Want to ensure your research influences policy? Advice from a government insider

*Among the ways social sciences research can have impact is by influencing public policy. **Duncan Green** recently attended an event at which this subject was much discussed, with a leading government research analyst offering clear advice on what officials are looking for. Comparative work highlighting a range of possible solutions is valued, as are multidisciplinary approaches. Most useful is demonstrating where something has or hasn't worked and why. Make written work short but not dumb, avoid jargon, and quickly get to the point. Beyond that, a researcher's attitude, accessibility, and understanding of the rhythms of policy decision-making are all important.*

The "Protracted Conflict, Aid and Development" conference that I wrote about on Friday was funded by the Global Challenges Research Fund, a massive (£1.5bn) UK research programme that is funding, among other things, the LSE's new Centre for Public Authority and International Development, where I'll be putting in a day a week over the next few years.

Not surprising, therefore, that the topic of "research for impact" kept coming up. A group of us at Oxfam are planning to put together a paper on this (we think we are quite good at it, sometimes), but in the meantime, here are some thoughts based on the conference. Babu Rahman, a top research analyst at the British Foreign and Commonwealth Office (FCO), gave some commendably clear advice on what government officials need:

"What we want from research is not 'it's complicated' or 'here's the answer', but comparative work highlighting a range of possible solutions, showing how particular tools and approaches have worked out. Most useful is understanding where something has/hasn't worked and why. Then we can apply that to a new situation.

"Statistical surveys alone are not that useful – they can generate false confidence or aversion. Multi-disciplinary approaches can be very helpful – even in helping government break down internal siloes. Case studies are really helpful, but limited in generating transferrable lessons – there is a risk in recreating experiences from one place in another, as if they're templates.

"Three quick points on how to make research more useful to officials. All within the broad paradox that civil servants are assessed on their ability to simplify complex issues down to the key components necessary to make a decision, whereas academics' value lies in illuminating complexity:

1. Make written work short but not dumb. That requires significant intellectual athleticism.
2. Avoid jargon and assumed knowledge. We don't need lots of text on methodology.
3. Structure is really important – go straight to your point in headlines and bullets.

"We're seeing more academics producing abstracts and executive summaries, but they are too often abstracts rather than elevator pitches. Senior officials may have only 30 seconds to get hooked (or not) on what you are trying to say.

"Attitude: be accessible – what's often most helpful is when you can sit down with someone and talk to them about your problem. That requires trust and discretion. You have to be able to find the time and navigate the risk of compromise, and that your role may not be acknowledged. The single greatest risk of getting research into policy is that we won't read it!"

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Great stuff. I had a two-minute pitch at the end of the conference, by which time most people were comatose, so for them (and anyone else who's interested), here's what I added to Babu in messages for academic researchers:

1. Above all, assume that no-one is going to read your paper. What else can you give them instead? A good executive summary? A blog? A killer fact?
2. It's really hard to retain anything from reading a piece of research that has no overall narrative, but it is often equally hard for the researcher to identify a narrative that does not do violence to the research. Nevertheless, we have to try. Road-testing possible narratives ought to be something researchers spend a lot of time doing, especially towards the end of their research project.
3. Timing: how can researchers adapt their messages to the rhythm of decision-making (as set out in the policy funnel). Think about crises: officials are most open to new ideas immediately after a crisis/scandal or other "critical juncture", so how can researchers spot these windows of opportunity, drop what they're doing, if necessary, and feed ideas to the suddenly interested bureaucrats and politicians? It's not that easy because crises are also when officials/politicians are busiest and most harassed, so there's no point in just sticking your old report in the post. The key is to cultivate relationships and trust in peacetime, so that when it all kicks off, you can pick up the phone or drop someone an email offering to help.
4. A distressing amount of academic research on aid treats practitioners as fools, or knaves, or both. Try assuming that practitioners are actually smarter than you are, but don't have the time to do all that thinking and reading, so you are providing a valuable service. That should help avoid some of the plagues of straw men ("aid does X", "aid people think Y", any sentence involving "neoliberalism") which are so crude and silly that you immediately give up on the paper (as in this really annoying example).

Which leaves me with two big questions to ponder:

1. Are funders set up to support this kind of research?
2. To what extent do academic career incentives encourage or prevent these ways of working?

I fear the answer to both is often pretty negative. Thoughts?

This blog post originally appeared on the author's From Poverty to Power blog and is reposted here with permission.

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