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COMMUNICATING RESEARCH: POLICYMAKERS' PERSPECTIVE

The adoption of the United Nations Millennium Development Goals in 2000 intensified global efforts to eradicate extreme poverty in low-income countries. Supported by the William and Flora Hewlett Foundation's Population and Poverty (PopPov) Research Initiative, researchers have sought to contribute policy-relevant information about the links between population dynamics and poverty at the national and household level.

The PopPov research agenda supported over 100 research and dissertation grants between 2005 and 2015. These findings are highly relevant to policy decisionmaking and priority setting, especially in light of the recently launched Sustainable Development Goals, which target (among other things) universal access to health care and economic inclusion. But the findings are useful only if the right regional and country-level policymakers have access to and understand relevant results.

This policy brief summarizes policymakers' perspectives on what constitutes barriers to evidence-informed policymaking. It also presents strategies for making research results more accessible to high-level policymakers at the country-level, based on what they say they want as well as evidence about what information policymakers can and do use in policymaking. Finally, the brief includes examples of how PopPov-supported researchers addressed policy-relevant questions and applied some of the outreach strategies that policymakers suggest.

Who Makes Policy?

Governance is, at its heart, making decisions about priorities, allocation of resources, and determining which policies will support political goals—those related to leveraging or maintaining power, as opposed to policy goals that are focused on interventions to improve social welfare. This brief focuses on individuals involved in making decisions at the highest level of government (advisors to the head of state or head of government, depending on which system is in place) who design the regulations that ensure decision (policy) implementation.

In the African and South Asian context, where most of the PopPov research is focused, government structure varies across countries. For the majority of these countries, cabinet ministers or a group of presidential advisors develop policies and programs, with a secretariat overseeing the process and ministries initiating and implementing policies. Cabinet ministers are the highest level officials responsible for determining and formulating policy in the public interest, although in some countries, certain policies require approval by representative bodies. Cabinet ministers may, in making decisions, weigh political considerations, availability of resources, and needs of the people. The cabinet secretariat or administrative staff supporting presidential advisors, headed by a high-level civilian administrator such as a permanent secretary, manages the policy development process, engaging in policy analysis or seeking out evidence.

Although the ministries execute official policies and programs, usually headed by a cabinet minister and assisted by other ministers, a range of officials within a ministry may provide information that influences policy development and implementation. In addition, the media and public affect the politics and context that ministers consider in both development and implementation of policies and programs. At the international level, regional and global multilateral organizations may raise the profile of issues and provide a framework for addressing specific areas of common concern, exerting influence on country officials to prioritize these issues.

What is Evidence?

For high-level policymakers, we define evidence broadly—including anecdotal evidence or testimony and opinion research, and qualitative and quantitative evaluations, including project and policy evaluations. Within this framework, scientific research results such as double-blind randomized controlled trials and other rigorous methods are invaluable for certain types of decisions—for example, the assessment of the efficacy of medical interventions. Modeling of financial costs and associated outcomes can also provide critical information at this level.

Stories are also powerful tools in the political arena, even though they may not be the deciding factor in setting policies. Stories capture the human imagination, and as such are crucial in communicating government achievements. Simple stories, such as before-and-after stories, preferably with pictures, are an effective communication tool with which politicians have familiarity.

Policymakers Use Evidence

Cabinet ministers often face complex multidimensional problems. In making decisions, officials must frequently consider moral dimensions, interests of various groups, and political feasibility. Conscientious policymakers ask what works, for whom, where, and under what circumstances. In order to design programs to achieve policy goals, implementers need to know how or why an intervention works.

Table 1 presents a list of questions asked by policymakers and examples of PopPov research that answers such questions. The responsibilities of ministers will determine the type of evidence on which each focuses. For example, the ministry of finance mostly focuses on efficiency, seeking cost-effective options. Spending ministries, such as ministries of health or ministries of education, are responsible for implementing programs to achieve policy objectives in their particular domain. They may emphasize the outcomes for which they are responsible or attributes such as social justice that might be important to the public.

OVERRCOMING CHALLENGES TO USING EVIDENCE

From the perspective of policymakers in low-income countries, many challenges to evidence-informed policymaking remain, including:

- Biased presentation of evidence from stakeholders, both inside and outside government, to support their agenda.
- Lack of research.
- Lack of clarity in research findings.
- Lack of policymakers' staff skills to interpret research, and lack of researchers' skills to communicate in nontechnical language.
- Limited relationships between policymakers or their staff and researchers.
- Shortage of home-grown evidence.

Policymakers have suggested remedies for some of these challenges, though a few, such as the shortage of home-grown evidence, require longer-term strategic investments. To facilitate the consideration of evidence at the cabinet level, ministers need well-prepared memoranda that include information on whether proposed interventions will work and assessment of the interventions' likely impact, including the impact on sectors other than the one with which the ministry is charged and the impact on different population groups. Evidence must be provided in a timely manner, ensuring that ministers and their ministries have sufficient opportunity to

consider proposals. To ensure the contribution of researchers or technical experts to memoranda, ministries may:

- Use standing committees to review evidence.
- Bring outside experts to brief the cabinet.
- Identify a variety of ways to present evidence during cabinet meetings.

CASE—SOUTH AFRICA

Researchers from the Southern Africa Labour and Development Research Unit (SALDRU), University of Cape Town, and their partners from the University of Michigan, began a PopPov-supported research program in 2008 to analyze links between teen fertility, educational attainment, and health outcomes in South Africa. They completed the initial set of studies in 2011 and started another set in 2012. Their experiences with policymakers as well as the influence of their research differed between the first and second phases, largely because of differences in developing the research agenda.

Both the first and second phases had the potential to inform policy and program development in teen pregnancy prevention and protective services for teen mothers and their children, with the second focusing on long-term economic effects and access to health care. The second phase benefited from researchers' efforts to communicate the results of their first set of studies (since analysts in the relevant implementing ministries had lamented researchers' failure to engage the ministry before deciding on the research questions). After engaging stakeholders in the design of the second phase of research, including final research questions, the SALDRU researchers noticed heightened interest in the progress of the research and in results. SALDRU was invited to join a national partnership on teen pregnancy, providing an established avenue for communication between national stakeholders (including ministries) and the researchers on this issue.

CASE—ZAMBIA

Building on an on-going relationship with the Ministry of Health, Nava Ashraf and colleagues at Harvard University conducted, in 2007, an experiment to investigate the impact of husbands' participation in decisions about contraceptive use. Their research provides policymakers and interest groups information to make decisions about how to address unmet demand for family planning in Zambia.

Ashraf and colleagues began working collaboratively with the Zambian government in 2006 and developed formal partnerships with both the Ministry of Health and the Ministry of Education. The strong partnership between the research team and the Ministry of Health allowed for trust and movement toward a shared goal. The Ministry of Health requested follow-on research to assess both the effectiveness of maternal mortality education on the use of family planning and fertility outcomes, and how education influences male acceptance of family planning.

Table 1

PopPov Studies Address Policy-Relevant Questions

Policy Questions	Examples From PopPov-Supported Research
Is there a problem?	
Nature of problem	Burkina Faso: Household economic consequences of severe pregnancy complications.
Size of problem	East Africa: Proportion of women with unmet demand for modern contraceptives.
What are possible solutions?	
Benefits	Tanzania: Effect of conditional cash transfer on safe sexual practices.
Harms	Sub-Saharan Africa: Long-term effects of HIV on rate of national economic growth.
Costs	Bangladesh: Cost effectiveness of MATLAB family planning program compared to government program. Uganda: Cost effectiveness of universal access to family planning. South Africa* : Cost effectiveness of secondary education in prevention of HIV infection.
How well are current solutions working?	
Implementation	Zambia: Assessment of factors that influence use of antenatal services, including user-based fees.
Key Elements	Indonesia: Effect of community's losing a midwife.
Effects	Zambia: Effect of social cash transfer on use of maternal health care services. India: Effect of Integrated Child Development Scheme on stunting.
What are stakeholder views?	
Experience	Burkina Faso: Women's experience using medical transportation and care services for life-threatening obstetric complications and follow-up care.
Views	Kenya: Women's perception of men's views on family size.

Note: *PopPov support provided only for presentation at annual research meeting.

Ashraf and colleagues at the London School of Economics developed a research project with the Ministry of Health to investigate recruitment, training, and retention of health workers. This experience offers insight into scientists' co-generation of local knowledge with policymakers:

- Questions must be of both scientific and programmatic interest.
- Building trust between researchers and policymakers takes a long time.
- Implementation requires flexibility to accommodate policymakers' timeline which may be more accelerated than the usual research timeline, once the decision to proceed has been made.

For the policymakers, the issue of how best to assure health care workers' performance and retention was a matter of great importance. As a former department head in the Zambian ministry of health viewed it: "In the meantime, people are dying."

Conclusion

Without translation of research findings, information/data that can help policymakers and program staff is lost. Research must be designed and interpreted with policymakers' needs in mind.

The capacity of researchers to produce evidence that informs policy and practice will increase uptake of research results. Also, increasing the capacity of policymakers and other stakeholders to identify and use relevant research has the potential to increase cost effectiveness of development assistance, which is estimated by the World Bank at US\$28 per capita for low- and middle-income countries and about US\$50 per capita in sub-Saharan Africa in 2013.

Evidence-informed decisionmaking has the potential to increase the impact of government programs. Even more important, better decisionmaking will help governments avoid wasting limited resources on ineffectual interventions, both achieving better value for money and improving accountability.

Table 2

PopPov Projects Used Various Strategies to Encourage Consideration of Evidence

Strategy	PopPov Example	Countries
Home-Grown Evidence	Stakeholder workshops in design phase of research	Bangladesh, Burkina Faso, South Africa, Rwanda, Tanzania
	Support local researchers in research design and implementation as well as in policy engagement	Ghana, Kenya, Rwanda, South Africa, Tanzania, Uganda
	Partnership with an implementing ministry	Zambia
Standing National Committees	Researcher sits on committee	South Africa
	Researcher presentation to committee	Malawi
Expert Briefings	Relevant implementing minister participates in project dissemination meeting or in-country conference	Ghana

Note: Resources for policymakers interested in identifying what kinds of research can answer what types of questions and for researchers interested in outreach to policymakers may be found at: <http://poppov.org/Researcher-Resources.aspx>.

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The Population Reference Bureau (PRB) is the Secretariat for the PopPov Research Network: www.poppov.org.



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