This section will now tease out the assumptions often made about evidence-based policy and outline some problems connected with the concept.

3.1 What counts as evidence?

The Oxford English Dictionary (1998) defines evidence as ‘the available body of facts or information indicating whether a belief or proposition is true or valid’. Embedded in this definition is the process of determining truth, accuracy or validity. This process can be viewed as science or as judgement, depending on the research discipline. Although the medical and health sciences, for example, have an established ‘hierarchy of evidence’ for assessing impact, there is little agreement in the social sciences as to what constitutes ‘accurate’ or appropriate evidence, despite the enthusiasm for evidence-based policy. Behind the process of determining ‘fact’, scientific evidence or ‘validity’, is the act of interpretation and internalisation according to the parameters and values of those receiving or using the research evidence. Defining ‘scientific research’ is not always straightforward, as recent debates about the selective use of climate change evidence have illustrated (Dickson 2009). Although research may be conducted in a neutral manner, at times the interpretation of the evidence may not be, or the selective use of the evidence may reduce this neutrality. As Marston and Watts (2003: 152) put it, ‘our reliance on all sorts of assumptions helps us to focus on what we already know or wish to know so that we can see what we need to see in order to make our case about the state of affairs’.

3.2 Assumption 1: Evidence-based policy improves the nature of policymaking

Embedded in the concept of evidence-based policy is the rationale that promoting the use of evidence in the policymaking process encourages a more systematic approach to developing policy. According to this, using evidence is therefore good practice to aspire to and makes for policy that is better because less driven by opinions and ideology. There is an inherent logic in this; however it does not fit with what we know about hierarchies of evidence, the process of determining credibility and the politicisation of evidence. There is often no ‘correct’ evidence, and all evidence is evaluated through a prism of assumptions. Evidence-based

policymaking is not the absence of opinion but the framing of opinion through evidence. What determines 'usefulness' is not merely a rational decision, but may be based on expedient needs related to power and politics (Wells 2004). Often research is only utilised if it is in line with the prevailing policy narrative and policymakers select research findings to legitimise current decisions. Furthermore, policymakers need to respond to public opinion and public opinion might not always be informed by evidence.

3.3 Assumption 2: Policymakers are problem-solvers and seek out information

While much has been written about the fact that policymaking is not inherently a rational process, the concept of evidence-based policy contains an assumption that policymakers are technocrats and problem-solvers who seek out information (Weiss 1979). There is also an assumption that research evidence should be directly useful to policymakers. The problem-solving model of research utilisation (Weiss 1979) (which will be explored more in further sections) implies that policymakers seek out evidence to help tackle a problem and clarify uncertainty. This suggests that there are 'hard facts' out there that can improve policymaking and it is the role of researchers just to supply relevant research and communicate it well. However, decision-makers often ignore evidence and have different incentives to use evidence or decide what evidence to use. The concept of evidence-based policy does not take into account the judgements about political feasibility that policymakers are so often required to make.

3.4 'Hard facts' and 'what works': the development of rigid policy narratives and closed political spaces

The conceptualisation of evidence-based policymaking as a (more) systematic approach to policymaking can lead to a narrowing down of debate. As Fisher and Vogel (2008) maintain, power relations can perpetuate knowledge hierarchies, close off political spaces and crowd out alternative perspectives or evidence. In nearly all 'policy communities' (Kingdon 2003) particular types of evidence become acceptable, and the conclusions are then reproduced. This continued acceptance and privileging of conclusions and types of evidence can lead to a dominant policy narrative and a controlled and restricted type of policymaking with an 'exclusive network' (Fisher and Vogel 2008) of researchers and policymakers with little room for negotiation or contestation of the 'evidence'. This could lead to charges of what some analysts call 'policy-based evidence-making'. Researchers seeking influence on policy often end up accepting (or needing to accept) a measure of contamination and compromise (Toynbee 2009). A technocratic approach creeps in, with the belief forming that there is only 'one way' that works, or that there is a 'professional' way of making policy. There is also the issue of what happens if there are no 'hard facts' (which is often the case), or an absence of clear-cut findings. In addition, decisions based on technocratic thinking or 'credible evidence' do not necessarily always lead to better policies or improved outcomes than those that were made on hunches or what a decision-maker thinks 'is the right thing to do'. They may also crowd out innovation or encourage policymakers to overplay the role evidence played in informing policy, preventing them from being honest about the use of evidence.

3.5 Oversimplification and the loss of caveats

Another concern about evidence-based policymaking stems from the process of using research to make policy. King et al. (2005) highlight how the 'policy attractiveness' of a particular set of research findings can lead to the creation of simple messages, which

become accepted wisdom amongst a broad policy community that has not engaged directly with the research findings. This can lead to the stripping of caveats and context as the message is translated into policy (King et al. 2005), leading to generalisations that result in inaccurate interpretations and inappropriate policy responses. The issue is not with the creation of simple policy messages, as it is widely accepted that research needs to be accessible and digestible; it relates to the removal of caveats and context. Rarely do you see policy briefs or reports of research in the media that raise the issue of sample size or reverse causality. Little acknowledgement is given to the contextual framing of research questions or recommendations and the degree to which the findings can be generalised. Davies (1999: 111) has said that 'there is no such thing as context-free evidence'. Caveats matter in order to make recommendations useful. Unless policymakers have access to the caveats, and are given an explanation of the context in an accessible and relevant way, it can lead to the creation of what Jan Vandemoortele has termed 'misplaced concreteness' (Vandemoortele, in Young Lives 2009: 10). This means acceptance of a simple narrative that has been stripped away from its original meaning or interpretation. The fast process associated with the creation of politically attractive research, which becomes the common policy narrative in 'what works', can be a cause for concern.

3.6 What we can learn from these issues?

It seems it is important for policymakers to be aware that seeking out evidence of 'what works' and becoming reliant on expert-driven policy can lead to a narrow pool of evidence and a constricted definition of 'experts'. Rather than helping them to access the best evidence available, this can lead to reduced space for negotiation and contestation of the evidence. Inclusive policy can at times be in conflict with technocratic and evidence-based approaches to policymaking.

Dominant policy narratives can create or feed off exclusive policy networks, and actually lead to a reversal of the objectives of evidence-based policymaking. That is, policymakers may seek evidence to support policy rather than examine evidence to make policy. Accessing a wide range of evidence from a variety of sources, and encouraging debate and contestation of evidence of 'what works' strengthens the potential of evidence-based approaches to improve the quality of policymaking.

Caveats are important for interpretation and the development of nuanced policy responses. Clear policy narratives are crucial for effective research communications, but researchers and advocates need to be better at communicating complexity.

Having examined the issues raised by the concept of evidence-based policy, we have shown that some caution is advisable in approaching the subject. However, this does not mean evidence-based policy is not to be recommended. On the contrary, we would like to see more use made of research by governments. In the next section, this paper will consider why research is not currently used effectively in policymaking.

4. What prevents the effective utilisation of research in policymaking?

A common explanation for why research evidence is not used (or not used effectively) in policymaking is the unrealistic expectations from policymakers and researchers about how research–policy linkages should work. The research community is often frustrated at the lack of uptake of research findings and the misinterpretation of research evidence for policy aims. Policymakers often cannot understand why research is not more accessible, timely, and relevant to policy decisions. A lack of dialogue and an absence of effective relationships necessary to facilitate the uptake of research are often viewed as the main explanations of the problem.

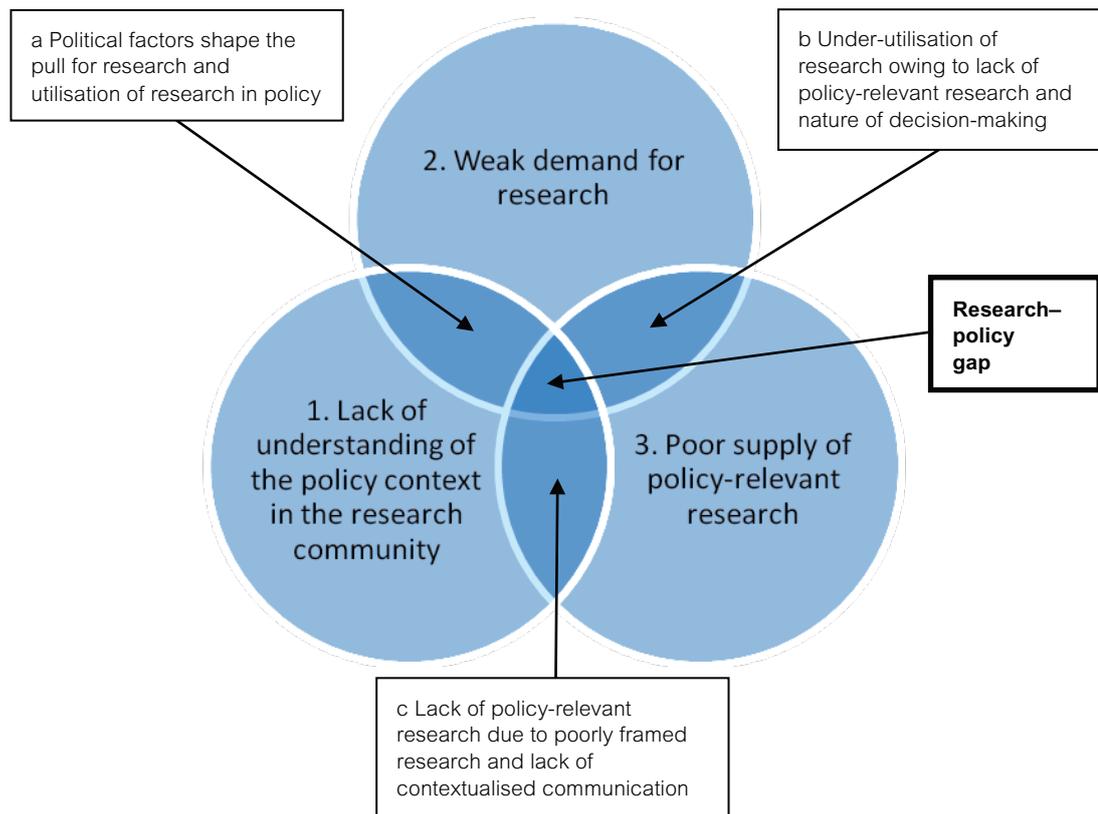
Although these explanations are valid, and hold true in Young Lives' experience, they are not sufficient in diagnosing the underlying causes of poor utilisation of research in policy process: the research–policy gap. It is important to think through carefully how political and organisational factors shape different notions of 'evidence' and drive the 'use' of research.

The three main drivers of poor research utilisation in policy processes can be classified as follows: lack of understanding of policy context in the research community; weak demand from policymakers for research evidence; and poor supply of relevant research.

Poor supply and weak demand for research evidence are fundamentally driven by weak analysis on the part of researchers of how political factors shape the research and policy context. Because of this, demand for research does not necessarily translate into the 'use' of research in decision-making, leading to under-utilisation of research (see intersection b in Figure 1). Inappropriate research combined with researchers' lack of understanding of the policy context create a lack of policy-relevant research (see intersection c). Weak demand, absorptive capacity and uptake of research by policymakers are shaped by political factors; better understanding on the part of researchers could help address this (see intersection a).

This section will now outline in detail these three drivers behind the research–policy gap. It will also highlight the challenges Young Lives has encountered when trying to tackle political issues in its evidence-based policy engagement work in the project's study countries (Ethiopia, India, Peru and Vietnam).

Figure 1: *Drivers of poor research utilisation*



4.1. Lack of understanding of policy process in the research community

An important explanation for poor research–policy integration and the research–policy gap is the lack of a nuanced understanding on the part of researchers of the political aspects of the environment within which policy is framed, understood, designed and implemented. The formal and informal political processes that affect decision-making, bargaining, opinion-forming and influencing within government clearly shape how research is used or not used in policymaking. A lack of attention to the politics of the policy process can help explain the assumptions researchers make about evidence-based policy and the research utilisation process.

There are a large number of theories that try to explain the policy process (see Neilson 2001 or Lindquist 2001 for substantive literature reviews) and that provide useful perspectives on policymaking. Each theory makes certain assumptions about how policymakers analyse problems and use evidence during the policy development process. Table 3 provides a brief overview of the these policy theories.

Table 3. *Theories of the policy process*

Decision-making is an incremental process

- The ultimate goal of policymaking is to manage 'time' as opposed to 'tasks', effectively (Kingdon 2003). Decisions taken are not necessarily 'optimal' decisions.
- Policymakers faced with a complex problem will find ways drastically to simplify it by limiting alternative policy options – they therefore may not consider an outside expert or academic problem-solver to be helpful. (Lindblom 1959: 87).
- Policymakers move around a 'policy soup of policy options' (Kingdon 2003). They drift in and out of decisions as policy problems 'float by'.
- Policy problems are dumped in a 'garbage can'. Making a decision is about the combination of mix of policy choices and problems, the mix of solutions looking for problems, and the outside demands on the decision-makers (Cohen et al. 1972).

The nature of decision-making can vary considerably

Three different types of decision modes (Lindquist 2001):

- *Routine* decision-making involves matching and adapting existing policies or programmes to emerging conditions
- *Incremental* decision regimes focus on select issues as they emerge
- *Fundamental* decisions take place infrequently and involve rethinking approaches to policy problems, often during moments of change. They usually follow incremental and routine decisions.

How policymakers engage with and 'use' evidence
(Weiss 1979)¹

Enlightenment model

- Conceptual and theoretical perspectives from a wide range of research percolate slowly to frame policymakers' thinking and ideas about issues.
- Research helps change the parameters within which policy solutions are sought rather than specific policies.

Problem-solving model

- Policymakers seek out evidence and apply evidence to a pending problem
- Evidence helps clarify a problem and influences the decisions policymakers make.

The politics of agenda-setting is very important
(Kingdon 2003)

- Element of chance in relation to why some issues get on the political agenda and some dissipate. Those that do can still disappear quickly.
- Policy entrepreneurs play a role in bringing together problems, solutions and timing in seizing policy windows.
- Key survival criteria: technical feasibility and value acceptability.

Bargaining and coalition formation lead to policy formulation
(Stone 1996)

- Policies are developed as a result of bargaining and conflict between societal groups that are organised to advance particular issues.
- Knowledge is a key aspect of power in epistemic communities and is the source of their authority in shaping policy narratives. The status associated with their knowledge and 'scientific authority' gives them crucial access to the political arena.
- Diverse policy communities, networks and coalitions of policy actors, from both inside and outside government, are integrated in the policymaking system.

Dominant narratives can shape problem-definition and open or close off political space
(Roe 1991)

- Narratives or language shape the policy agenda and how problems and solutions are defined.
- Narratives are transmitted through 'policy communities', and certain types of research method and development programme become associated with particular narratives.

1 Carol Weiss sets out five models of research utilisation in the policy process. The enlightenment model and the problem-solving model offer interesting analytical lenses for understanding how evidence is used or not used in the policy process.

The theories in Table 3 all have their limitations. Rational policy theories (like the garbage can model) and their assumptions about how research is utilised in policy processes are often criticised for their failure to apply to the developing-country context. Also, although some theories may shed light on the reality of policymaking in developed countries, they may not always fully explain the policy process in these contexts. A common criticism is that policy is much messier and more political than these theories describe. Their focus on formal policy processes, it is argued, is at the expense of informal politics, analysis of power and the increasing role of policy networks. Furthermore, the theories all assume that research is directly useful in the policy process.

Very few theories have been developed specifically to apply to the developing country context. Grindle and Thomas' (1990) interactive model of policy implementation is a welcome contribution in this area and in many ways bridges both rational and political models. They argue that implementation is an interactive and ongoing process of decision-making by policy elites (political and bureaucratic officials who have decision-making responsibilities) and managers (implementers) in response to actual or anticipated reactions to reformist initiatives.

These theories can help us understand the nature of policymaking and give meaning to how research is utilised (or not) in decision-making processes. There are some important insights in them that may help analyse how evidence is utilised in a variety of policymaking processes: the messy and random nature of policymaking; the percolation and filtering of research ideas by policymakers; the politicisation of policy choices.

4.1.1 *The randomness of policy*

Policymaking is a random and messy process. Policy tends to emerge rather than being an outcome of a specific decision. 'Somehow a complex set of forces together produces effects called "policies"' (Lindblom 1980, quoted in Nutley and Webb 2000). While there is often a clear review cycle for policies where policymakers formally review evidence, this is not necessarily when decisions get made or when issues move up the agenda. Kingdon (2003) argues that there is an element of chance in the policymaking process and why some issues get on the political agenda and some, despite the resounding evidence, dissipate. The 'policy soup' (Kingdon 2003) or 'garbage can' models (Cohen et al. 1972) emphasise the random nature of governing. According to them, policymakers drift in and out of decisions and are quite happy to make decisions in a situation of 'opaqueness' without having all the knowledge. The ultimate goal of policymaking is to manage 'time' as opposed to 'tasks', effectively (Kingdon 2003). Often this involves rationing the attention they give to issues (Zahariadis 2007). These models can help us understand that significant changes in policy do not happen frequently. Policymakers are not always trying to make 'the most balanced and evidence-based decision', instead they make 'acceptable' or 'compromise' policies based on the limits of the situation. As the situation is fluid, how policymakers balance demands and compare different policy options will vary according to the time they have available and organisational constraints. They will often tackle a problem bit by bit in an incremental process of 'muddling through' (Lindblom 1979).

This has significant implications for promoting the use of evidence in policymaking. Workability and short-term gains are often what guide decision-making parameters. Although it is often acknowledged that policymakers lack time, the natural response is to make messages shorter and more succinct. But often it is not just that they lack time: it is their inclination to make changes to policies when a pragmatic response may suffice. So, given that the real decisions get made earlier in the process, how do issues get on the agenda?

Agenda setting can be understood as the process by which problems and alternative solutions gain or lose public and elite attention (Birkland 2005). Kingdon (2003) suggests that issues get on the agenda when three streams converge: a problem is recognised, a solution is available, the political climate makes it the right time for change and the constraints do not prohibit action (Kingdon 2003: 88). Issues are only actually considered and rise up on the institutional or decision agenda when solutions are available. However, the timing of this is unpredictable. The questions for evidence-based policy are what factors, within this messy process of policymaking, lead to the definition of problems and solutions and what role does research play? The challenge is to navigate the political factors that shape how policymakers translate issues into problems. Kingdon (2003: 131–3) describes the ‘survival criteria’ for how solutions/ideas survive the political stream and get on the decision agenda: technical feasibility and value acceptability. Technical feasibility can refer to the feasibility of implementation: whether it is ‘worked out’, ‘worked through’ or ‘ready to go’; whereas value feasibility relates to alignment with a certain political culture, a way of ‘seeing the world’ or mainstream political thinking.

4.1.2 *Percolation and filtering of research ideas*

It is rare that policymakers will be able to state specific findings from a piece of research that influenced their decisions. Often they feel research has given them ‘a backdrop of ideas and orientations’ (Weiss 1979). Weiss (1982) argues that research ‘sensitises decision-makers to new issues and helps turn non-problems into policy problems’ and helps them to make sense of what they have been doing, after the fact. It changes the parameters within which solutions are sought, and can redefine the policy agenda. However, it is the route by which she says this happens that makes Weiss’s claims so challenging and useful. She maintains that research diffuses into the political domain through indirect and unguided channels. Rather than the specific findings, it is the concepts and theoretical perspectives that become embedded through a process Weiss calls ‘enlightenment’. Policymakers ‘cannot disentangle the lessons from their whole configuration of knowledge’. Instead the research ‘percolates’ over a period of time and comes to shape the way in which people (not just policymakers) think about issues. This is not to take a pessimistic view of what can be achieved or to suggest that policymakers are passive and do not make choices. However, perhaps it is more a filtering process rather than a direct process of engagement with specific pieces of research that takes place.

If policymakers give little time and attention to research (as we believe from the apparent randomness associated with policymaking), the filtering process can help policy officials make sense of research. Weiss argues that policymakers test research ideas against their own knowledge and judgement, and the extent to which they accept a new research idea or give it some thought, depends on whether it resonates with and helps make sense of their existing knowledge. In relation to education, for example, policy elites often have their own view of the factors that shape quality education. The degree to which new evidence has an impact on the thinking of policymakers, will depend on the extent to which it fits with their understanding of the problem and the parameters of their thinking.

There are three significant implications of this. Firstly, that influencing policymakers is a painfully slow process and it quite a challenge to get one’s foot in the door to begin to change their perspectives. Secondly, research must fit with how policymakers frame problems to even be considered. Finally, it highlights how policy actors often merge research together and frame it with their other knowledge, which emphasises the importance of communication multipliers to get research out in the public domain.

4.1.3 *Politicisation of policy choices*

Politicians and policymakers often have little space for manoeuvre in relation to policy. By the time evidence enters their filtering process, they often have pre-assigned policy objectives and are looking for evidence to fit within this. Often policymakers either look for, or absorb, existing research that supports a predetermined position and ‘spray’ in on to what they were going to do anyway (Halpern 2004). Or they use research to ward off criticism and use it as ‘political ammunition’ (Weiss 1979). Often research is only utilised if it is line with the prevailing policy narrative. This can affect the hierarchy of evidence and incentives (or disincentives) to use research. There is often a disincentive for policymakers to engage with new forms of evidence, which goes beyond not merely having the time or inclination. What determines why evidence is picked up and run with is often due to political expediency and whether it helps advance a political actor’s agenda.

Policymakers and indeed departments and governments can become captivated by their own narrative. This can shift discussion to a zone where they have more control over decision-making and where they have greater political space (Grindle 1980). This can, and does, mean that they ignore certain types of evidence, and place more emphasis on technical evidence that supports their case and is deemed ‘acceptable’. This can lead to de-contextualisation, misquotation or selective use of research findings to support existing policy narratives. Policymakers can also be held captive to public opinion or political commitments. Public opinion can explain why some policies or programmes are not abandoned despite resounding evidence showing the policy to be ineffective. As Toynbee (2009: 37) has put it: ‘Between social science and politics falls the shadow of public opinion. Politics is often the mediation between fact and public sentiment’.

All these factors contribute to the research community’s lack of understanding of policy processes. It is clear that politics shapes what research is used in policymaking and how it is used. Research can be employed in a tactical fashion to perpetuate existing policy preferences and the political space that policymakers occupy. Research, in the form of knowledge, can be viewed as a source of power and therefore can be subject to manipulation. It can shape the hierarchical way policymakers rank knowledge and research, their level of openness to alternative research narratives and the context within which research takes place and is interpreted.

Box 1. *How to build relations with government programmes and deal with sensitive evidence. Reflections from Peru*

Understanding the level of institutional space and political room for manoeuvre is crucial when building relationships with government officials. Being aware of what governments see as ‘acceptable evidence’ can help researchers and communicators negotiate the political context. The process that Young Lives research and communications staff adopted in Peru² is a useful example of how to communicate sensitive findings and build strong and sustainable relationships with government.

In 2009 and 2010 the Young Lives team published two working papers on the *Wawa Wasi* early childhood programme. *Wawa Wasi* is a public programme that targets poor

2 In Peru Young Lives is known as *Niños del Milenio* (www.ninosdelmilenio.org).

children, aged 6 to 48 months. The programme provides child care as well as educational stimulation activities and nutrition and health check-ups.³ One of these papers had a sensitive finding, but despite this, the communications and research team were able to have constructive and positive discussions with the government programme staff. This facilitated further space for discussion on a second paper on the same programme and created space for additional dialogue on future research related to the sensitive finding.

Approach

Although the Young Lives team in Peru did not involve staff from the *Wawa Wasi* programme in setting the research questions, they were actively involved in the paper. The government gave approval for the research to go ahead (as this was required to access the early childhood centres). In addition, Young Lives had previously built up good relations with the programme staff and relevant ministry and had gained respect as a credible and authoritative research project. The research and communications team presented the preliminary results in private to the *Wawa Wasi* government staff. Even though the research did not produce positive findings about one important aspect of the programme, it did find encouraging results in relation to other elements of the programme and researchers were able to have an open discussion about potential explanations for the results. The government presented its interpretation of the results and the research and communications team acknowledged the analysis and perspective of the government. The team felt that the programme had an important role to play given that it is the largest public programme aimed at young, poor children, and they worked to have the research results used in ways to strengthen it. The researchers felt that there were some very good aspects to the programme and it had potential to improve, and therefore they were still keen to offer their support to the government officers working on *Wawa Wasi*.

A final draft of the paper was developed which incorporated some of the explanations the government provided alongside analysis and interpretation from the researchers. The team also wrote a newspaper article about the programme. The newspaper article stated that although the programme needed to be strengthened in certain areas, the researchers thought that the programme occupied a niche that no other programme had in early childhood care and development. The working paper and a summary of all the findings were included on the Young Lives website in Peru. The summary was worded carefully to acknowledge the benefits of the programme and the areas where it needed further work.

Reflections

Despite the mixed findings, the Young Lives research and communication team maintained good relations with the government in the interests of wanting to strengthen the programme. The team attributes this to the fact they enabled the government to provide explanations for the results and discussed their findings in private with the relevant government officials. In addition, they felt that their private and public support for the programme enabled them to build trust and continue their access to and relationship with the programme. As a result, Young Lives then went on to conduct an additional study of the potential pitfalls of decentralising the *Wawa Wasi* Programme, which was well received. The paper resulted in *Wawa Wasi* officials delaying a rushed decentralisation of the programme.

3 Link to the Wawa Wasi Programme: <http://www.mimdes.gob.pe/programas/wawawasi.html>

Analysis

This example illustrates the importance of understanding the political context and then using this analysis to frame messages, recommendations and the nature of policy activities with government. While the analysis of the political context did not make the team change the finding or even the actual policy recommendations, it did play a role in how the findings were framed and discussed with government and civil society. The example demonstrates that it is possible to frame sensitive findings in a way that continues dialogue and doesn't back government into a corner. Even though one particular finding on the research was not positive, researchers framed the paper's recommendations and conclusions in a more positive light. It also highlights the important role reputation and trust can play in sustaining relationships even when research of a critical nature is produced.

Based on discussions with Santiago Cueto, Young Lives Policy Coordinator and Senior Researcher, Peru and Virginia Rey Sanchez, Communications Coordinator, Peru and the following working paper: Cueto et al. (2009) Promoting Early Childhood Development through a Public Programme: Wawa Wasi in Peru, Working Paper 51, Oxford: Young Lives

4.2 Weak demand from policymakers for research evidence

What makes policymakers want to use evidence in their decision-making processes? The previous section discussed the processes by which policy is made and highlighted how policymakers use research for their own political ends. Thus we can say that the political context to some extent moulds their behaviour; but does it cause them to pay more attention to evidence? The paper will now explore three factors that affect the nature of demand and pull for research: the nature of the decision-making process; bureaucratic factors; the type of evidence.

4.2.1 Nature of the decision-making process

Decisions are often not 'made' by one person; they are the cumulative result of conflict and cooperation (Garrett and Islam 1998) among many government and non-government actors within a policy arena. Few decisions in governments are taken by a small group of decision-makers either. Subsequently there is not just one space where decisions are taken and the decision-making arena can be quite blurry. Lindquist (2001) developed a typology of decision regimes to explain how different types of decisions are taken by government actors. The reason why decision-making processes are important for evidence-based policy is that they can help researchers understand when evidence can play a role in altering the momentum towards different decisions. This can shape the level of demand for research and help determine what type of policy influence is most likely (see Table 2 on page 10).

Lindquist proposes that *routine* decision-making deals with matching and adapting existing policies or programmes to emerging conditions. It therefore involves little discussion on the logic and design of the policies. *Incremental* decision regimes focus on selected issues as they emerge, but do not deal with all the issues related to a particular policy problem. *Fundamental decisions* take place infrequently, but offer the opportunity to re-think approaches to policy problems, whether as a result of policy spill-overs (unexpected effects on different policy domains) or the creation of a new government or a crisis. Fundamental decisions usually follow incremental and routine decisions. The role of evidence in these

types of processes is important to understand. Policymakers will probably seek little (new) evidence for routine decisions, or if they do, it will need to fit within the confines of their existing knowledge. They will be not receptive to evidence that tries to put new issues or ways of framing policy problems on the agenda. Evidence that proposes re-tuning of programmes or research that was commissioned by government to support an existing policy is more likely to be utilised in decision-making. Incremental decisions permit more space for evidence that suggests alternative policy responses and helps to partially redefine a problem. Fundamental decisions create significant space for rethinking an understanding of a problem and for challenging assumptions between existing policies.

What does this mean? Demand for, and most importantly, receptivity to, research increases when governments anticipate the need to make an important decision, particularly, after winning an election, appointing new ministers or responding to an urgent policy problem (e.g. climate change or financial crisis). However, policymakers do not spend most of their time in government making big policy decisions, but in fact make routine decisions and non-decisions. Even if research evidence is new, policymakers have little absorptive capacity or willingness to make decisions. Despite the erratic nature of policymaking, policymakers like to feel in control of the timing of their decisions. They often do not respond well to pressure to make decisions on issues when they are not ready. Even when policymakers do have to make incremental decisions, their demand for evidence is often within the parameters of how they have defined the problem. Returning to the types of policy influence outlined in Table 2, there seem to be greater chances to influence incremental changes in programmes, than to influence the entire policy thinking behind a programme or get a completely new issue on the agenda.

Box 2. *The incremental nature of policy influencing: engaging with dominant policy narratives. Reflections from Ethiopia*

Influencing the direction of policy is difficult. Most changes will be incremental. It is much easier to influence technical aspects of policies or programmes than to influence the nature of government thinking on a policy. Any changes that take place in relation to the government's understanding of problems will be slow, as their thinking develops slowly. Advocates and communicators will require a long-term strategy in order to bring about any fundamental changes in policy. Technical aspects of programmes in relation to their efficiency or the mechanics of implementation may be easier to tweak. This does not involve asking government to change the overarching way they deliver services or seek to reduce poverty, or to fundamentally change how policy problems are defined. It relates more to operational decisions.

One of the explanations for this is the dominant narrative that often surrounds certain policy areas. For example, in Ethiopia the policy priorities of the government and the donor community relate to promoting human development, food security and rural development. However promoting economic growth is the dominant narrative which underpins these priorities. So, despite the overarching focus on poverty reduction and sustainable development, there is a clear emphasis on promoting greater commercialisation of agriculture, enhancing private sector development, industry, urban development and scaling-up efforts to achieve the Millennium Development Goals in line with the economic growth narrative (MOFED 2006). All social and economic policies are therefore geared towards facilitating economic growth. This is the dominant narrative upon which large-scale social protection, education and health programmes are based.

Evidence and policy recommendations that seek to strengthen this policy direction will have a better chance of being accepted. However, evidence which seeks to alter the way in which policy problems and solutions are framed away from the dominant narrative, may gather less momentum in the policy arena. It is potentially easier to influence the technical nature of policies in relation to human development, food security and social protection policies and programmes and to get issues of this nature on to the agenda, than it is to shift fundamental thinking in relation to the nature of economic growth and poverty reduction policies.

Analysis

This analysis from Ethiopia supports a number of different theories about the policy process and decision-making regimes. Lindquist's (2001) work on decision regimes explains that policymakers often control the use of evidence in decision-making. They frequently only seek evidence outside the dominant narrative if they are making significant discussions and want input into framing problems or solutions. Often policymakers do not want research evidence that tries to challenge the logic or fundamental design of a programme as they do not have the policy space to deal with it. Policymakers focus mostly on *routine* decisions and are more likely to absorb and use research that is already within the confines of their existing policy thinking. However, due to changes in political environments, economic changes and volatile behaviour of donors, there will always be some political volatility and new policy windows opening up. However, this volatility can also make the policy environment difficult to navigate.

Based on discussions with Bekele Tefera, Young Lives Policy Coordinator, Ethiopia

4.2.2 *Bureaucracy of policymaking*

Often the lack of demand for research relates to more mundane issues regarding the bureaucracy of policymaking and the absence of a culture of learning within policy arenas. The capacity of policymakers to engage with research (new or existing) is often very low. This may be due to the need to ration time (also a function of the quality, clarity and relevance of the evidence), but could also relate to ignorance of certain research methods. If policymakers are unable to check the findings and don't understand the methods, it may be easier for them to dismiss, ignore or rush over research findings. This can also be connected to the political context and whether research institutes, or those advocating on the basis of research, have much political space. The political opportunity structure (Tarrow 1996) can determine whether it is acceptable publicly to use evidence from civil society groups or institutes with a different ideology. The political opportunity structure refers to the signals given to social and political actors to conduct advocacy and engage with government. The demand for evidence may drop in contexts of weak political opportunity, only to rise rapidly with regime change.

Habit and tradition, often embedded in a civil service culture, may reduce the demand for new research evidence. The bureaucratic logic (Davies et al. 2000) that says things are right because they have always been done this way is difficult to counter. This can also dovetail with the pragmatic nature of policymaking. Policymakers may have good reasons for ignoring or not utilising evidence. Parliamentary terms, timetables for policy reviews, procedures for consultation and the weak administrative capacity of many government ministries, especially those in developing countries, can reduce demand for research.

Box 3. *Stimulating demand for research and involving government in setting research questions. Reflections from Vietnam*

Involving government in the process of setting research questions or priorities can play an important role in overcoming some of the challenges of negotiating the political context. However, experiences of Young Lives in Vietnam offer some useful reflections on how the political context can interrupt 'best practice' for stimulating government demand for research. The process of putting together a policy research paper on quality education in Vietnam is a good example of the practical challenges of bringing government into the process of setting research questions.

Setting the research question

In 2007 Young Lives policy staff at Save the Children UK in Vietnam decided to conduct qualitative policy research on the role of non-tuition-related education expenses as a barrier to accessing quality education in Vietnam. This would complement the Young Lives longitudinal quantitative and qualitative research that had been conducted in 2002 and 2006. This topic was chosen as the policy staff at the time deemed it to be relevant to policy. The research was delayed, and in order to refresh the research, the staff decided to invite officials from Ministry of Education and Training (MOET) to discuss the research topic and to get their ideas on specific areas of interest. What the policy staff found was that non-tuition fees were not a burning issue for the Ministry and that they were much more interested in issues relating to directly to the quality of education. This led the Young Lives staff to rethink their topic and to hold a consultation meeting with representatives from MOET and from the Ministry of Labour, Invalid and Social Affairs (MOLISA). At the meeting, government representatives put forward their views on factors affecting education quality and the effectiveness of existing government policies and a consensus was reached that quality education was an important area to investigate. They also highlighted sub-areas within quality education to focus on. The research team (made up of consultants and Young Lives staff) then reflected on these discussions to define a new research topic. The end result was a research question and focus quite closely related to the interests of the government representatives.

Consultation process: discussing the findings and recommendations

Once the research was completed, a second draft of the paper was shared with government officials as part of the consultation process. However, only one representative from the Committee of Ethnic and Minority Affairs was involved in the consultation process, sending written comments on the draft. It was found that representatives from ministries were too busy to engage with the research. It was difficult to get government officials to discuss the implications of the paper, even though they had played a key role in shaping the direction of the research. The research findings and recommendations were not controversial, but were quite practical in seeking to understand the challenges of policy implementation and children's and family experiences of education.

Reflections

Although the government officials were involved at the beginning of the process, it was felt that the research ended up not being particularly relevant to them. The research team felt, on reflection, that the research topic was too broad and did not end up stimulating demand from the government. One reason could be that after the research areas were decided, there was little dialogue with the officials. Perhaps the agenda of the government

had moved on, and therefore as there had been little ongoing dialogue, there was little scope for altering or framing the research differently. The research team felt that they could have chosen specific government policies to examine that were in line with the government agenda rather than broad policy areas. This may have improved the chances that the paper would be utilised by policymakers and feed into policy formulation and review processes. As a number of non-government organisations and research bodies are conducting independent research it can be difficult to get the attention of government officials unless they are mandated to use the research. One option that frequently takes place in Vietnam is that NGOs collaborate with one or two specific government agencies and conduct the research together. This is often the best way to enhance the relevance of the research and ensure demand for the research product.

Analysis

Best practice would tell us that involving government in the process of establishing research priorities increases the likelihood of research uptake by the government. It should also make it more likely that recommendations are not out of line with government thinking and are mindful of the realities of policymaking. This definitely remains the case, but putting it into practice requires a lot of time-intensive collaboration with government throughout the entire research and drafting process. So, although the Young Lives research did not go out 'cold' to the government, that didn't automatically mean the government was more receptive to the analysis or the recommendations. It is necessary to actively involve policymakers throughout the process. But in Vietnam this can be difficult. It is more common to conduct the research jointly with government or conduct research that has been commissioned by the government.

The key problem with getting government involved is that rather than it necessarily helping you navigate the political context, you either end up being pushed outside the politics of the research or at least being moulded by it. It does not reduce the political dynamics. A drawback of this approach is that by enabling the government to help set the parameters of the research it does place some restrictions on the research. This can prohibit the investigation moving into interesting areas that are outside the scope of the research. It can also result in the government deliberately choosing research areas that are more likely to produce favourable research. Alternatively, it could reflect the government's preference for a certain type of evidence that they place less value on (such as qualitative evidence) and will therefore find it easier to ignore. Perhaps, in this example, the government did not want in-depth examination of specific policies and instead preferred more general research on areas related to quality education. Or perhaps the government deliberately pulled away from the process during the drafting and consultation process so it did not feel obligated to act on the recommendations or engage fully in the process. These are mere speculations but they highlight the politicisation of processes that are deemed to be trying directly to stimulate demand.

Based on discussions with Mai Thuy Hang, Young Lives Policy Coordinator, Vietnam and Nguyen Hoai Chau, former Young Lives Policy Coordinator, Vietnam

4.2.3 *The type of evidence*

What determines whether evidence is 'useful' to policymakers? How policymakers value different types and forms of evidence is often shaped by the political context and the nature of the policy process. There is little agreement from policymakers or researchers about what constitutes evidence, as different actors will place different forms and types of evidence in their own hierarchy. How policymakers judge and value different forms of evidence is also shaped by the different faces of an issue that policymakers see (Garrett and Islam 1998), which determine how they analyse the issue and shape a response. This can depend on their ideological leaning, their professional expertise and their appreciation for research. If policy actors have little comprehension of research, weak expertise in a specific area or an ideological leaning towards certain policy responses, this will shape how they rate the credibility, accessibility and relevance of the research and subsequently their uptake. Some of the judgements made by policymakers about the evidence used in the decision-making process may include:

- *Assessing quality*: An overarching term often used to describe the reliability and authority of research. Quality is often linked to the *credibility* of the research. Credibility can be judged in a subjective manner, and is often attributed to research from reputable research institutions or research that is endorsed by reputable academics or institutions (see Box 4, India). This is due to the fact that it is difficult for policymakers to check evidence, and they therefore need to rely on the reputation of the source (Sutcliffe and Court 2005). A technical definition of credibility or quality can relate to the *reliability* of the analytical methods, the rigour used in the data collection and analysis processes, and the clarity of presentation of the results. How different types of research (qualitative and quantitative) are accorded levels of accuracy can be a subjective process.
- *Assessing relevance*: This concerns the timing and significance for policy, and is shaped by the nature of the audience. Knowing the key policy questions and evidence gaps of the target policymakers can help to stimulate demand. Policymakers have been known to ask researchers 'how does what you're finding help me do my job?' Often research is produced that is not relevant to the current political narrative and thereby finds it difficult to gather political momentum behind its recommendations, no matter how conclusive. Relevance also relates to 'generalisability' and applicability of the evidence, and whether the findings are useful in a different context or with different sampling methods (Shaxson 2005).
- *Assessing sensitivity*: The sensitivity of the findings refers to whether the results could be uncomfortable for policymakers and could therefore be ignored. Sensitive findings could be politically disruptive by challenging the 'policy regime' (Lindquist 2001), the status quo or the current definition of a policy problem or solution.
- *Assessing clarity*: Often research methods and results are unintelligible to non-researchers, are not digestible or results are not accompanied by a clear interpretation. Policymakers often have little time for engaging with research and if the results are ambiguous and do not offer clear interpretation of the findings, they will be discarded, ignored, or misinterpreted in line with certain policy lines. This is not to say that ambiguous findings will always be discarded (although they often are), but rather that there is need for a clear interpretation of what the research has found.

Box 4. *Defining credible and relevant research in the context of India*

Scrutinising the political dynamics that shape hierarchical judgments about evidence and understanding how policymakers (and other influential elites) define 'credible' evidence are crucial for effective policy engagement. This case study illustrates why this is important in the Indian context. During a recent stakeholder event in India involving Young Lives and other research, there was significant debate about defining 'credible' and 'relevant' nutrition-related research. Many participants felt that research questions must be designed in collaboration with nutrition experts and that the analysis and results needed to be endorsed by nutrition experts in order for research to be deemed 'credible'. As many of the stakeholders were unfamiliar with Young Lives research, there were numerous questions from advocates, policymakers and sectoral experts about the process by which research questions were designed and research variables were selected, the nature of the methodology and the level of consultation process with experts.

Reflections

This example demonstrates that the way policymakers and broader policy/epistemic communities define credible and relevant research can be an important factor in determining the influence research has on policy. It also highlights that definitions of 'credible', 'accurate' and 'relevant' can be context- and sector-specific. While there is no agreed definition of credible or technically correct evidence, there is often a clear process for determining credibility. The chance that policymakers will deem research accurate will depend on the credibility of the research institution and levels of trust. The consultative process that has been adopted to develop the research questions is therefore critical, as well as the clear communication of research methods. Credibility and quality, in this instance, are also linked to relevance. If research is developed without consideration of important research questions or policy questions (without an appropriate consultation process) then it will most likely not be of great use and will be deemed poor-quality evidence. What is interesting is that evidence is viewed by a wide variety of government and non-governmental sources to be apolitical. Only the process of knowledge translation and turning research into a policy tool is viewed as political. There seems to be some level of agreement about what constitutes acceptable evidence but less discussion about why certain actors may define evidence as inaccurate or irrelevant to their own ends.

How policy change happens in practice

Despite the emphasis on defining credibility, receiving credible status does not guarantee that policymakers will utilise the research. Judgements about the credibility of research are a necessary, but not sufficient condition, to influence policy. Our experience in India has shown that policies or programmes are rarely changed solely on the basis of one research study. At the best, research mostly informs and modifies operational methods of a scheme. Although formal policy review processes do exist, the design of policies and programmes is a largely political process. While scientific experts define credible evidence in appropriate terms for their sector, in reality, decisions made about utilising the evidence are political. Policymakers are frequently handed new pieces of research, and it is quite easy for them to ignore research that does not fit their political agenda. 'Reading' evidence is different from acting upon on it, but if there is strong civil society support for the evidence, and it is backed by the media, there is at least a good chance the research will be heard even if there is little action. The influence research has on the executive and legislative process will always largely be shaped by the level of political will and resources.

Analysis

This case study shows that contextualising evidence within country-specific and thematic policy and research debates is vital not just for framing the research and its recommendations but also for the credibility of the analysis. It also illustrates the importance of understanding the criteria and process for how accurate or credible evidence is defined within specific policy contexts. Finally, it demonstrates that improving the relevance and credibility of research evidence and ensuring it is endorsed by experts will only go so far towards ensuring research gets on the table of policymakers and then is actually used.

Based on discussions with Ajay Kumar Sinha, Young Lives Policy Coordinator, India

4.3 Poor supply of policy-relevant research

Stone (2002) has provided a useful analysis of some of the problems associated with the character of supply, and creating what Lindblom and Cohen (1979) term 'usable knowledge'. These problems relate to inadequate supply of policy-relevant research; lack of access to research; poor policy comprehension on the part of researchers; and ineffective communication efforts by researchers. Despite this nuanced analysis of supply-side problems, many of the strategies to improve the nature of supply focus on the importance of research communications in relation to the 'marketing' of research and the mechanics of supply (Barnard et al. 2006). This is due to the fact that getting messages through to the intended audiences can be quite difficult. Even the donors who fund research don't necessarily read the reports, let alone think about the implications of the research. While this is a crucial part of solving the supply dilemma, it would be problematic to focus only on problems associated the mechanics of supply as this implies that this issue is mainly about 'getting the research out there' and not about the nature of the research itself. This section will focus on how political factors shape the nature of the research that is supplied.

A number of the challenges associated with the quality of the supply of research relate to the nature of the research itself. Because the research community lacks knowledge of the political context and the policy process, they supply research that is not contextualised, that focuses on topics that are not directly relevant to policymakers' current agendas, or that is communicated in a fashion that doesn't take into consideration how policymakers use evidence. These underlying issues are due to two supply-side problems: asking the wrong question – poorly framed or contextualised research and poorly contextualised communication.

4.3.1 Asking the wrong question? Poorly framed and contextualised research

How does one define a 'policy-relevant' research question? Should all research be relevant to policy? Who defines what is relevant? Is it civil society, government or academics? These are clearly thorny issues. If researchers are asking the wrong questions, is it that the topics researchers choose to investigate are not interesting or relevant to people in government? Or is it that general topics are relevant but that the specific line of enquiry is framed in a way that produces results that are not directly useful to policymakers? Alternatively, is it that researchers do not take the political context into consideration when developing research questions, so that the research appears context-free in the eyes of policymakers? It is probably a mix of all three, combined with poor synthesis and messaging that makes potentially relevant material hard to understand and digest. However, the problems of

messaging and clarity are perhaps easier to 'fix', than ensuring that research is relevant to policymakers' current agendas.

Policy debates move on. Agendas change. However, research often can be slow to pick up on subtle changes in relation to policy questions. As Young Lives is a longitudinal study there is natural tension between 'horizon scoping' to predict future policy issues and ensuring research is accessible now so that it can feature in current debates. Research can take time to carry out and the review process which ends up in papers being published in a journal can be lengthy. Often by this time, policymakers will have drawn on tacit knowledge or their own pool of knowledge or contacts to make decisions or to frame their thinking. Research questions need to try to address current evidence gaps in policy debates, or try to supply evidence that helps to frame policy debates. But to do this they need to know what the debates are. For example, in relation to social protection conditional cash-transfer programmes, the debate on conditionality may have moved on from wanting to know *what* the impact of the transfers is to understanding whether the conditionality itself is the cause of the impact and if so *why* and *how*.

Sometimes researchers conduct research on a useful topic but don't choose a useful line of enquiry or research question. Policymakers often want research that shows *how* impacts take place and *why* or that produce evidence that demonstrate *how* things should be done differently or that offer practical guidance. Often researchers will state that this requires further research or that it was beyond the remit of their research, but only partly answering a policymaker's research question, or answering the wrong part of it often means that the research is not useful. Policymaking is to some degree about problem-solving. Therefore how policymakers define 'useful' research will often depend on whether the evidence helps them solve a policy problem.

Finally, local, national and international social and political processes constrain and facilitate how programmes are designed and implemented and affect who gains access to them and who is excluded. Research questions that do not consider political and social dynamics when researching government programmes produce inaccurate results or findings that are open to misinterpretation. Often researchers may apply caveats in relation to the political context, but frequently that is not sufficient. Variables will have already been chosen, interviews carried out, and analysis will have already been conducted. Political context is not something that can be added on to the end of a paper, it should be a lens that is used throughout the research process right from setting the research question.

Why should researchers be concerned if their research is not framed in a way that is relevant to policy? How can they be expected to conduct research on relevant topics when policymakers are always changing their minds and following 'fashions' in relation to policy issues? Is it up to researchers to solve the problem of the lack of policy-relevant research or is it up to policymakers? Do they have the capacity? Should researchers try to engage more with policy actors or should policymakers seek out researchers and try to understand where research can really add value? Often the funders of research are themselves government departments, but this is mostly in developed countries. However, ministries for women and social affairs, for example, may deem different topics to be policy-relevant than donors. There are no easy answers here. There are also broader issues relating to the impartiality of research and the importance of stimulating independent thought and ideas to stimulate new narratives and discussions. This is often termed 'blue sky thinking'. If researchers are too close to government or merely try to analyse only what they think governments want to know, there is a danger that political spaces may become closed off or that policy will drive the evidence rather than evidence making a contribution to the policy analysis.

4.3.2 *Poorly contextualised communication*

While the usual problem that is identified in relation to the supply of research is the poor communication skills of researchers, it is now often the case that research projects employ communications staff. In fact, many funders of research projects now stipulate that a certain percentage of a project budget be allocated to communications activities. Consequently there is a strong emphasis on 'selling research' (Keeley and Scoones 2003). However, while improving the way the product is 'sold' is important, what is equally important is that a nuanced analysis of the political context should underpin and frame the communications activities. Communication (or advocacy) work is often poorly informed by political analysis or is used as a substitute for good political 'intelligence-gathering' work. Just as good communication work can't substitute for good research, good communication can't replace the absence of a political lens. So how does poor political analysis weaken communication activities and thereby affect the supply of research?

Often communicators or advocates do not think carefully or practically about what theory of policy change they subscribe to (even in broad terms), or examine how the policy actor that they are trying to influence actually uses evidence, if it all, in their decision-making processes. Or if they do conduct this analysis or ask themselves these questions, rarely is it internalised to the extent that it frames the nature of the communications work. For, example how are policies changed in relation to child work? In order to understand this, it is vital to understand how the issues of child 'work' and child 'labour' are framed, the type of language that is used to frame debates (e.g. rights or evidence), and who makes decisions on this issue (e.g. ministries of labour or women and social affairs). How policy change is understood affects how messages are framed, and the timing and nature of influencing activities. Stakeholder analysis, and other similar advocacy tools which analyse the power and influence of policy actors, are a step toward this analysis. However they fall short in that they do not include analysis of the decision-making process and how policy change happens. They could also be strengthened by better knowledge of policy elites and stronger analysis of informal political processes.

Developing a theory or framework for how policy change occurs and when and how decisions are made is crucial to setting achievable and realistic objectives and developing a strategy for influencing policy. There is often no hypothesis about the significance research evidence has (in relation to other factors) in decision-making and no explicit definition of what 'policy influence' means in their specific context. This can have a significant impact on the nature of the influencing objectives and whether or not a realistic strategy for using evidence to influence policy is developed. Analysis of the policymaking process is important for contextualised communications. A lack of understanding of the nature of policymaking, how policy narratives are created and the room for manoeuvre policymakers have, can mean policy messages and recommendations are often poorly framed and are reliant on a formal and rational model of policymaking which is far from the reality. In India there is a dominant rights narrative in relation to child work. Understanding the history of democratic politics and social movements is crucial to understanding the framing of this issue and developing socially and politically feasible recommendations.

4.4 **Improving research utilisation**

There is now an increased focus among academics on a more nuanced approach to tackling supply-side issues. This involves encouraging researchers to be 'policy entrepreneurs' (Young and Mendizabal 2009, based on a term used by John Kingdon in the early 1980s).

Proponents of this view encourage researchers to be networkers and story tellers, or if that is not feasible, to link up or employ 'research brokers' (Yaron and Shaxson 2008) who have a skill of teasing out key messages and liaising with political actors. However, solving problems associated with the supply of research will depend directly on the demand for research. Both components of the equation, supply and demand, need to be tackled in adequate measure. However, ultimately success in promoting the actual utilisation of (not just increased demand for) research in the policymaking process will depend significantly on the level of nuanced understanding on the part of researchers of the political aspects of the environment within which policy is framed, understood, designed and implemented. More attention needs to be given to understanding decision-making and knowledge utilisation within government and policymaking processes, and then internalising this analysis in research and communications work. This next section focuses on practical experiences of trying to do this and will offer some examples of context-based practice and some additional tools.

5. How can we put into practice what we know about the role of politics in shaping how evidence is used?

This paper has shown that understanding politics and the process of policymaking is important for researchers. However, as our case studies have shown, negotiating politics in order to use evidence successfully to influence policy can be difficult. How can we put into practice what we know about the role of politics in shaping how evidence is used? This section will outline the type of political analysis that could be adopted by researchers and communicators/advocates at different stages of the research and communication process in order to negotiate the political issues. It will address the following questions:

- What lessons emerge in relation to promoting the use of evidence in policymaking?
- What additional analysis is required to apply this understanding?
- How can this analysis be applied at different stages of research and communications work?

5.1 What lessons emerge in relation to promoting the use of evidence in policymaking?

So far this paper has highlighted a number of challenges and lessons in relation to the utilisation of evidence in policymaking. These relate to the political context, the demand for research and the supply of research. What are the implications of this? A number of key lessons emerge which suggest important issues that should be considered by those trying to analyse the impact evidence has on policymaking. Table 4 juxtaposes these lessons and challenges with the assumptions behind and issues raised by evidence-based policymaking.

Table 4. *Politics and research: how to put our knowledge into practice*

	What we know	Key lessons	How to put it into practice
The policy process and the political context	Policymaking is a random process. Decision-making is more pragmatic than optimal – and is based on what is politically feasible. Research often percolates slowly, merges with other ideas, to gradually filter through to influence thinking.	Be realistic about what is achievable and try to increase demand for research. Influencing policy is a slow process; there is a greater chance of changing the way problems are understood than changing specific policies.	Build informal relations with government and discuss previous policy decisions and the use of evidence. Develop an incremental influencing strategy and be explicit about the nature of policy objectives and definitions of policy influence.
Weak demand from policymakers for research evidence	Policymakers make judgements about whether evidence is useful, credible or relevant. Choices about the use of evidence and how the parameters of acceptable evidence are defined are often political.	Evidence is interpreted. Assumptions about evidence are embedded in social and political institutions. How ‘useful evidence’ is defined is not clear. It is crucial to assess political space and prevailing policy narratives.	Question policymakers about how they define credibility and usefulness. Analyse how they frame debates, who is successful in influencing government and how this relates to government views about evidence.
Poor quality supply of research	Research is often poorly contextualised. The political context of research is not always considered when research is designed or interpreted. Advocacy is often poorly informed by political analysis.	Successful communication is not just about developing simple messages but knowing how to shape messages, and developing strategies based on knowledge of decision-making processes and political realities.	Create partnerships with government by involving them in the research process. This can help integrate political- economy-related questions into research design and help shape interpretation of findings.

5.2 What additional analysis is required to apply this understanding?

Mapping and diagnosing the political context is crucial. Actually, many researchers and communicators already have this knowledge but do not synthesise and try to make sense of it. The biggest challenge however is not always doing the analysis, but viewing it as a process and understanding how to apply it (while being careful to challenge underlying assumptions). Political economy analysis tools and approaches can be useful to help apply this understanding.

Political context / Political economy analysis for research

In reference to policymaking, the *political context*, can be understood as the political aspects of the environment within which policy is framed, understood, contested, designed and implemented. It relates to the level of civic or political space, the power, influence and interaction of different actors, and the undercurrent of momentum around different ideas and policies. Leftwich (2006) suggests that there are two levels where politics occurs. The first relates to the *rules of the game* (procedures and processes that underpin and structure political life) and the second concerns the *game within the rules* (contestations over policy and power).

Political economy analysis is the study of how these two levels affect how, and when, political decisions are made. In relation to evidence-based policy, political economy analysis is concerned with analysing the interests and incentives of political actors and the role that formal and informal institutions and sources of power play in shaping the choices, values and ideas of policymakers and their relationships with civil society. It is interested in understanding how change comes about, how and why decisions are made, and what factors shape political feasibility.

Political economy analysis can include analysing the following factors that make up the political context:

- *Policy environment*: The process and context, within which policy is framed, understood, contested, designed and implemented. Assessment of policy communities, agenda-setting and policy narratives.
- *Formal institutions and forms of governance*: Formal political/electoral, bureaucratic, legal and policy processes. Assessment of formal institutions of government accountability and responsiveness.
- *Informal institutions and forms of governance*: Social, cultural, ideological and political norms. Analysis of informal actors and systems of power including patrimonialism and clientelism.
- *Political system*: The interaction of formal and informal institutions; processes of contestation and assertion of power; level of political space; definition and role of political elites.

5.3 How can political economy analysis be applied at different stages of research?

In order to integrate political economy analysis into the research process there are a number of key questions that can be considered at different stages of research design, interpretation and developing recommendations. This section will outline key questions about the policy process and the political context that could be considered at different stages of the research process.

5.3.1 *Designing the research*

The following key questions should be asked at research design stage:

- *What do policymakers see as the key evidence gaps?* It is important to ask policymakers about the type of evidence and research questions that they find useful and what their questions are in relation to certain policies or programmes.
- *How are certain policy problems and solutions understood?* Although policy narratives can be quite fixed, policymakers are not a heterogeneous group and policymaking in developing countries can be quite volatile. Changes can also take place after a change in government. Understanding the ebb and flow in relation to problem and solution definition may help to predict future research questions and contextualise current ones.

- *How do policy narratives shape how policymakers define 'acceptable evidence'?* How do policymakers rank different types of evidence (qualitative or quantitative)? How do they determine 'relevance' and 'credibility'? Answers to these questions may not change the research priority but may shape the nature of the line of enquiry. A series of research questions that chip away at a policy problem may be more usable.
- *Who would be interested in your research and why?* It is important to understand what type of research governments and the donor community are interested in. Whether they are more interested in knowing *what* the impact is, *how* it occurred, or understanding *why*. If policy influence is a stated aim of the research, then it is important to consider what level of policy influence is desired or achievable, and how research questions need to be framed in order to achieve this.

5.3.2 Interpreting the research

- *What does your research actually mean? Could the research results mean different things to different people or organisations?* Asking these questions, with an emphasis on 'why' and 'what does this actually mean', can help researchers move a step closer to developing more accessible and useful findings. It can also help to correct over-emphasis on one solution for 'what works'.
- *How have social and political processes affected or shaped your results?* Political economy affects the design, implementation and outcomes of government programmes. Research that seeks to evaluate the impact of such programmes needs to acknowledge this and take it into account when interpreting results. Research, to be politically sensitive, needs to go beyond estimating impact – to understanding why and how this impact came about. This may mean political context analysis is needed to complement the research analysis in order to facilitate more effective interpretation and contextualisation.

5.3.3 Developing recommendations

- *So what? Why does this research matter?* There should be no automatic assumption that research matters for policy. Findings must be contextualised and framed. If research findings do contribute to policy or evidence gaps, analysing how they contribute and adding the relevant caveats will improve the contextualisation of the research.
- *Why have previous attempts to solve policy problems failed?* Because policy development is not only technical but political, research recommendations need to be politically feasible. This may mean developing second- or third-best recommendations that can be 'bought into' and adapted. Solutions to policy problems are often developed through processes of consensus-building, compromise and adaptation (World Bank 2008). Recommendations that are grounded and relevant are more likely to be taken up.
- *How much room for manoeuvre do decision-makers have?* Understanding the potential for reform in the political context, and the level of potential contestation around research findings, doesn't have to mean toning down recommendations. However, it should alter how they are framed and communicated. However, if results are controversial, or policymakers have little room for manoeuvre, sensitive recommendations may be ignored or disregarded. One option is to provide practical advice suggesting how the situation can be improved with practical policy changes.

- *How do the research's caveats and context relate to its recommendations and the way it is interpreted?* Caveats and context are not just important for producing accurate or credible evidence, but are crucial for making recommendations practically useful and avoiding generalisations that can result in inaccurate interpretations and inappropriate policy responses.

5.4 How can political economy analysis be applied at different stages of communications and advocacy work?

There are a number of key questions that could be asked and internalised when conducting communications and advocacy work in order to try to overcome some of political barriers to evidence-based policy engagement. These questions can help frame the different components of communications and advocacy work (stakeholder analysis, message development, objective setting and strategy development). Stakeholder analysis normally involves tools such as influence mapping and power analysis but does not usually look at decision-making and use of evidence, and needs to be revised for evidence-based policy engagement work. Stakeholder analysis needs to be more a process of 'political intelligence-gathering', which will then subsequently shape how messages are framed and objectives are set.

This section will outline:

- Key issues at different stages of communications and advocacy work
- Key questions about the policy process and the political context that could be considered at different stages of communications and advocacy work
- Examples of working practices adopted by Young Lives that might be useful, as well as additional tools and approaches that can help.

5.4.1 *Analysing stakeholders and audience*

- *Incorporating political intelligence-gathering into stakeholder analysis:* Understanding how key stakeholders make political decisions and how this shapes the demand for and use of evidence are critical for understanding the political context. This will help determine how evidence is communicated and the type and nature of evidence sought. If significant decisions are made infrequently then there is likely to be little demand for evidence that is not in the confines of stakeholders' existing knowledge.
- *Assessing political space and how this frames preference for evidence:* Understanding the amount of political space and influence that key stakeholders have and how much room they have to deviate from prevailing narratives, to make significant decisions or to absorb new research is a very useful addition to power analysis. Understanding *why* they may ignore evidence, and the incentives they have to stick to agreed positions or to cherry-pick evidence, helps understand how they operate. These issues were prevalent in the Ethiopian example given in Box 2 on page 22.

5.4.2 *Developing a message*

- *Developing feasible messages based on strong contextual analysis:* Understanding how policy issues are framed (whether in economic, political or moral terms) by different actors is crucial for developing appropriate research messages. It is also important to understand how different sectors frame the same issues. (For example early childhood centres (such as the Peruvian *Wawa Wasis*) can be framed in terms

of child care, social protection, nutrition or education.) Framing issues in the right way can increase the likelihood that evidence-based messages will be absorbed or picked up on, rather than ignored.

Messages and recommendations that are not feasible, not based on political reality, or not based on an assessment of the likelihood of certain institutions or actors adopting them will fall flat and most likely be ignored. Understanding how reform happens and how debates are framed is fundamental to developing politically viable messages.

- *Understanding how single pieces of research are utilised:* Assessing how research utilisation takes place in a specific policy sector or environment is important for framing research messages well. If your assessment concludes that one piece of research is unlikely to have a direct influence, and is likely to be merged with other research in the mind of the policymaker, how does this shape messages or framing? Does this influence how you liaise with other research bodies or communication outfits?
- *Understand incentives to engage with new research:* Examining the incentives of policymakers to engage with and utilise research and their freedom to make brave choices instead of seeking out research which 'reinforces and makes coherent their own ideas' is vital to effectively frame research and develop messages. Rather than framing research to influence a specific policymaker, it may be more effective to tailor it to their superior's agenda or relate it to upward policy agendas. If certain policy issues are shaped by ideology or are dominated by a rigid policy narrative, then it might make sense to only focus on them during new 'policy windows' (Kingdon 2003) e.g. during a time of change (i.e. election, change of minister, change in economic context) when there may be an increased demand for new evidence. This can be quite challenging however, as political and economic changes can often be unpredictable and research can have a long lead-in time.

5.4.3 *Setting objectives – defining desired policy influence*

- *Developing a theory of policy change:* Developing a theory or framework for how policy change occurs and how decisions are made is crucial to setting achievable and realistic objectives. Developing a hypothesis for the degree of significance that research evidence plays (in relation to other factors) in decision-making will facilitate clearer policy aims and a more nuanced definition of what 'policy influence' means in a specific context. This will also enable stronger monitoring and evaluation. Often policy objectives relate to creating specific changes in government policy when it may be more realistic to focus on getting issues on the agenda and debated by government.
- *Understanding political momentum:* Considering how, and which, issues gather momentum and the different combination of factors that contribute to issues getting on the agenda will help define realistic policy and communication objectives. How and why do issues get on the 'systemic agenda' where they could be considered and then move on to the institutional agenda where they are eligible for serious consideration? Dissecting which of these influencing factors that affect agenda setting are under your control helps shape grounded objectives and determine what type of policy influence is possible.

5.4.4 *Developing a strategy – outputs and activities*

- *Assessing how ‘acceptable decisions’ are defined:* Pragmatism is the basis of policymaking, but often not the foundation for policy influencing. Understanding how ‘acceptable’ decisions are defined by policymakers, and how lack of time and the involvement of multiple actors constrain their choices is crucial to developing a grounded strategy. The fact that policymakers often make decisions without all the evidence and tackle a problem in small stages affects the degree of evidence-based policy influence that is achievable. Conducting this type of analysis should frame the timing, nature and breadth of the influencing activities and outputs and make them much more realistic.
- *Develop appropriate activities and outputs based on analysis of the policy process:* Revisiting this analysis is also important at this stage. Once a theory of policy change is developed this will frame the policy and communication objectives that were drawn up and the parameters of policy influence that are feasible. This will subsequently shape the communication outputs and activities that are developed. If, for example, significant decisions are made infrequently, research evidence is thought to percolate and it is deemed easier to get issues on the agenda than to change specific policies, then this should fundamentally shape the nature of activities and outputs chosen to ‘get the research out there’.
- *Assessing previous failures in policy influences:* Analysing the role evidence has played (or not) in previous policy decisions can help provide a realistic assessment of the barriers to overcome. Understanding the political dynamics that led to previously successful or failed efforts to solve policy problems can be vital in defining the supporting components of a communications and policy strategy (such as building alliances, involving stakeholders in setting research questions, and capacity building, etc.). Analysing previous failures and the political feasibility of recommendations is crucial in helping to address the absence of political will for policy changes, and creating a more effective communications and outreach strategy.

5.4.5 *Supporting researchers and liaising with policymakers – acting as interlocutors*

- Communicators and advocates can act as interlocutors in various ways. This role can be viewed as an ongoing one that supports other stages. As the function of interlocutors is not commonly utilised in communications work, it can be viewed as a new stage or process.
- Interlocutors can act as a bridge between researchers and policymakers. They can support researchers to reflect on how their analysis of the policy process has helped them to know whether their research is policy-relevant. They can engage with policymakers during the research design stage to discuss research priorities and political context. Advocates can support researchers in understanding the political context and the nature of policy debates and can also support communicators to conduct political intelligence-gathering to carry out more nuanced stakeholder analysis and message development and to set more realistic objectives.

Table 6 gives a summary of the stages described above, and incorporates the key questions about the policy process and the political context that should be considered at each stage. Examples of work practices adopted by Young Lives as a result of their experience of trying to bridge the research–policy gap are given, as are additional possible tools and approaches.

Table 5. *Integrating a political economy lens: guidance for communicators and advocates*

Key questions	Application – practical examples and lessons
Analysing stakeholders and audience	
<p><i>Political intelligence-gathering</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What type of decision-making regime is prevalent in the policy community you operate in or are seeking to influence? • How are political decisions made about the issue you are working on? • What informal systems of power exist? Who are the policy elites? • How does all this shape how policymakers seek out research evidence? 	<p>Young Lives example: Stakeholder analysis</p> <p>In order to strengthen its political dimension, Young Lives has adapted the standard approach to stakeholder analysis. In addition to collecting and analysing information on the interests, incentives, relationships, power and approach of key stakeholders, the study has attempted to include analysis of decision-making and policymaking processes, key evidence and policy gaps as defined by stakeholders, and stakeholders' hypotheses about different policy solutions.</p> <p>Additional tool: Analysis of informal policy elites by sector or policy issue</p> <p>Stakeholder analysis can be deepened by including informal actors – in particular policy elites – and how they contribute to the definition of policy problems and getting issues on the agenda. This should be accompanied by an analysis of the informal political system.</p>
<p><i>Assessment of political space</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • How much room for manoeuvre do decision-makers have? • Are decision-makers looking for a certain type of evidence to support a predetermined position? 	<p>Young Lives example: Introduction of political context baselines</p> <p>Young Lives has integrated the analysis of political context baselines into the work of its policy staff based in the study countries. They analyse sectoral issues in the national and sub-national political context and the policymaking process through desk research and stakeholder interviews. As this analysis is conducted annually, it forms a baseline from which to understand the changing context and interpret the longitudinal research findings. This analysis is shared with the project researchers. However, the goal is for the analysis to be done jointly by the research and policy staff.</p> <p>Additional tool: Analysis of informal political systems</p> <p>Informal systems of power, influence and negotiation (i.e. patronage and clientelism) may determine decision-makers' room for manoeuvre. Analyse the process by which informal policy elites (identified through intelligence-gathering) influence policy interactions and processes.</p>
Developing a message	
<p><i>Feasible messages based on analysis</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • How are policies, debates and problems framed? How are problems and solutions understood? • Why have previous research studies with powerful findings not been picked up? 	<p>Young Lives example: Message mapping</p> <p>Young Lives has developed a process for mapping the key findings from different pieces of research against analysis of policy debates and evidence gaps. This is an ongoing process designed to strengthen understanding of how Young Lives research fits into policy debates and how messages need to be framed to maximise impact. It also helps identify where the study has new or potentially sensitive findings.</p>
<p><i>Utilisation of research</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Are there many examples of research directly influencing policy or does it tend to go through a filtering process? • How does research affect the thinking of policymakers in your policy community? Does this vary by issue or sector? 	<p>Suggested approach: Government capacity-building and research-uptake workshops</p> <p>Organising capacity-building and research-uptake workshops with government can be an effective way of improving how government understands and utilises research. It can also help the stakeholder and political analysis processes by improving your knowledge of the constraints on policymakers regarding evidence-based policymaking and the factors which would facilitate it.</p>
<p><i>Policymaker incentives to engage with new research</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What shapes the incentives driving policymakers and the choices they make? • Is there a fairly rigid policy narrative within your policy area? How does this shape how policymakers define acceptability in relation to evidence? • How does all this relate to values and ideology? 	<p>Young Lives example: Policy analysis and informal and formal stakeholder consultation</p> <p>Young Lives has set up a process whereby all policy staff conduct ongoing policy analysis of the main policy debates and government programmes in relation to the project's areas of work including education, child work, social protection, and childhood poverty. This analysis is shared with the research partners to help them to develop policy-relevant research questions, and to contextualise their research interpretation and recommendation development. Informal and formal consultation with stakeholders is a key component of this policy analysis.</p>

Key questions	Application – practical examples and lessons
Setting objectives – defining desired policy influence	
<p><i>Developing a theory of policy change</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What theory of policy change do you subscribe to? • What does policy change mean in your context? • How important is evidence in the policymaking process? 	<p>Suggested tool: Hypothesis and policy change analysis</p> <p>Analysing how policymakers understand the causes and consequences of certain problems, and their ideas about how certain issues can be tackled is important in order to develop realistic objectives. Policymakers and policy institutions will have an overarching view of an issue or problem and a leaning towards certain types of approaches to solve it. Understanding the hypotheses driving their preferred solutions and types of evidence is useful for understanding policymaking. Policy change analysis involves defining what policy change means in certain contexts and developing a theory for how change occurs within specific contexts, sectors and issues.</p>
<p><i>Agendas and political momentum</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Who sets the agenda, and how and when do issues get on the agenda (and which type of agenda)? • What types of research are successful in shaping political agendas? 	<p>Suggested tool: Kingdon's multiple streams analysis tool – agenda-setting</p> <p>John Kingdon's (2003) multiple streams model of the policy process provides a useful framework to analyse agenda-setting – see Zahariadis (2007) for a synthesis of the framework. By conducting analysis of the policy, problem and politics streams, it is possible to find potential routes for research to influence policy agendas.</p>
Developing a strategy – outputs and activities	
<p><i>Definition of 'acceptable' decisions</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • How pragmatic are the policymakers in your sector? How far are their decisions based on evidence and how far do they settle for 'acceptable' decisions because of lack of time or to increase political support? • How and when are political decisions made? Are significant decisions made frequently? 	<p>Suggested tools: Problem tree and decision-making analysis</p> <p>Using decision-making and problem tree analysis tools can be an effective way of understanding how policymakers perceive problems and identify solutions. Problem tree analysis is a participatory tool for understanding the hierarchy of cause and effect between policy problems for different policymakers. It can help people understand the different factors (individuals, events, values, processes) that affect decision-making and the role evidence plays. Conducting this analysis can assist in identifying the best activities and outputs to communicate the research.</p>
<p><i>Assessment of previous work</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Why have previous attempts to solve particular policy problems failed? • What role has evidence played in helping to solve problems? 	<p>Young Lives example: Policy peer-review process</p> <p>Young Lives developed a new peer-review process to ensure all policy-relevant publications were reviewed by internal policy staff and external policy stakeholders – in addition to academic reviewers. This process aims to ensure that research findings and recommendations are contextualised and that associated communications and advocacy activities are informed by strong policy and political analysis and advice.</p>
Supporting researchers and liaising with policymakers – acting as interlocutors	
<p><i>Questions interlocutors can support researchers to ask</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What are the key evidence gaps and policy questions relevant to your research? • How is policy-relevant research defined in your sector? • What are the research priorities of policymakers? 	<p>Young Lives example: Stakeholder consultation in research and communications strategy development</p> <p>Young Lives developed a new approach for an OAK-Foundation-funded initiative in Ethiopia and India. This initiative involves holding a series of multi-stakeholder workshops during the design stages of research and its communications strategy. These workshops aim to get feedback from key stakeholders about policy-relevant research questions. The stakeholders will then discuss the findings from the first two rounds of longitudinal research and then decide key policy gaps the research could help address. The process will also involve discussions with stakeholders about the best way to promote research uptake by policymakers.</p>

5.5 An integrated approach

Young Lives is committed to integrating its policy, communications and research work. Young Lives believes that research–policy integration, which is crucial for promoting the use of evidence in policymaking, should not just be about researchers being better policy analysts and policymakers improving their research comprehension skills. The challenge for researchers and communicators/advocates is to work in liaison with policymakers where possible. Communicators need to work closely with the researchers, and can play an important role acting as interlocutors between researchers and policymakers and in supporting researchers with their political analysis. Furthermore political advocates can support communicators with their political intelligence-gathering.

6. Conclusions and implications

Our experience has demonstrated that negotiating politics and using evidence to influence policy can be difficult. However, as the examples from Young Lives illustrate, there are a number of practical tools and approaches that can be adopted to integrate a political lens into communications and advocacy activities. As this paper has demonstrated, overcoming political barriers to evidence-based policy engagement is not simply an issue for advocates and communicators. In order to begin to tackle the underlying reasons for under-utilisation of research, it is critical to integrate political perspectives into the entire research process. As the Vietnam case study highlighted though, even with the best intentions to be politically savvy in the process of research design, it doesn't always turn out as expected. The India case study demonstrates that, although examining the process for how credible evidence is defined is vital, it needs to be coupled with a good understanding of informal political dynamics. Engaging with political actors and operating within a complex political system can be a careful balancing act and requires long-term effort. Maintaining good relations with government, while also conducting sustained nuanced political economy analysis throughout the research process, can be challenging and sensitive for research institutions. In the four very different political and economic contexts of Ethiopia, India, Peru and Vietnam, Young Lives has experimented with different approaches for integrating research and communications initiatives. The Peru case study demonstrates that it is possible to establish credibility and build close relations with government while also maintaining impartiality, but it requires a careful interlocutor role which can sometimes be difficult to sustain.

It is clear from the literature and Young Lives experience that understanding politics and the process of policymaking are crucially important. The implications of this are two-fold. Firstly that it is important to be realistic about influencing policy. Secondly, policymakers should be realistic about the use of evidence in policy. Evidence can matter for policymaking, but often it is not as influential as policymakers state or researchers like to think or like to state. What has emerged from the Young Lives experience is that we need to look again at what we mean by evidence-based policy. It is necessary to question the 'what works' agenda and acknowledge that the expectation that improved technical policymaking will remove the political or value-based dimensions is unrealistic. We need to acknowledge the role incentives, informal politics and bureaucracy play in decision-making and examine how evidence is used (or not) in problem-solving. There may be good reasons for an absence of evidence or not utilising evidence, and governments and policymakers must be open in acknowledging this. Our experience has shown that researchers and advocates need to be realistic in the parameters and type of influence that they strive towards, based on their own theory of policy change and problem-solving. It seems that, given the often informal and political nature of policymaking, aiming to influence the terms of the debates and the intellectual framework surrounding policymaking is a more realistic approach to strengthening research utilisation.

Davies (2009) has recently concluded from his research and practical experience that evidence-based policy is no substitute for *thinking-based* policy. The implications of this for research institutions that promote evidence-based policy are significant. Perhaps we could work more with government to improve *how* they use evidence – not necessarily trying to

push for a certain type of evidence or for 'evidence-based government' per se – but for more inclusive and rigorous policymaking. Evidence-based policy engagement should be about working with government to increase their *pull* for evidence and *how* they use evidence to *inform* their thinking and decisions rather than necessarily promoting or overplaying the evidence-based mantra. Building government capacity and strengthening the way policymakers use knowledge and evidence to make policy is a realistic, sustainable and worthwhile objective.

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Young Lives is an innovative long-term international research project investigating the changing nature of childhood poverty.

The project seeks to:

- improve understanding of the causes and consequences of childhood poverty and to examine how policies affect children's well-being
- inform the development and implementation of future policies and practices that will reduce childhood poverty.

Young Lives is tracking the development of 12,000 children in Ethiopia, India (Andhra Pradesh), Peru and Vietnam through quantitative and qualitative research over a 15-year period.

Young Lives Partners

Young Lives is coordinated by a small team based at the University of Oxford, led by Jo Boyden.

Ethiopian Development Research Institute,
Ethiopia

Centre for Economic and Social Sciences,
Andhra Pradesh, India

Save the Children – Bal Raksha Bharat, India

Sri Padmavathi Mahila Visvavidyalayam
(Women's University), Andhra Pradesh, India

Grupo de Análisis para el Desarrollo
(Group for the Analysis of Development), Peru

Instituto de Investigación Nutricional
(Institute for Nutritional Research), Peru

Centre for Analysis and Forecast,
Vietnamese Academy of Social Sciences,
Vietnam

General Statistics Office, Vietnam

Save the Children, Vietnam

The Institute of Education, University of
London, UK

Child and Youth Studies Group (CREET),
The Open University, UK

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Young Lives 
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