

Making research relevant for policy makers

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Overview

- Who are policy makers?
- Does your research address a policy need?
- Is your research clear?
- When to involve policy makers
- Connecting and communicating with policy makers

What is a policy?

“a course or principle of action adopted or proposed by a government, party, business, or individual” - Dictionary

“A policy is a principle or protocol to guide decisions and achieve rational outcomes. A policy is a statement of intent, and is implemented as a procedure or protocol.” - Wikipedia

Policy makers in government and higher education

- Anyone with the authority to decide how to handle matters in a particular sector is involved in policy making and therefore is a policy maker
- Government: Legislators, politicians, permanent secretaries, senior management in ministries
- Higher education: Heads of institutions, vice chancellors
- Some designations:
 - Member of Parliament (MP)
 - Minister of Health
 - Permanent Secretary, Ministry of Health
 - Executive Director of the Muhimbili National Hospital

Why are we talking about this?

- Scientists communicate with each other through publications in peer-reviewed journals
- But who else reads journals? Does *anyone* else read journals?
- Researchers might have to communicate with authority or power at some point
 - People who have a say in making research relevant to society
 - People who determine research budgets
 - People who influence research priorities
 - Not all of them might be researchers!

- Do you think your research is relevant to your country or region?
 - Health, environment, education, economy...
- Are you worried that your research area is not seen as a high priority?
- Do you think that there should be more national or institutional funding for your research?
- Then you might need to figure out how to communicate with policy makers!

Does your research address a policy need?

- Not all research projects address current policy needs
- Are you aware of existing policies related to your research area?
- Ask yourself:
 - Does your research address any gaps – a policy that should be in place but isn't?
 - Does your research add knowledge to an existing policy?

Is your research clear?

- A fellow scientist might understand your paper. What about a policy maker?
- Research can be complex. Who should make it clear?
 - Should you take on the task of simplifying, clarifying, elaborating, and revising your writing many, many times?
 - Or should the reader try hard (maybe very, very hard) to figure out what it is that you mean to say?

Problem statement and rationale

- The problem, existing knowledge and gaps, how your research addresses that
- Avoid jargon and highly scientific terminology
- Brief example:

“Due to the increasing prevalence of non-communicable diseases (NCDs), the government needs to put in place an NCD prevention policy. My research provides evidence of the benefits of school-based sports in the prevention of NCDs in Tanzania.” - Dr. Mashili

Methods

- Not to be written in the same way as the methods in a research paper
- Keep it simple; perhaps include highly scientific information in the appendix
 - Make sure you include complete details somewhere
- “Simple” not the same as “simplistic”
 - Simple: plain, uncomplicated (good)
 - Simplistic: overly simplified (bad)

Brief example:

“In this study we compared the rate of occurrence of NCDs in people who went to schools that had physical education as part of their curriculum with those from schools without physical education. We found that people from schools without physical education were more likely to suffer from NCDs compared to the other group.” - Dr. Mashili

Conclusion and recommendations

- Conclusion: most relevant message from your research results
- Recommendations come from the conclusion (make sure there's a clear link to policy)
- Long-term impact? Try to break it down into a series of short-term items (policy makers may be focused on the short term)

Brief example:

“The most striking finding in our research is that including physical education in schools reduces the risk of diseases like hypertension and type 2 diabetes later in life. We therefore recommend that physical education should be made compulsory in all primary and secondary school curriculum.” - Dr. Mashili

When to involve policy makers

- After your research paper is written up?
 - No! This is a common mistake!
- Immediate policy makers -> involve at the beginning
 - So they feel some ownership or motivation and can help you work with upstream policy makers
- Even consider including policy makers in your research team

Dr. Mashili's work

When conducting research on the importance of including physical education curriculum in Tanzania for the prevention of future NCDs, school principals, headteachers, education officers, etc., were part of the research team.

How to connect with policy makers

- Hand over your research paper?
 - Will most likely have zero impact on policy makers!
- Write a policy brief
 - Advice on writing policy briefs coming up
- Seek them out
 - Nothing like face-to-face contact!

Where you might find policy makers

- Official meetings or seminars with government connections
- Nationally important scientific gatherings
- Public forums
- Fund-raising dinners
- Other?

Taking the initiative

- Organise seminars or workshops specifically for policy makers
 - On a regular basis
 - Explain what policy makers would gain from attending the event
 - Value their presence
 - Communicate your research in a simple manner (even in your local language?)
 - Provide handouts in plain English
- Work with local media outlets to advertise events

Communicating online

- Try to use at least one social media platform regularly as a **professional** – LinkedIn, ResearchGate, Twitter, your own blog
 - Facebook also okay if you can separate your personal and professional lives
- Communicate your research **regularly** on this platform
 - Also advertise events your institution organizes for policy makers
- If possible, maintain a professional website (e.g., in your university's domain) with links to your work

Access to research papers

- Even if you've done great research and published your work in top journals, your research may not be **accessible** to policy makers:
 - Too complicated!
 - Research topic has no connection with policy needs!
 - No big picture!
 - No recommendations relevant to policy makers!
 - Boring!
 - Not even available! Pay walls!

- Has anyone written a policy brief?
- How is a policy brief different from a research paper?

How to write a policy brief

- Google “how to write a policy brief”
- One excellent resource available on the IDRC website

Basic advice on policy briefs

- Written for policy makers who have limited time to make practical decisions
- Short, precise, specific (1500 words or so, unless specified otherwise)
- Problems, findings, and recommendations stated prominently and clearly
- Recommendations should address policy gaps or deficiencies
- Visuals: photos and graphs
- Plain English

Beyond text

- An example: “Getting policy makers to hear community voices”, a summary of how a video shot on a cell phone was instrumental in conveying a community's situation to policy makers
<http://www.politicsandideas.org/?p=1815>
- “This video takes local governments officials who are typically confined in their offices straight to the communities concerned”

- Videos also recommended by a speaker at last year's PEER conference
 - Nalaka Gunawardane: “Belling policy cats” (Google this phrase to get the slides)
- Also see TVE Asia Pacific:
<http://www.tveap.org/>