Linking research, policy and livelihoods: challenges and contradictions

Karen Brock and Elizabeth Harrison

The relationship between research and policy is a complicated one. It is influenced both by the approach taken by research projects, and by the institutional context within which policy making takes place. Natural Resources Systems Programme (NRSP) projects are a rich source of insights into this relationship and thus of more effective policy making.

Key messages

Some key messages have more relevance for researchers; others for funders of research.

For researchers:

- To ensure that research influences policy, analysing how policy makers learn is as important as providing them with information.
- The outcomes of natural resource management policy often do not match the policy's objectives. For policy analysts, it is therefore necessary to consider the unintended as well as the intended consequences of policy implementation.
- Factors such as gender, wealth, age and place of origin influence access to natural resources. Awareness of these factors should be reflected in the formulation and implementation of policy.
- Research findings point to the critical importance of building on existing collective arrangements for natural resource management, rather than necessarily developing new ones.
- Decentralisation of government is often seen as an important step towards pro-poor natural resource management, but research shows that this is by no means always the case. As with any change in representation, the possibility of capture by elites must always be considered.
- Tenure and property regimes are likely to be critical factors in determining the outcome of natural resource management policy.
- Disconnections between different institutions and different levels of the policy process are as important as connections in understanding how policy works or fails to work.

For research funders:

- The dynamics of politics and power in policy processes are often overlooked in research on natural resource management. And an understanding of institutional complexity cannot easily be bolted on to approaches that have emphasised technical and managerial dimensions.
- Interdisciplinarity and strong partnerships between researchers in the North and South are essential for influencing national policy. These need to be supported in research design and built upon where they have already been shown to be effective.
- Research has been most successful in creating local impacts and working upwards and outwards where funding has been available for successive, rather than one-off, projects. Researchers need resources to invest in building their own networks and alliances over the medium to long term if they are to successfully influence policy.
- Influencing policy may take at least as long again as conducting research. This needs to be reflected in funding and in the expectations placed on individual research projects.
- Institutional awareness of research and an institutional memory for research findings is lacking amongst donors. A better relationship between centrally funded research and regional offices would be one way of developing these.

Summary

For research to influence policy – and hence livelihoods – both researchers and those who fund research need to better understand the complex and dynamic world of policy and policy processes.

The experiences of Natural Resources Systems Programme (NRSP) projects are a rich source of lessons about policy processes for natural resource management, and the relationship

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between research and policy. This Brief is based on a review of 35 NRSP projects in which lessons about policy and institutions were particularly important. Power and politics are crucial in policy processes, but the review revealed that few researchers attempt to analyse the power dynamics of the natural resource management processes they investigate. One reason for this may be that research teams are dominated by natural scientists, while social scientists – who are trained to describe policy processes in terms of politics and power – rarely lead projects or set the research agenda. Beyond this, there are several key characteristics of research processes that influence the likelihood that research findings will influence policy processes. Reflexive practices on the part of researchers – in which they reflect openly and explicitly about their own position, and the implications this has for what can and cannot be done with the findings of their research – enhance the chances of successful engagement with policy makers. Building networks and providing support for stakeholder learning, as well as time, continuity and commitment, are also important. Livelihood outcomes can be unpredictable – indeed, they may have very little to do with policy. Social factors such as the economic status, age and gender of stakeholders can be more influential. The legal frameworks governing resource access and tenure are also crucial in shaping outcomes. Decentralisation, despite its good intentions, does not always have a positive effect on natural resource management policy and practice.

Background

In recent years, development research has become increasingly focused on influencing policy. This has important implications, both for researchers themselves and for those who fund research. First, there is a greater need to understand what policy is, how it works and how it interacts with other factors to influence development outcomes. Second, we need to know more about what it takes for research to influence policy.

The relationship between research and policy has often been portrayed as relatively simple. Policy makers are thought to base their decisions on systematic and rational analysis of clearly defined problems, to which solutions are then defined and implemented. But this view is slowly being replaced by a more complex picture, in which policy makers are seen as taking up research messages in a range of different ways, and in which policy formulation is not always faithfully reflected in policy implementation. Indeed,

the relationship between these two is sometimes very unpredictable, being strongly mediated by a range of factors including the internal dynamics of institutions. These factors may be as influential to implementation as the merits or otherwise of the policies themselves.

DFID's NRSP, which ran from 1995 to 2006, aimed to "deliver new knowledge that can enable poor people who are largely dependent on natural resources to improve their livelihoods". The experiences of NRSP projects are a rich source of lessons about the dynamics of policy processes and the relationship between research and policy in natural resources research and development. This Brief is based on a review of 35 NRSP projects in which lessons about policy and institutions were particularly important.

The role of power

The review revealed a paradox: despite widespread recognition of the importance of both politics and power in policy processes, this was not widely reflected in research findings. A reading of the final written outputs of the projects reveals that an analysis of the power relations that animate institutions and shape their behaviour is notably absent from almost all of them. While findings are presented that demonstrate power relations at work, the lack of systematic analysis of these means that they remain largely embedded in background information, and are not explicitly used in efforts to influence policy.

As a result of this, much research still overlooks the role of power, resulting in the development of managerial and technical solutions to problems that in reality have just as much, if not more, to do with institutional change and policy influence. Such research seldom attempts to understand the difficulties and complexities of the processes with which it is engaging. This matters because, without such an understanding, the chances that the insights from research will have genuinely pro-poor effects are greatly reduced.

Interdisciplinarity is key

The need to have an impact on policy has challenged many researchers, as has the shift in emphasis to policy and institutions rather than technology or productivity. The review indicates that, over the course of the NRSP, researchers from a predominantly natural science background were encouraged to adapt their research focus to accommodate this need. Some did this very well, others less so; but the important point is that it was not part of what they were trained to do.

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The few projects that explicitly engaged with policy formulation and implementation as politicised and problematic processes were led by researchers whose primary academic training was in the social sciences. Articulating policy processes in terms of politics and power, context and contingency is what social scientists have been trained to do. And importantly, this is the language in which it is normal for them to report their findings. For natural scientists or those with a background in management, the apparently more neutral language of linear cause and effect is more normal and acceptable.

One project leader described the challenges of communication thus:

"The difficulties are the ways that the different disciplines report, and their expectations. The anth[ropologist]s would write a paper with some catchy title, and the soil scientists would want to write a treatise on Carbon 16 in this field or whatever, so the sort of product we were trying to give to each other was very different."
(Interview, August 2005)

For many, interdisciplinarity is a solution to the challenge of strengthening policy influence. There are positive examples of interdisciplinary learning in NRSP projects. One researcher explained the reasons for successful interdisciplinary work in the following terms:

"I think two things [matter]…one is trust, and the other is chemistry… I had to be willing to put myself through a mini-anthropology course to understand what they were talking about, to understand what were the basic tenets of the discipline, and they had to be willing to come and do some computer work."
(Interview, August 2005)

If positive livelihood outcomes are to emerge from development research, it will be necessary to develop closer relations between the natural and social sciences, better communication between them, and more transparency in addressing the sometimes painful clashes or competition for resources that mar their collaboration at present.

Characteristics of research that influences policy

There is, however, more to being able to understand and engage with the policy process than the disciplinary perspective from which this is attempted. The review revealed several key characteristics of research that also influence the likelihood that research findings will have an impact on the policy environment.

Reflexive practices

It is often not the quality, accuracy or robustness of research findings that determine their contribution to policy processes, but rather political questions of legitimacy and 'stake'. For example, the assumption that information from externally funded research can and should have an influence on policy, and a similar assumption that such research should be 'demand-led' by Southern policy makers, may both be questioned.

Such issues imply that researchers need to become more reflexive. If, as they are urged to do, researchers are to engage directly in the processes they seek to influence, then it is increasingly important for them to consider their own position, and the implications this has for what can and cannot be done with their findings. If research is really to influence policy, researchers need to become more visible, and clearer about the kind of changes they are aiming, and able, to achieve. Those projects in which researchers reflect directly and explicitly on their own role in the process, are also those in which engagement with policy makers appears most deeply and successfully embedded.

Networks, and support for learning

Influencing policy is often a question of building stronger bridges between institutions and stakeholders at different levels. It is also about supporting policy makers in their efforts to learn, rather than simply giving them access to more information. This can include providing support to stakeholders who are currently excluded from natural resource management processes, as well as strengthening the skills and capacities of the relatively powerful in order to promote the development of more efficient and accountable management and governance processes. In this, the relationship between the research funders and their in-country offices and representatives is potentially important, but often overlooked or underplayed. When the relationship is strong, the chances that research will influence policy are higher. Unfortunately, in some cases, the relationship between DFID's centrally funded research and national development programmes is one of disconnection and mutual ignorance.

Time, continuity and commitment

Several projects emphasise the time, continuity and commitment necessary to conduct research that

influences policy. Creating change in local institutions and policy processes is challenging: they may be relatively autonomous and locally specific, and they will always face their own imperatives. In those projects where change has been successfully stimulated through research, significant investments of time and the construction and maintenance of local alliances have proved essential. This implies ownership of the research agenda by local partners and a long-term commitment from the research funding body (see Box 1).

> **Box 1. Continuity of commitment in the Caribbean**
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> In research into Marine Protected Areas (MPAs) in the Caribbean, continuity between projects was important. The initial project focused on the problem of managing an MPA in Tobago, drawing in a wide range of stakeholders. The second project, informed by the challenges identified in the first, looked much more closely at the institutional landscape which shaped what could and could not be done to adopt a sustainable approach to managing the park. Because the research team had adequate time to build on their learning and pursue this across different institutional levels, they have delivered particularly rich insights, not only into what policy is but also into how to catalyse policy change, moving beyond the boundaries of what can be expected from conventional policy research.
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> *Based on NRSP project R7408*

Conversely, researchers on shorter projects found that expectations of what could be achieved within the time allowed were sometimes unreasonably high, and that there was little room for manoeuvre if the early stages of the research produced surprising findings or gave rise to unexpected process difficulties. In these cases, it is dissemination and downstream activities that come under pressure, since time and other resources are taken away from them to support the research effort.

The role of individuals

Individuals also have a key role in either catalysing or inhibiting institutional change. While this may seem self-evident, it does have implications for understanding what is needed to bring about positive change. The pivotal role of individuals demands a focus on the micro-politics of how decisions are made and the consensus required for different kinds of action. Trusted individuals are key to effective communication and learning processes. But change initiatives that over-rely on individuals may become fragile and vulnerable. Several research teams that had developed good relationships with key individuals and began to build constituencies for change experienced problems when those individuals were posted to other areas or left their institution to find other employment. Conversely, when researchers engage not just with individuals but with the factors influencing their actions and priorities, there are better chances that positive change may be sustained.

Policy and livelihood outcomes

Livelihood changes occur for a wide range of reasons, many of which may have very little to do with policy. It is also often the case that there is a strong disconnection between policy on paper and policy in practice.

Many examples show that policy can have unintended impacts on livelihoods alongside, or instead of, those that were originally intended. Policy can have a positive impact for some, but there may be negative impacts for others who were not even the original targets of the policy. Those negatively affected are often marginalised or disadvantaged groups.

Factors of difference

The research reviewed contains a wealth of insights concerning the local and national contextual factors that influence livelihood outcomes. These exist regardless of what researchers do, and they are an important part of the picture with which policy makers need to engage. The most important are factors such as economic status, age and gender, which play a critical part in shaping opportunities to sustain or improve livelihoods. These factors also influence the outcomes of managed processes of social change such as decentralisation, and the ways in which different people may be represented in, or excluded from, natural resource management processes.

Research findings point to the need for caution to ensure that development resources are not captured by local elites, and to the critical importance of building on existing collective arrangements for natural resource management rather than necessarily developing new ones. A common finding across the projects is that many local institutions lack the capacity to implement sustainable and equitable natural resource management policies and practices.

Legal frameworks and tenure

The legal frameworks governing resource access are a crucial factor in shaping outcomes and vary widely from place to place. Many research projects found overlapping and unclear legislation on property and access rights for natural resources, especially in the case of common property resources. Systems of land tenure in particular were found to be extremely complex in many areas. In many studies, the complexity of legal frameworks, combined with weak implementation, meant that there was a strong difference between legal and actual natural resource tenure.

Decentralisation and representation

The decentralisation of government is often seen as providing an opportunity for natural resource management policy and practice to become more democratic and accountable. In this view, decentralisation increases the chances that the local community will have greater control over or stronger representation in the processes of planning and management. Decentralised natural resource management can make good use of local knowledge and insights, implying that the negative impacts of policies on livelihoods would be less likely to be ignored or discounted.

The counter-argument is that decentralisation can lead to uncoordinated and incoherent policy, made without adequate information or analysis, and based largely on the interests of wealthier and more powerful people. It can involve the establishment of institutional mechanisms that exist on paper only, and in reality are not allocated the necessary resources to ensure they have the desired influence. Decentralisation always involves central government institutions giving up powers which some are not happy to relinquish; such people may dig in their heels and block the progress of decentralisation.

The research shows that decentralisation processes are variable in their structure and intent, and also differ according to their maturity. The case study in Box 2 discusses some of the dynamics of decentralisation in Ghana, illustrating both positive and negative elements in the process.

The design of natural resource management policies and interventions must take into account the status and form of decentralisation if they are to be successful. Communities may need support in building the skills and capacities needed to capitalise on the opportunities that decentralisation offers, just as government officials at lower levels may need support to make policy that addresses local problems rather than central narratives.

Box 2. Decentralisation in Ghana

Local government decentralisation in Ghana has its origins in reforms first introduced in 1987. While devolution is still far from complete, a progressive transfer of decision making and legislative control to district-level authorities for many aspects of environmental management is under way. However, there is little evidence that attempts at decentralisation are increasing the chances that marginalised voices will be heard in the policy process. Even at local level, the prevailing narrative that the poor are responsible for environmental crisis is very strong. This reinforces the continuation of a top-down approach that draws on received wisdom about the environment rather than actual conditions on the ground. In addition, new institutions and decision making processes are located in an environment where rights and claims to natural resources are shaped by factors such as ethnicity, age, gender and length of residence.

Based on NRSP project R7957

Another important consideration is the difference between indigenous institutions and those created by outside interventions. Recently, new resource management institutions have proliferated. In part, the success of policy initiatives rests on the relationship between these externally induced institutions and those of longer standing. In turn, the effective representation of stakeholders in these institutions requires sensitivity to the factors that mediate access to them: wealth, gender, age, caste, political identity and ethnicity. Examples where marginalised groups have successfully been represented suggest the need to build new resource management initiatives on existing foundations (see Box 3).

Box 3. Inclusive representation in action planning

A participatory action planning methodology was developed and tested by researchers and non-government organisation (NGO) partners at the peri-urban interface of the twin Indian cities of Hubli and Dharwad. The impact of the research was severely hampered by a profound lack of trust in government, which is seen to be distant and corrupt and to ignore the needs and priorities of local people. But in one peri-urban village, Mugad, a particularly inclusive planning process was facilitated. Towards the end of this process,

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at a meeting with senior government officials, village representatives clearly articulated the causes and effects of their problems and the natural resource management priorities of the village, with women dominating the platform. The issues they brought to the meeting had already been thoroughly discussed in the village. The key factors in this success were a history of trust and prior relationships between the community and the implementing NGO, and the high level of existing organisation in the community, particularly the presence of strong women's self-help groups. Later NRSP research found that this inclusive representation was translated into livelihood improvements, especially for poorer women.

Based on NRSP project R7959

About this brief

NRSP Briefs present research carried out at the culmination of the programme to synthesise results across projects. They derive lessons and key messages that could benefit future research and policy on a range of topics that added to or crosscut the NRSP and RNRRS research agenda.

This Brief is based on **NRSP Project R8493 Policy processes and institutions in NRM: lessons from NRSP research**. Details of this project and its publications, and those of other NRSP projects, can be found in the Project Database at the NRSP website: www.nrsp.org.uk.

Karen Brock is an independent consultant.
Elizabeth Harrison is at the Department of Anthropology, University of Sussex.

Other NRSP Briefs

The peri-urban interface: intervening to improve livelihoods
Common pool resources: management for equitable and sustainable use
Climate change: enhancing adaptive capacity

Communication in research uptake promotion *(forthcoming)*
Gender sensitive research in natural resources management *(forthcoming)*

The **Natural Resources Systems Programme (NRSP)** is one of ten programmes comprising the Renewable Natural Resources Research Strategy (RNRRS) of the UK Department for International Development (DFID). The RNRRS started in 1995 and ends in 2006. NRSP's purpose is the delivery of new knowledge that can enable poor people who are largely dependent on the natural resource base to improve their livelihoods. To achieve this NRSP undertakes research on the integrated management of natural resources. This research encompasses the social, economic, institutional and biophysical factors that influence people's ability to both use and maintain the productive potential of the natural resource base over a relatively long timeframe. The intended outcome of the research is that natural resource related strategies for improving people's livelihoods, that are of proven relevance to poor people, will be delivered in forms that could be taken up by the poor themselves and/or by development practitioners operating at a range of levels, from grassroots to senior policy level.

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The NRSP is managed by HTSPE in association with MRAG and DPU.

Contact:

NRSP Programme Manager
HTSPE Ltd
Thamesfield House, Boundary Way
Hemel Hempstead HP2 7SR
Tel: +44 (0)1442 202400
Email: nrsp@htspe.com

HTSPE Ltd
www.htspe.com

MRAG Marine Resources Assessment Group Ltd
www.mrag.co.uk

dpu Development Planning Unit
www.ucl.ac.uk/dpu

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