9 Lessons for out-scaling and up-scaling from *Understanding policy processes: a review of IDS research on the environment*
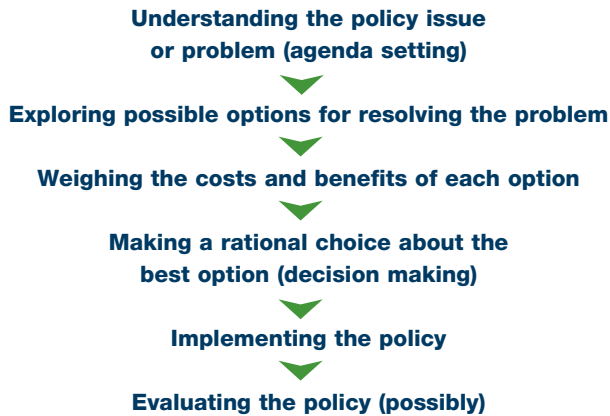
Background

This synthesis study illustrates the complex and multi-tiered nature of policy processes. The authors of the DFID-funded study[28] summarize 10 years of research undertaken by the Institute of Development Studies (IDS) with the aim of understanding how environment and development policies have come to be the way they are, and how or why change comes about—or fails to.

The conventional approach to policymaking (Box 9.1) assumes that experts contribute independent and objective scientific knowledge. Policy makers base their decisions on 'facts' (as opposed to values) and implementation depends on bureaucrats or administrators to put the decisions into practice.

Box 9.1

Travelling the straight and narrow:
The conventional view of policymaking
Traditionally, policymaking is seen as a linear process:

**Understanding the policy issue
or problem (agenda setting)**
▼
Exploring possible options for resolving the problem
▼
Weighing the costs and benefits of each option
▼
**Making a rational choice about the
best option (decision making)**
▼
Implementing the policy
▼
Evaluating the policy (possibly)

The model assumes that policy makers act rationally and carefully consider all relevant information as they go through each stage of the process. If policies do not achieve what they are intended to achieve, blame is often placed on the failure of politicians or managers to implement the policy (for example, lack of political will, poor management or shortage of resources) rather than on the policy itself.[29]

Key points

- Policymaking is political and by no means purely technical and rational.
- Policymaking is incremental, complex and iterative; it often involves experimentation, learning from mistakes and taking corrective measures. As a result, outcomes are varied; there are no set formulas.
- There are always overlapping and competing agendas, as well as diverging views among stakeholders as to what the important problems are.
- Facts are intertwined with value judgements, which play a major role.
- Discretion and negotiation by front-line workers are paramount.
- Technical experts and policymakers mutually construct policy. While scientists help to frame policy issues by providing evidence and knowledge, those working in policy also frame scientific enquiry by defining pertinent areas for investigation.
- In this 'co-production of science and policy', scientists often play down uncertainties as they attempt to satisfy the demand for answers from policy-makers; as a result, plural and partial debates can be recast as singular, closed and certain.
- Policy processes include some perspectives at the expense of others; in particular, the perspectives of the poor and marginalised are often excluded.

While this is view of policy making—also known as 'evidence-based policy' or policy rooted in 'sound science'—is pervasive in development practice, research has shown that this isn't really what happens. Policy processes are complex and involve a variety of actors. To contribute to understanding of these processes, the authors explore the ways in which 'facts' are established within particular networks and how they influence policy change at the national and international level.[30]

Lessons learned

Understanding the mechanics of decision making and implementation, as well as the more complex underlying practices of policy framing, are essential for effective policy advocacy.

What concepts and approaches can help?

To understand the way in which policy is shaped, it is important to take into account:

- how issues are framed by science: the narratives that tell the policy stories

---

- how policy positions become embedded in networks of actors
- the power dynamics that enable or constrain policy implementation

The analysis of these influences helps to clarify why some ideas are acted on, while others are ignored.

Policy narratives define a problem, explain how it comes about, and show what needs to be done to put it right. Those who construct these narratives frequently simplify complex issues and processes to make them more appealing to time-challenged politicians or managers. Some narratives are very persistent, making it very difficult to challenge them effectively (Box 9.2).

> ## Box 9.2
>
> ***Why some stories stick***
> - They suit political interests.
> - They are easily communicated through political marketing, mass media and education.
> - They are embedded in institutional structures, bureaucracies, actor networks and popular culture, limiting thinking about particular areas and reducing the ability of policy makers to consider alternatives or different approaches.
> - Once embedded, they are perpetuated and reinforced through everyday practices.

Actors and networks act to perpetuate policy narratives. Coalitions and alliances of people with similar or shared beliefs, visions, codes of conduct and patterns of behaviour, use their chains of persuasion and influence to spread and sustain narratives. These networks often link state institutions with the private sector, donors and civil society representatives such as journalists, researchers and NGOs, establishing connections that span the local and global levels. These diverse stakeholders and interest groups engage in debate and negotiation that can reinforce —or change— the prevailing narratives.

Politics and interests shape policy in a number of ways. Policy makers may use science to support and defend their interests, playing down contradicting evidence (Box 9.3).

Policy spaces define the policy maker's scope of action: the extent to which he or she is restricted in the decision making process by the forces described above. Looking at 'policy space' is fundamental when developing strategies for changing and influencing policy. Strong pressures to adopt a particular policy limit the room for action while, on the other hand, the lack of such pressure may provide valuable opportunities to exert leverage and develop consensus. Developing consensus involves negotiating trade-offs and agreements. While it is seldom possible to please all, it is important that the consensus be genuinely negotiated; otherwise, the policy decision is likely to fall apart.

The examination of knowledge/narratives, actors/networks and politics/interests contributes to the understanding of policy

> ## Box 9.3
>
> ***Politics and policy: One and the same?***
> In the conventional view of policy, fact and value are viewed as separate and unrelated. Yet in reality, politics shape policy processes in several important ways.
> - The desire of a particular regime to remain in power moulds the political context, as does competition among groups in society to defend their differing interests. Bureaucrats also have their own personal and political agendas to negotiate.
> - A range of interest groups exert their power and authority to influence policy making at each stage of the process, from agenda setting to the identification of alternatives, weighing of options, and choice and implementation of the most favourable one.
> - Policy is often termed in legal or scientific language to emphasise its rationality and portray it as objective, neutral and value-free, masking the political nature of the policy.

processes, helping to identify policy spaces (Box 9.4). For example, a weakness in the articulation of the dominant narrative may open up an opportunity to introduce a new option. Depending on the policy issue, there also may be important interactions between spaces at the local, regional, national and global levels.

> ## Box 9.4
>
> ***Understanding policy spaces***
> Making the effort to understand the nuances of policy processes can bring valuable insight and help policy makers to take the agenda forward. This includes:
> - unravelling the relationships between scientific and political interests
> - getting a feel for the geography of actor networks behind policy
> - questioning the assumptions embedded in policy narratives
> - identifying alternative, obscured narratives
>
> To illustrate this, researchers analyzed several case studies from IDS research, highlighting approaches that promote innovation:
>
> In **Ethiopia**[31], technical solutions to food shortage and environmental degradation built upon the prevailing narratives have not worked. More recently, the funding of successful participatory projects led by NGOs, together with the imaginative creation of networks around these activities, have created new policy spaces and helped reshape official thinking regarding agriculture and natural

[31] Keeley, J. and Scoones, I. (2003) Understanding Environmental Policy Processes: Cases from Africa, London: Earthscan. http://www.ntd.co.uk/idsbookshop/details.asp?id=740

resources. Local consultation and planning at the village level are now providing alternatives to top-down solutions.

Box 9.4 *continued...*

In **Guinea**[32], international conservation narratives around biodiversity and forest loss were causing local considerations to be interpreted within globalised frameworks, often excluding the forest users' perspective. New approaches, advocating the use of a broader strategy to make room for silenced voices, are enabling critique, building local skills and confidence, and using the media to express dissent.

In **China**[33], close, well-connected networks linking scientists, donors, regulators, bureaucrats and multinationals have enabled biotechnology advocates to secure access to policy makers. The resulting endorsement of biotechnologies by political leaders— linking it to economic development, food security and poverty reduction—has enabled the rapid development of this these technologies by the public sector.

In **Ghana**[34], powerful political and elite interests have produced arguments that gloss over the reasons why certain people are poor and why environmental areas are being degraded, undermining natural resource management for poverty reduction. The promotion of a deliberative process that encourages new types of participation, enabling policy actors and civil society to examine and challenge the conventional policy discourses, can help to counter this situation.

In **Africa**[35] in general , the dominant narrative regarding livestock disease eradication reflects a set of interests and assumptions that, rather than being driven by the issues of livestock disease, are actually about politics, territory and control. Yet because the international scientific community supports the prevalent views, it is difficult to introduce other perspectives. Creation of new alliances, negotiation of change at international forums, and improvement of the skills of African representatives in standard-setting bodies can help create policy spaces that will enable the introduction of alternatives.

In **India**[36], simplistic views of water scarcity have obscured the real causes of the problem, leading to inappropriate policy that benefits rich irrigation industries and marginalises the requirements of the water-needy, in particular the poor. A powerful coalition of politicians and business constituencies perpetuates the dominant narrative, with the support of media, NGOs and academics with close ties to them. An alternative network of actors— ranging from small NGOs to coalitions of engineers, social scientists, journalists, academics and members of a famous protest movement—is working to challenge the dominant narrative, promoting locally appropriate solutions and institutional reform.

Improving the policy process

Many steps can be taken to improve policy processes and ensure that they result in measures to promote equitable, balanced development objectives.

Capacity building for policymakers: Many people in policy positions do not have the skills or insight to tackle complex policy issues. They may have been trained in different, less relevant areas, and are expected to learn how to 'do policy' on the job. Much effort is currently invested in capacity building around the technical aspects of policy. It is important, however, to dedicate concerted attention to improving understanding of the processes of policymaking.

Linking research to policy: Because research-policy links are complex and non-linear, an astute assessment of the politics of knowledge making and its use in different contexts is necessary. This calls for asking a set of questions:
- Which policy networks have reach and influence?
- How can 'facts' be established within these networks?
- How can research findings influence change, recognising that research and information dissemination are only one part of the picture?

Priority setting for research and innovation systems: Most priority setting approaches use tests of efficiency and potential economic impact, often with little assessment of the likely outcomes of innovations. An understanding of the political and institutional context for innovation processes is critical to improve priority setting. The key questions include:
- Which lines of research are relevant to different political interests?
- How are poor people represented in these discussions?
- What narratives and political interests inform 'technical' research agendas?
- What are the likely obstacles - and how might these be averted by building alternative networks and alliances?

Setting standards: Regulatory standards, such as food safety and biosafety, are increasingly dominating developing country trade, particularly in agricultural commodities. Standard setting involves intensely political processes and most developing countries have little voice in them. A better understanding of these processes can offer a greater chance of influencing outcomes in favour of developing countries and poverty reduction. Questions

[32] Fairhead, J. and Leach, M. (2003) Science, Society and Power: Environmental Knowledge and Policy in West Africa and the Caribbean, Cambridge: CUP. http://www.ntd.co.uk/idsbookshop/details.asp?id=780
[33] Brock, K. and McGee, R. (2004) Mapping Trade Policy: Understanding the Challenges of Civil Society Participation, IDS Working Paper 225, Brighton: IDS. http://www.ntd.co.uk/idsbookshop/details.asp?id=805
[34] Waldman, L. et al (2005) Environment, Politics and Poverty: Lessons from a review of PRSP stakeholder perspectives, Brighton: IDS. http://www.ids.ac.uk/ids/KNOTS/PDFs/Synthesis_Review_%20EN.pdf
[35] Scoones, I. and Wolmer, W. (2006) Livestock, disease, trade and markets: policy choices for the livestock sector in Africa. IDS Working Paper 269, Brighton: IDS. http://www.ntd.co.uk/idsbookshop/details.asp?id=943
[36] Mehta. L. (2005) The Politics and Poetics of Water: Naturalising Scarcity in Western India, Delhi: Orient Longman. http://www.ntd.co.uk/idsbookshop/details.asp?id=913

surrounding the role of science in framing standards, the basis of risk statements made in the name of 'sound science', and the winners and losers of the current standard-setting practices, are critical for understanding the trade-offs and uncovering whether there are alternative perspectives that are currently obscured.

Economic/sector reform management (e.g. SWAPS, SAPs, PRSPs): All too often, the 'participatory consultations' required by donors are limited and do not capture the diversity of issues in sector or economic reform. They exclude certain perspectives, reflect particular sectoral interests, or frame issues in a way that prevents the exploration of alternatives. Policy process analysis can be a useful complement to these processes, creating space for civil society actors and others to raise issues and thereby encouraging more effective and inclusive change processes.

Negotiating responses to controversy, scandals and crises (e.g. avian flu, SARS, HIV/AIDS, climate change etc.): These themes are characterised by varying degrees of scientific uncertainty and risk. In policies dealing with them, the politicised and contested nature of scientific knowledge and the 'co-production' of science and policy have been particularly evident. The following questions need to be asked:

- How have policy agendas been framed, and by whom?
- Drawing on which science-policy networks?
- Are plural and partial debates being recast as closed and certain?
- Which perspectives are marginalised or excluded?
- What trade-offs and disagreements lie behind 'consensus'?

How can the locals bite back?

In an increasingly complex global environment, where a multiplicity of stakeholders stands to benefit—or suffer—from policy decisions, it is increasingly important to build trust around decision processes. Although a variety of participatory approaches have already been put in place to increase public participation in policy, these processes have not always been effective in enabling local knowledge to challenge global perspectives. In other words, they do not help poor people to shape policy agendas. There are many reasons for the failure of these approaches. Participation is often on the host's terms, replicating familiar patterns of dominance and exclusion.

In formulating models of participation, a focus on process helps to elicit the questions that will create more fertile ground for true participation:

- What kind of participation, and for whom?
- Who convenes the process?
- Who sets the agenda, defines the questions and shapes the terms of the debate?
- How are multiple forms of expertise accommodated?

Strategies and procedures that build on a firm understanding of policy processes can reconfigure relationships of knowledge, expertise and policy making by building new coalitions and shifting the framing of debates. At the same time, broader empowering measures—to enable critique and build confidence and skills among citizens—can help people to shape and inform policy debates.

Practical techniques for effecting policy change

Several techniques can be used to create new policy spaces that enable existing policy to be challenged, opening up opportunities for debate and innovation.

Telling persuasive stories—with pragmatic, clear and simple arguments that challenge dominant policy positions—can help to bring about change by suggesting alternative policies and institutional structures. These may include personal stories, videos and other direct testimonials, supported by publications and materials that are more formal.

Building networks and encouraging champions of change helps to convince others that alternative arguments are worth considering. Understanding power structures and relationships is fundamental to enable targeting the right people in the right places at the right time. Building and linking networks is also important, especially those that link local groups with national, continental and international interests.

Learning by seeing is particularly powerful in promoting policy change. This may involve, for instance, getting senior professionals out to the field to interact with remote communities, conducting field days or offering demonstrations; all of these experiences offer proven means of getting people on-board.

Opportunism and flexibility are critical aspects of any strategy. Fixed, inflexible plans cannot respond to changing circumstances and opportunities. Effective leveraging of policy change requires an aptitude for recognizing windows of opportunity as they arise and seizing these moments to get new messages on the agenda and open up the debate for policy reform.

Policies are not operational manuals; they should not define activities on the ground, but lay out principles, allowing latitude for interpretation, adaptation and negotiation. Rather than delivering 'evidence' for policy in a linear way, iterative dialogues need to be established between research and policy.