Moving Beyond Research to Inform Policy in Developing Countries.

Background

Research is generally understood to be a systematic process for generating new knowledge, and can act as a powerful tool for providing information for policy formation (Walt 1994). The continuing trend towards evidence-based policy formation has increased the demand for research outputs that can provide clear, concise policy-relevant findings (WHO 2000; ECDPM 2000).

Demographic research continues to produce a large body of scientific findings that can address critical issues faced by policymakers, and informed policymaking can benefit from understanding the policy implications of such research (RAND 1997). The extent to which such research is translated into policy action, however, is dependent on the success of communicating research outputs between researchers and policymakers.

The growth of large donor-funded operations research programs focused towards developing countries has increased the need to provide evidence of policy impact, which in turn has placed greater importance on ensuring that research outputs are communicated effectively to policymakers. Effective communication between researchers and policymakers, however, provides a continual challenge.

This research examines current modes of communication and dissemination between researchers and policymakers to develop dissemination and uptake of research results to policy.

Methodology

This study was conducted in four countries: Malawi, Tanzania, India and Pakistan. Information was collected via 48 in-depth interviews with health researchers and policymakers responsible for developing health policy.

Implications of the Research:

Strategies for Researchers

- Give careful consideration to appropriate 'packaging' of research findings which consider the needs of different policy audiences (ie: research briefs, key bullet points, clear policy recommendations, simple language, reduce methodology, statistics and theory).
- Widen the target audiences for research dissemination to consider the full range of end-users of the information (ie: Government ministries, service delivery practitioners, law enforcement agents, community groups, educative groups, non-Government organizations, academic audiences, media).
- Include dissemination activities in research proposals to donor agencies. Include a dissemination plan, target audiences, dissemination activities, research 'products' (i.e. fact-sheets, executive summaries, newsletter articles), communication media and budget.
- Training for researchers on; communication strategies for differing audiences; developing a variety of research outputs; and shaping messages for policy audiences.

- Utilise 'communication mediators' or 'knowledge brokers' to promote the main findings of research and focus stakeholders' attention towards areas of need.

Strategies for Policymakers & Practitioners
- Closer collaboration between researchers and policy and program personnel, to foster a greater appreciation for evidence-based policy making and program development.
- When commissioning research, ensure dissemination to wide range of stakeholders (ie: other government ministries, service delivery agencies, community advocacy groups).

Strategies for Donors
The strong presence of donor agencies in developing countries places them in a position to both enable and to encourage dissemination activities.
- Encourage researchers to incorporate dissemination strategies into proposals so that funding is available.
- Ensure researchers allocate project time for consultation with the end-users of the research.
- Widen in-country dissemination activities to enable information to reach in-country policy audiences.

Collaborative Strategies
Effective utilisation of research results also requires joint action between researchers, policymakers and donors, which has the following benefits;
- Research partnerships would overcome the disparity between research issues and policymakers' priority areas.
- Collaboration enables decision-makers to understand how to utilize research to support policy development, and to translate substantive research findings into policy issues.
- Collaboration enables researchers to consider realistic policy and service delivery issues, political limitations and practical realities.

A range of strategies would assist in collaborative initiatives:
- Establish formal communication channels and central depositories for research outputs
- Conduct research in partnership between the research producers and research users.

Finally, it needs to be recognized that research dissemination is sometimes superseded by overriding influences such as the political environment and political ideologies; so that even effective dissemination of research to policymakers does not necessarily ensure that it is used in policy formation.