Issues in assessing the policy influence of research

Fred Carden

Introduction

The use of research, whether in technological application or in decision making and policy, is a goal for many researchers, who wish the knowledge they generate to be useful to their societies and used by them to improve conditions. Some researchers hope for very immediate use and focus their research on issues of direct relevance in their societies; others focus on issues they as researchers consider important and do not think directly about application. They leave that for others; but nevertheless they do hope that the research gets used and that their ideas and technologies are adopted in some way.

The search for understanding about how knowledge is used, in what is largely seen as a political process of public policy making, is an exploration into the relationships between ideas and decisions, between researchers and policy makers. It is an attempt to understand whether or not there are some specific strategies that could be adopted to increase the potential for influence. Further, it is an attempt to articulate the subtleties of the policy process in ways that make it more meaningful to researchers – as many researchers pointed out in the workshops documented later in this report, they were trained to carry out research, not to transmit it or engage in

Fred Carden, Ph.D., is Director of evaluation at the International Development Research Centre, Canada. He has written widely in the areas of evaluation, international cooperation, and environmental management. Prior to joining IDRC, he has taught and carried out research at York University, the Cooperative College of Tanzania, the Bandung Institute of Technology (Indonesia), and the University of Indonesia. He holds a Ph.D. from the Université de Montréal and a Master's degree in environmental studies from York University. His current work includes the development of evaluation tools and methods in the areas of organisational assessment, participatory monitoring and evaluation, programme evaluation, and outcome mapping.
Email: fcarden@idrc.ca

implementation of results. Now that they are increasingly expected to engage in these activities as part of the research itself, they need new tools and skills. As one researcher put it, "I mean, you have to be like Erin Brockovitch, no? You have to have the legs, you have to have the looks, you have to be smart, you have to do the research…dissemination work, publication work…I said, come on, I'm a researcher." (IDRC 2003c: 51).

The first part of this paper will explore the origins of the study, explore the gaps in evaluation methods relevant for such a study, and outline the process behind the design of this evaluation. It will explore the problems of attribution and time as they influence evaluation conduct and findings, as well as the tensions between striving for a generalizable science and the context dependent nature of much social science evaluation. The second part of the paper outlines how we dealt with these issues in the design of the study and the rationale for the approach used. It will go into considerable methodological detail: the intent here is to make the method available to others and to contribute to the growing interest in this domain of work.

The third part of the paper will explore what happened as the study was carried out. It

was conducted as a single, strategic evaluation by the Centre, but it is intended to guide future studies on policy influence and, further, provide guidance to IDRC programme officers and partners on the factors which need to be considered in the use of research to influence policy. The Centre is also encouraged to consider a follow-up study (Weiss 2003: 8).

Issues in assessing influence

Evaluation of research in support of development faces several key challenges. These challenges have to do with how development support is evaluated. In many cases, evaluation attempts to look at the final impact of a project. It looks not so much at how the project succeeded but at whether or not it succeeded. Evaluation normally also tries to determine the direct effects of a project: that is, it tries to establish cause and effect links between the project and the final impact. A third problem is that of time. Contribution to development is often carried out in a series of short projects, 3–5 years in duration. However, development is a much longer-term process, especially as far as policy influence is concerned. As a result, the issue of when to evaluate is problematic. Finally, the social sciences struggle with the issue of whether or not there is a generalisable social science, with findings that can be applied through a general model, or whether social science is more case and context specific. They also struggle with gaps in research and evaluation methods suitable to their specificities. I will review these issues in depth here. How we dealt with them is evident in the methodology developed.

Impact

While it is generally understood that development happens because of a range of factors coming together to create change, there is considerable pressure on both development (and development research) projects, and the agencies that fund them, to demonstrate a significant positive impact on development. It is also understood that development results occur when a local partner takes ownership of the actions and makes the project its own; it does not tend to happen so long as the ownership is

with the project team or the external donor. Nevertheless, there is increasing pressure on projects and on agencies (including multilaterals, bilaterals, and NGOs) to demonstrate "good performance". As a result, the project and the donor tend to elevate their own position in identifying any change that occurs. Further, there is a tendency in evaluation of this type to ignore unintended consequences. Most importantly, there is a tendency to focus on the final results, and ignore important information on *how* the project achieved anything. It is then almost impossible to identify the critical success factors and the development of new relationships and patterns because these have not been tracked. It is therefore extremely difficult to apply the experience in other settings.

In *Outcome Mapping* (Earl *et al.* 2001), we make the case that development (research) contributes to outcomes, which then work with other outcomes and events to create impacts in local contexts. The intent here is to identify the real level at which a project or programme provides assistance and to assess those contributions, not the final impacts which remain the responsibility of the local partners.

Attribution

Closely related to the concept of impact is that of attribution. There is a call to attribute change to projects that were supported. Governments want to know how their resources are spent and, through evaluation, seek to know what changes have been caused by their support, what impacts are the result of programmes and projects they have supported. Iverson, in a review of the literature on attribution (Iverson 2003), notes that the challenge in the social sciences is that society is complex and a range of factors and conditions influence change. "Insofar as multiple and often unknown confounding variables are the norm, complex systems present a serious obstacle for attribution." (Iverson 2003: 36) In most development-oriented research, project and programme support relates to one or more dimensions of a development issue. For change to take hold, ownership must transfer to the local community, and a number of other factors must support, and not hinder, ongoing change. It is highly unusual that a single programme can result in a development

impact, unless all the other conditions have already been met and factors are already aligned – and in that case, many other projects have already been involved in building capacity, modifying conditions, and these would also like to claim credit for the impact when it finally occurs. The challenge in development (research) evaluation is that credit for change can be claimed only by effectively discrediting others and raising a contribution's importance above those of others.

As Flyvberg notes, "proof is hard to come by in social science because of the absence of 'hard' theory, whereas learning is certainly possible." (Flyvberg 2001: 73). The focus here is on learning about and from the contributions made through IDRC-supported research, in order to contribute more effectively to change on an ongoing basis.

Time

A persistent issue in evaluation is that of timing: when is the evaluation "final"? When can you give a judgement that is permanent? What happens over time when good things turn bad and bad things turn good? How do you modify the findings of the evaluation and take this into account? This problem is further exacerbated in the study of influence on public policy, a notoriously long-term affair. How do you decide at the end of a project if it is going to have an influence, when, and in what way? What is the basis to determine continuity or interruption in funding? The story does not end when impact arrives. The problem for development (research) agencies is compounded when the issue of timing is combined with those of impact and attribution. If we consider a successful development effort as one in which the local partner has taken ownership of the ideas or knowledge and is using them directly for development purposes, the external agent is further and further removed from the impact. Thus over time, if the programme is successful, the external agent plays a smaller and smaller role – precisely at the time impact occurs. Paradoxically, projects and funding agencies are being asked to assess their contribution at the point when they are least involved with the change process.

Approaches

Smutylo notes that, "methodologically, we need to acknowledge the contextual reality of which our projects are a part" (Smutylo 2001: 7). It is not obvious that existing approaches in the social sciences are appropriate to evaluate in a context of high complexity, multiple influences, and ongoing change.

The final evaluation challenge that informed the design of this study was the debate on research approaches in the social sciences. The debate here is not about qualitative versus quantitative research methods; both are used in the social sciences. Rather, the debate is whether, in the social sciences, general knowledge is more valuable than concrete, practical knowledge. As Flyvberg notes, "context counts" (Flyvberg 2001: 38) in the social sciences. He goes on to clarify that the issue for the social sciences in understanding how people and societies function, is to take account of the context-dependent relationship between how people act and how they interpret what has happened. As he notes, the rules are not the game and grammar is not language. Both are far more complex and subtle than can be captured through an understanding of the governing rules and systems. Here, we are trying to find out why and how things happened so that we can use this knowledge in support of future activities.

Flyvberg and others before him (Yin 1994) make the case that case studies are the approach best suited to understanding context and the relationships that are part of development. Case studies are widely criticised in the social sciences, to the point that Yin refers to this problem on page 1 of his book outlining case study design and methods. Case studies are often seen as explanatory and are used in teaching. In these contexts they may contain evident bias to generate discussion around a particular interpretation of events. However, case study as a research method must be concerned with the rigorous and fair presentation of data. Case studies are particularly useful in answering "how" and "why" questions, whereas one might use a survey or other method to answer "what" questions.

Taking these factors into consideration, the Evaluation Unit of IDRC designed a study to understand the influence of IDRC-supported

research on public policy. Before discussing the design of the study, I will first review the issues in how research is seen to influence policy.

Issues in the research – policy nexus

A considerable literature exists detailing the nature of policy processes and assessing whether and how research informs public policy. There are numerous frameworks and/or models found within the literature to help explain or represent knowledge utilization in decision-making, as well as frameworks explaining how policy change occurs. A detailed literature review was carried out in preparation for this evaluation (Neilson 2001). It is the basis on which this summary is prepared.

The first section of the literature review presents an overview of the knowledge utilization literature including its views on the use of knowledge and research in decision-making. The two most enduring findings from this literature are discussed: (1) the cultural differences between researchers and policymakers; and (2) the ''enlightenment'' function of research in policymaking. Caplan (1979) explains the use, or non-use, of research as a symptom of the cultural gap between researchers and policymakers. For him, the limited use of research by policymakers was, in part, due to the fact that researchers and policymakers have different worldviews. Later explanations, based on the writings of Weiss (1997), Sabatier & Jenkins-Smith (1993), and others, include the idea that the research-policy link is not a direct one, particularly with respect to data and information sources. These writings support the claim that research is only one of many sources of information for policymakers: there is no simple dichotomy between ''use'' and ''non-use''; rather knowledge/research utilization is built on a gradual shift in conceptual thinking over time.

The second section provides a synopsis of the various policymaking frameworks. These include: (1) linear; (2) incrementalism; (3) interaction; (4) agenda-setting; (5) policy networks; and (6) policy transfer. Although many of the earlier frameworks have been heavily criticized for their rational and/or unrealistic portrayal of the policy making process, they have each made an important contribution in terms of helping to explain some of the factors that facilitate or constrain the use of research within it.

Each of these conceptualizations has different implications for the extent to which research is able, and could be designed, to influence policy. Each has different implications as to the main decision makers in society and as to the appropriate targets of research dissemination. While some of this literature acknowledges the diversity of policy contexts throughout the world, much of reflects Northern or developed country settings. Given the paucity of studies on the research-policy nexus in any of the developing regions, the focus on policy influence in the South is seen as a major contribution of this study.

Preliminary interviews with staff, along with a preliminary review of specific IDRC documents, reveal that there are several ways in which research is considered to link to policy. The types of ''policy influence'' experienced by IDRC programme staff include:

– dissemination of research results to policymakers, in appropriate formats;
– interaction between researchers and policymakers during the design of the research, dissemination, and/or the research process itself;
– building of relationships between researchers and decision makers that last beyond the research project;
– public dissemination of and debate on the research results;
– use of the research results by groups in society to encourage or advocate change;
– strengthening organizations in terms of their capacity to carry out policy inquiry; and
– strengthening key individuals within a generation of researchers who will in the future be in a position to implement or encourage policy change.

Some of these links are also mentioned in the literature as factors or mechanisms that help facilitate the use of research in policymaking. The close interaction between researchers and policymakers throughout the research process, for example, is seen as being critical for the use of research in the policymaking process.

What is often left out of the literature is an understanding of whether policy influence should always be construed as positive. Few studies examine issues related to poor research or research that is only partial in considering trade-offs and policy development. Recently, the notion of "faking" influence has emerged. It explores some of these issues, including the use of inappropriate evaluation indicators, political patronage and the selective use of research for legitimization rather than policy development (Stone, personal communication, 2001). Factors explaining such "influence" may include the fact that it is not necessarily the strength of the independent research but the weakness of the other players, weak policy capacities and/or the ideological closeness of the think tank with the government (Krastev 2000). This strategic evaluation could yield information on these issues.

The approach

The starting point

Influencing the policy process is increasingly important to the International Development Research Centre (IDRC) in the research it supports. As the Centre's current strategic planning document puts it, "IDRC will foster and support the production, dissemination and application of research results leading to policies and technologies that enhance the lives of people in developing countries." (IDRC programme directions 2000: 16). While not all the research the Centre supports is intended to influence policy directly, awareness of the importance of policy change in development is increasing and hence the relevance of policy influence is growing. From the start of Centre activities in 1970, there has been some focus on policy influence, but this has significantly increased over the past decade. The Centre has as its objectives both the conduct of research relevant to development issues in the South (which may be policy- or technology-oriented) and support for capacity building for research by researchers in the South. The Centre supports research and research capacity building in Africa, the Middle East and North Africa, Latin America and the Caribbean, and Asia. In addition to a Head

Office in Ottawa, Canada, the Centre maintains six regional offices staffed by professionals in the main programming areas. These offices are located in Singapore, New Delhi, Cairo, Nairobi, Dakar, and Montevideo. It supports programmes in three main areas: Information and Communication Technologies for Development (ICT4D), Environment and Natural Resources Management (ENRM), and Social and Economic Equity (SEE), which includes programmes in trade, employment, governance and health, economics and poverty monitoring, and peace building. The primary mechanism of programme delivery is providing technical and financial support to researchers in countries in which IDRC operates to carry out research projects in the *problématiques* identified in each of the programmes. The philosophy of the Centre's approach is reflected in the description of the study as focused on IDRC-supported research: the Centre supports others to carry out research on issues of relevance in their settings rather than determining and carrying out the research itself. The *problématiques* are identified through a series of consultations between the professional staff of the Centre and researchers in the relevant regions. Fifteen to twenty per cent of projects include some Canadian collaboration as well, generally through Canadian universities. Some research activities in all three programming areas include projects that are jointly funded with other donors.

This article reviews and reflects on the design of a strategic evaluation of the influence of research on the public policy process at the stage when the basic research is complete and analysis underway (see Carden *et al.* 2001). This central activity of IDRC's Evaluation Unit in the period 2001–2003 is meant to develop as clear an understanding as possible not only of what is meant by the policy process but of what has been accomplished thus far. This will inform thinking both at the project level – how to improve project support in order to enhance policy influence and to deepen understanding of how ideas enter policy processes – and at the corporate level – what has IDRC done as a corporation and what strategic adjustments does it need to make?

The Centre's perspective on evaluation is use-oriented (Patton 1997). The design and implementation of evaluations are generally

prefaced with a fairly extensive exploration of the use of the study to identify who will use the findings and how they will use them. These preliminary discussions inform both the design and the process of analysis. General experience has demonstrated that, in many cases, the users have not worked this through on their own and generally have a very vague idea of how they will use the results. Potential for use is greatly enhanced when the users go through the process of specifying the nature of their needs and interests in conducting the study. (While there may be some cases where the users are unwilling to specify their use, they are relatively rare; and even then, through the queries about use, the users are given fair warning that, by failing to specify use, they are limiting the value of the study.)

Work on the design of the study reported on here was initiated in January 2001. A series of staff interviews and an initial literature review were carried out in the first months of the year, followed by the development of several background research activities. These included consultations with Centre staff and experts in the field, an in-depth literature review, use of external expertise and research into the Centre's data. From the review of other work, it was clear that policy influence is a long-term and long-range issue in most cases. It was therefore determined at the beginning of the study that it would be extremely important to include older projects and projects that had been supported over a relatively long period of time.

Fairly early in the design stage, it was determined that, given the complexity of this area and the Centre's relative lack of experience in evaluation, it would be important to seek methodological support on an ongoing basis. The Centre approached Dr Carol Weiss for her input to the study because of her expertise in this field and she graciously agreed to collaborate. External expertise was matched with an internal implementation team ensuring both methodological rigour and internal relevance.

Because of the varied nature of the Centre's work and the range of regions in which it works, the study was made up of a number of sub-studies brought together to build a corporate picture. A range of methodologies is being used. These are outlined following a discussion of the evaluation questions and the state of the art in this field as it relates to the Centre. A number of products will be produced in the course of this study. As will be discussed further below, the data have been collected, discussed, and analysed as far as possible in collaboration with the users; a number of methods will be used to ensure participation but to minimize workload impact (as in most organizations, Centre staff suffer from a relatively high workload, which is frequently seen as a stumbling block to new initiatives). Products of the study started to appear late in 2001 (from the background research) and the final results will be published in 2004.

A second stage of the study may be considered to look at the influence of the implementation of public policy on development processes, which will be somewhat different from influence on policy development, formulation, and adoption.

Purpose and focus defined

Many IDRC project and programme objectives reflect the expectation that the research supported will influence or have an impact on policy. Within projects and programmes, the Centre staff promotes various means of linking research to policy: IDRC-supported research is often reported to have enhanced decision-makers' awareness of policy options or to have been otherwise taken into account in policy processes. If the Centre is going to increase its portfolio of projects with this mandate, there is a need to clarify and document what the Centre means by ''policy influence''; to examine more systematically the extent to which and the ways in which the research it supports influences policy; and to examine the factors that affect the extent of policy influence resulting from its projects. Given the apparent ''serendipity'' described by many in cases where policy influence is claimed (Adamo 2002, Edwards 2001), a fruitful avenue of better understanding might be to understand how policymakers learn and how they absorb ideas into policy processes. This will serve two main purposes: first, it will provide learning at the programme level, which can enhance the design of projects and programmes to address policy issues where that is a key objective; second, it will provide an opportunity for learning at the corporate level, which

Philip IV of France (1268–1314) and his privy council discuss the conflict with the Pope, 1297. Illustration from the late fourteenth century *Grandes chroniques de France*. British Library/AKG.

will provide input to the strategic planning process (specifically, feedback on performance in the strategic programming framework for 2000–2005, feeding into the design of the next corporate programme framework, for example, through presentations and discussions at the Centre's Open Programme Meeting in Fall 2002). Taken together, these objectives are what distinguish this activity from Centre research: it is focused on corporate performance, and it is intended to bring together disparate experiences in a range of domains and regions to inform learning across the organization.

While policy influence could be defined quite broadly, it appears most feasible to focus the evaluation on the effects of IDRC-supported research on public policy, at global, national, and local levels.

It should be noted that not all Centre projects or programmes have, or are expected to have, an influence on policy. However, it is an area of increasing importance to a wide range of activities across the Centre, both regionally and programmatically.

Users

There are two primary users for this study. Clearly the study will be of interest to a wider audience; however in view of the importance placed on use of the findings within the Centre, a clear focus on internal users is essential. More than two user groups would be extremely difficult to accommodate within the limits of the study.

The first users are *programme staff*. They have a mandate to develop research activities (projects or programmes) to support "the production, dissemination and application of research results leading to policies and technologies that enhance the lives of people in developing countries". The study is intended to provide them with a rich review of Centre experience from which they can draw out the most useful and relevant lessons for their purposes.

The second primary user is the corporation as a whole, through its *programme management* group. The evaluation will address two corporate needs: it will provide a picture of current performance; and, it will provide input to the development of the next strategic programme framework (and potentially modifications to the corporate programme framework for 2000–2005).

Members of both these groups have been involved in the identification of issues as well as preliminary identification of cases. They have indicated an interest in ongoing involvement and in some cases an interest in participation in fieldwork. Ongoing user involvement in design and in analysis will be crucial and the methodology will reflect that priority. The range and level of interest to date demonstrate the clear relevance of the issues within the Centre.

Key questions

The strategic evaluation has been discussed to date with Programme Officers, Research Officers, Team Leaders, Programme management,

Regional Offices, as well as other groups such as the Policy and Planning Group and the Communications Division. These initial discussions with Centre staff and preliminary reviews of the literature as well as of Centre documents, point to three main questions that the strategic evaluation could fruitfully address.

I. What constitutes public policy influence in IDRC's experience?
This question will help answer what we mean by research and its use. Among the issues to be considered are the following.

– What is the relationship between policy influence and capacity building – is it a trade off? Does investing in one support the other?
– What is the range and type of policy influence achieved through IDRC-supported research (e.g., influence on policymaker thinking, agendas, declarations, laws, implementation)?
– What is the role and definition of partnerships as part of policy influence?
– Is it about building capacities of researchers to conduct policy inquiry and to influence policymakers? building the capacity of policy makers to use research in the policy process? the relationships between researchers and policymakers? the enlightenment function?
– To what extent is advocacy important?
– To what extent are changes in legislation important?
– How do ideas enter the policy arena?
– How do policymakers learn?

II. To what degrees and in what ways has research supported by IDRC influenced public policy?

– How does policy influence happen? With whom are we working and what are the relationships between researchers and policymakers in policy inquiry processes?
– What are the range of decision makers which IDRC-supported research seeks to influence and how (e.g., national government policy makers through to local government policymakers, to communities and households)?
– What are dissemination strategies and what roles do they play?

III. What factors and conditions have facilitated or inhibited the potential of IDRC-supported research projects to influence public policy?

– What has been IDRC's experience in influencing new policy areas?
– What has been IDRC's experience in working collaboratively to influence policy? Collaborating with other donors? With communities?
– What is the link between research quality and policy influence?
– What are the contextual factors at play?
– What are the ranges of processes used?

Elements of the study

In order to deal with the diversity of interests and needs as well as the complexities of the research-policy linkages, this strategic evaluation is being conducted using a range of methods and through the integration of findings from a number of different elements. The approach is one in which exploratory case study research is combined with deductive theory building, continually adjusted to accommodate one to the other (Burns 1981). It is a hypothesis generating approach rather than a hypothesis testing approach given the limited range of work that has been carried out in this field. This results in a number of different elements that will be combined over the course of the project in collaboration with the users will therefore extend beyond the strict confines of each study to engage users in the synthesis and hypothesis generation across elements around the implications both for programmes and for the corporation as a whole. In addition, it is anticipated that partners of the Centre may be brought into the discussions in various ways. Three key mechanisms will be put in place to support this involvement. First, a small (IDRC-internal) advisory group will work with the Unit throughout the study. It represents key users in different parts of the Centre and advises on design, research, and on use issues. The group has been actively involved in both regional and Ottawa-based (IDRC 2003a) workshops. Second, consultations with regional offices and the establishment of regional activities with their support will ensure input from regionally based staff. Key outputs of these consultations are reported in

workshop reports (IDRC 2003b, 2003c, 2003d). While the study is clearly focused on learning for the Centre, the implementation of research, and any subsequent policy influence, are carried out by our partners, not by the Centre itself. It would therefore be advantageous to integrate the perspectives and views of partners in this study. This will be achieved both through interview processes in the study and through partner engagement in regional and Ottawa-based consultations on findings. Third, the Unit has established a space within its intranet site for the posting of documents and other information. The creation of the site is posted in Echonet. As materials become available they will be posted to the site. Most materials, once finalized, are also posted to the Evaluation Unit internet site; the intranet site is used for early posting of material and for posting drafts for consultation.

The outputs from the study are broken down into three main categories: background research, case studies, and analytical outputs.

Background research

Six studies are included.

Literature review (Neilson 2001)
This review of the main bodies of work that address the issue of research influence on policy is summarized earlier in this paper. It assisted us in the definition of key questions and, on an ongoing basis, will inform the questions used as well as the methodologies for data collection and analysis. The review will be updated for the final presentation of results.

Framework paper (Lindquist 2001)
Evert Lindquist was engaged by the Centre to provide a background paper on frameworks for examining policy influence. This document, which complements the literature review, was based on both the author's knowledge of the field and a series of consultations with Centre staff. It provides a preliminary framework to be tested and modified through the document reviews, case studies and consultations. The framework defines policy influence in a broad way, from enhancing policy capacities (i.e., strengthening the capacity of researchers to address policy questions), through broadening

policy horizons (i.e. building understanding and awareness of the multiple factors and actors at play in the policy process), to modifying policy regimes (actual change in policy).

PCR review (Edwards 2001)
Project Completion Reports are completed by Programme Officers on IDRC projects with a Centre contribution of over CAD $ 150,000. These provide insights into the results and management of the projects. Recent PCRs are being combed for information related to policy influence identified by Programme Officers.

Programme review (Gillespie 2003)
In order to develop a clear picture of the priority given to policy influence, a review was conducted of the programming documents, including programme objectives and a survey of project objectives, for all Programme Initiatives, Secretariats and Special Projects to identify the nature of policy-related objectives in each case.

Evaluations review (Adamo 2002)
The Evaluation Unit maintains an inventory of evaluations conducted throughout the Centre. A review was carried out of the 80 evaluations submitted from July 1999 to March 2001, in order to identify those that had a mandate to address policy influence. This study is being used as part of the identification of cases as well as to deepen our understanding of cases where evaluations have addressed policy influence of IDRC-supported research.

Policy influence and IDRC: a history of intent (Gonsalves & Baranyi 2003)
Accepted wisdom at the Centre is that in its early days in the 1970s and 80s, the Centre and its staff were primarily preoccupied with good research: responsibility for use of that research rested elsewhere. This study explored and documented the evolution of thinking on the relevance of policy influence in the Centre's evolution through a document review (*inter alia*, Board minutes, Annual reports), and interviews with senior staff. The focus on the management decision processes was intended to complement the focus on programme officers and project leaders that will inform the case studies. This study demonstrated that while there was generally an early orientation to "supporting good research", there were always some programmes with an interest in and orientation to policy implications of their work.

Other data sources

One additional data source was brought into the study for consideration. Four recent evaluations conducted by IDRC programmes which each had a strong policy focus bore a strong resemblance to this study and included significant elements of assessing the policy influence of their work. It was found, however, that it was difficult to include these studies – although they did indicate a stream of work in the Centre and a group of staff with experience and interest who could be tapped for advice and reflections, as well as participation in the analysis workshops.

Two elements not included in the study that are both still seen to have merit and could add value to an assessment of policy influence are a tracer study and a national study. The purpose of a tracer study would be to examine the policy influence and policy influence potential of Centre awardees. Over time the Centre has supported a significant number of junior scholars and researchers from the South. It is assumed that some of these scholars will become outstanding researchers and that some of these will, in some way or another, influence policy in their home countries or regions. Such a study would identify and systematically track a sample of awardees. Two pools of awardees would be considered: "traditional awardees" (who are directly supported by the Centre), as well as those who receive awards from small grants programmes administered by a Centre partner. Consideration should also be given to the inclusion of project leaders from the regional case studies.

The national study would be focused in a country in which the Centre has been active for many years and again would address the research-policy links in Centre-supported work in this country. This would entail a review across all programming areas in which the Centre had been active in that country. This should be a 10 or 15-year retrospective examination of policy influence. A country would be selected in which the Centre has been fairly active, a range of

programmes have worked, and there are a significant number of former recipients in positions of influence. This study would also permit a look from the country perspective at how policymakers integrate ideas into decision processes, as compared with the regional studies that look at research-policy linkages from the perspective of the research project that is perceived to have had influence. The case would require the involvement of a small team, led by an experienced evaluator. A number of sub-sections could be completed by programme staff knowledgeable about a given field, but the study would require some external perspective as well. It is a difficult study to design in the context of the Centre, which does not programme on a country basis but rather in terms of subject areas. While one may, as a result, be assessing against a criterion (contribution to national development) that is not central to Centre considerations for research support, neverthe-less, policy influence is national in many cases, and this influence merits attention.

A further element of this evaluation has been maintaining links with other studies on-going in this domain, with the Global Develop-ment Network (The Bridging Research and Policy Project: http://www.gdnet.org/rapnet/in-dex.html) and the Overseas Development In-stitute's programme (Research and Policy in Development: http://www.odi.org.uk/RAPID/Index.html).

Case studies: the research

The case studies are the heart of this evaluation. The two key elements are (1) the conduct of the studies by reviewers from the countries where the research took place, and (2) a process of collective analysis involving programme staff and partners. This latter element is critical to the success of the study given the study's strong use orientation. In addition to these two core elements a number of other elements were also considered, as discussed above. These were not included because of time and financial con-straints. There was also a realization of the complexity of the case studies, which had been inadequately recognized prior to their initiation. They took considerably more time and effort than anticipated. As a trade-off, they were

successfully completed in almost all cases and provided a rich data source. Almost all were completed within one year of initiation of the study, including several added at a much later date.

The series of cases in each of the regions in which the Centre is working were identified through a consultative process with Centre staff and interviews with former senior officers of the Centre. Criteria for selection included range, uniqueness, comparability, type of influence, type of organization doing the research, type of organization being influenced, duration of IDRC involvement with the partners, inten-tional vs. unintentional influence, and IDRC programming type (IDRC funds flow primarily through Programme Initiatives (PI); the Centre also funds Corporate Projects to explore new areas; finally, the centre provides support through Secretariats, which are a multi-donor mechanism of development support, housed at IDRC and focused on a specific issue, such as environmental economics in South East Asia). In all cases, the projects selected were ones where there was a claim of influence that could be clearly identified and articulated by the staff member(s) proposing the case. The purpose of the study is not to determine the extent of influence overall in IDRC supported research (which would have called for a random sample) but rather to understand better how influence happens. Therefore a purposive selection was seen as appropriate. It is worth noting that not all the case studies were pre-selected. A smaller set was identified at the beginning of the study. As the research became well known throughout the Centre, staff came forward with further examples of projects they felt should be in-cluded. Additions were made based on a combination of merit, geographic spread and subject area coverage. These additions provided the opportunity to balance coverage.

Consultants were identified in each region to carry out the case studies. Criteria for selection of consultants included: (i) experience with qualitative methods; (ii) capacity for social/gender analysis; (iii) participatory learning approaches to evaluation; (iv) experience in the policy domain; (v) ability to work across sectors; vi) strong knowledge of region of work; and (vii) availability. As indicated, our preference was for consultants from the countries where the studies

took place. This was not possible in all cases; however, where this was not the case, staff of the Centre were asked to carry out the studies (primarily staff from the Evaluation Unit) and in most cases this was possible. In all, 21 consultants were engaged to carry out the 25 studies. Of these, 12 (6 female, 6 male) were from the South and 9 (5 male, 4 female) from the North; of the 9 from the North, 6 were from IDRC and 3 from outside the Centre.

Before full implementation of the case studies, two were carried out. Based on experience in these two cases, consultants for the first group of case studies were convened for a planning session. The consultants met as a group with the Evaluation team and Carol Weiss (who provided ongoing methodological guidance to the study) in order to ensure a common understanding of the terms of reference for the studies. At this workshop, the experiences in the first two studies were reviewed, terms of reference were discussed in detail, an interview guide was presented and discussed, and the consultants were provided with more detail on the expectations of IDRC. While not all consultants were able to participate in this workshop (some cases were selected after the workshop and the identification of consultants in some cases was delayed), it was seen as invaluable to the successful completion of the studies. The common frame of reference and shared language that developed among the evaluators resulted in a commonality across the case studies, which greatly increased the potential for comparability. The consultants who did not participate in the design workshop had a more difficult time integrating with the study and their work is by and large less comparable. As would be expected, this is not universally true, with one exceptional case of solid integration by a consultant unable to attend, and one exceptional case of poor integration of the work of a consultant who did attend. Overall, however, the experience suggests that the design workshop was very important to the success of the study. Some of the cases are cited in the reference list of this article; others are available on the IDRC website (http://www.idrc.ca/evaluation).

It was important to us that the cases present detailed stories of the policy influence process. It is not expected that this study will create a

checklist or single set of lessons on policy influence. It is argued here that these lists are much too broad to be useful in more than a very general sense to the future work of the Centre. Rather, the focus was on the development of rich case studies that explored not only the IDRC work undertaken but also the changing context in which the work was carried out, and the processes that were used. It is the interplay between the project and these other factors that provides a menu of experience that can be used both by Programme Officers for planning future work and by the corporation at the strategic level in considering the relationships, strategies and types of research required to influence public policy. It is through the process of collective analysis in workshops that the staff and management of the Centre develop their preliminary insights into how research influences policy. These workshops are discussed in more detail below.

This approach puts considerable responsibility on the user of the findings to delve into the products of the study and their analysis in some depth. It means that the user has to take the time to read the material and not rely simply on the development of checklists and "lessons learned" to cull from the evaluation. We avoided this approach because of the context-dependent nature of policy influence and because, by and large, "lessons learned" tend to be other people's lessons in their context and for their specific needs. In other cases, they are the lessons we wish we had learned or that we think others should learn, but they are seldom learned. The second dimension of this approach is that it also puts more responsibility on the implementation team to ensure appropriate dissemination of the various products. The users can only access the products to consider their relevance if they are well disseminated and if they are well written and in the language of the users. The responsibility for this rests with the implementation team.

Analytical outputs

Three key outputs are identified. First, a series of regional workshops to engage in collective analysis of the case studies were carried out. As indicated earlier, these analyses by the users are extremely important to the use of the findings.

Second, a full cross-case analysis is underway. Finally, a review of the methodology will be conducted at the end of the study with the objective of developing tools for the design, monitoring, and evaluation of future research activities intended to have an influence on policy. This articulation of the methodology is the first step in this exercise.

Regional workshops

Three regional workshops were carried out at which cases from those regions were highlighted (IDRC Evaluation Unit 2003b, 2003c, 2003d). Participants included the evaluators who prepared the cases, staff of IDRC and selected researchers from the region. In some cases some cross-regional participation was included (for example, the Director of the Trade and Industrial Policy Secretariat from South Africa participated in the Latin America workshop because of the close links between his work and that of one of the Latin American cases, the Latin American Trade Network (Macadar 2003)). In advance of the workshops, participants were sent all the case material and asked to review it. Presentations were made by the evaluators highlighting the important elements of what they had found. In some cases oral presentations were used; in others posters were used to supplement presentation of the work, notably at the Bangkok workshop because of the large number of cases (8) that were presented (IDRC Evaluation Unit 2003c).

In general, the workshops were structured around five processes.

1) Review of the cases themselves, which was important as participants cut across programme areas.
2) A group activity around the IDRC role and position in the research and policy influence process. This was done through a poster session in which participants were asked to prepare posters presenting the project, either as theatre or as an advertisement.
3) Discussion of the policy influence typology developed for the study and position of the cases within this typology.
4) A discussion of performance based on an analysis of the cases in terms of context (what are the critical contextual issues which affect each case?), motivation (what are the key motivators for IDRC, for researchers and decision makers?) and capacities (what capacities were developed, changed or introduced amongst researchers, decision makers and IDRC?).
5) Small-group discussions on the contributors to and inhibitors of policy influence.

These workshops resulted in a rich preliminary analysis of the findings and provided insights for the review team on key foci for the full cross-case analysis.

In addition to these three regional workshops, two workshops were held with staff in Ottawa (IDRC Evaluation Unit, 2003a, 2003e). The first covered a range of cases from all programme areas and all regions. This workshop was structured in much the same format as the regional workshops, although with a much larger group (80 participants in contrast with the regional workshops of 25–35 people). The second was a special seminar on the Ukraine case to highlight findings for a small group particularly interested in work in Ukraine. The purpose here was two-fold, first to highlight the findings, and second to present findings at the conclusion of the Centre's work in the Ukraine so that others who continue to work there may make use of our experience.

Upon completion of the case studies, and the development of a regional analysis, the Unit is undertaking a cross-case analysis including all completed cases (several remain in draft form at the time of writing).

Cross-case analysis

In addition to the reflections of staff a cross-case analysis is underway. This analysis takes the full cases as a starting point. Given that this is a hypothesis-generating study, the categories for analysis emerge from the analysis. Certainly, the categories that have emerged in the partial analyses to date will be crucial, but they will not be the only ones. In a study of the multi-country networks included in the study, Carden & Neilson (forthcoming) found six key issues – capacity building, ownership, persistence, intent, communication and dissemination, and systems of

support – which can be summarized briefly as follows.

Capacity building

Capacity building is not just about building the capacity of researchers to do research. It is also about building researcher capacity to carry out policy-relevant research and to communicate the findings effectively to policy and decision makers. This can be achieved through career advancements, the credibility/reputation of the research and/or researcher(s), and through networking. Another challenge for the Centre is to make the distinction between building the capacity of researchers to influence policy with research, and advocating a particular position. The latter is not the mandate of the Centre; the former is. What is challenging is that capacity is built most effectively through practice and engagement where the researchers begin to use the research findings as part of building their understanding of *how* to use findings. In this there is a fine line. The Centre advocates that "voices from the South" be heard and incorporated into policies that affect their everyday lives. In other words, the Centre supports research to inform policies, rather than supporting research that takes a particular position regarding public policies.

Ownership

"Ownership" of the research can also affect the perceived (potential) effectiveness of policy influence. The review of the G-24 (Group of 24 Technical Services Support Project) case explains that, initially, under the leadership of the first Research Coordinator and with the support of IDRC, important steps were taken to "increase G-24 ownership of the research programme" (Tussie *et al.* 2003: 9). The first was that G-24 members began to contribute to the trust fund themselves in response to IDRC's request for parallel funding. The second was the creation and establishment of the Technical Group. These two mechanisms "offered a more defined process for the functioning of the research project, [and] to some extent, (…) may have provided the G-24 with a greater sense of 'ownership' of the programme" (Tussie *et al.* 2003: 9). Building on these mechanisms for effective policy influence, the G-24 representatives

requested "soundly argued policy briefs to influence the policy debate" (Tussie *et al.* 2003: 20).

Persistence

Many projects in this study are long-term commitments by the Centre. For example, IDRC supported the Asian Fisheries Social Sciences Research Network, or AFSSRN, for 14 years (Pomeroy 2002), and the G-24 (Tussie *et al.* 2003) has realised 15 years of support. The notion of persistence is strong within the Centre, which recognises that building capacity to do research takes a long time and is not a "single project effort". In the short term, rapid results are seldom seen. The same holds true for the uptake of research for the purpose of developing policies. Further, policy influence is not a single project effort either. Donors must learn to recognize that issues of policy influence go beyond single projects (the "project trap"): they need to think about policy influence in terms of intent, and to design strategies and activities according to what is needed at a programming level, rather than as unrelated, individual projects.

Intent

Research projects that aim to provide input into policymaking should define explicitly what this contribution is expected to be, and how, and at what point throughout the life of the project, the contribution will be made. Both the G-24 project noted above and the Latin American Trade Network, or LATN (Macadar 2003), are examples of projects designed expressly to influence policy and both cases reported "success" in terms of achieving those ends. On the other hand, the contribution that AFSSRN made was later on in the project. Once the capacities were sufficiently instilled in several national systems, the researchers were able to think in terms of policy influence, both in how they defined their research, and in terms of what demands and expectations policy makers placed on them.

Communication and dissemination

The ability of researchers to communicate their findings and results in a way that is understood by policy makers was frequently reported as a problem for researchers. Second, the understanding of Programme Officers regarding the need to build communication and dissemination

costs into programmes was found to be weak. Third, the range of relevant formats for information was not known. Fourth, the informal nature of policy influence is not well understood or accepted by many researchers. That is, enhancing the use of knowledge is often achieved through informal relationships and through creating windows of opportunity to speak with, and provide ideas to, policy makers. For some researchers this is a contamination of the research process: they see researchers who can achieve this as ''research entrepreneurs'', a term that connotes a certain somewhat less ''rigorous'' type of researcher who is willing to compromise research in the interests of influence. Finally, the timing of financial support to communicate findings was raised as an issue.

Systems of support

What emerged on this point is the disconnection between the way we think about the influences of research on policy and the way we design and fund research projects. Influence is clearly seen as multi-path, uncertain and changing over time, yet project design and funding are still a fundamentally linear process. Projects tend to be designed based on a system that emerges from the design and management of infrastructure projects that are more linear in nature. The development of appropriate support systems and project management systems that ensure accountability, but are also agile in their ability to seize opportunities as they emerge, is not an easy undertaking. This is particularly true in the context of capacity building.

These factors will likely emerge in other cases; additional ones will also emerge. At the corporate level, this study will inform the goals of the Corporate Strategic Programme Framework and will, through exploration of a range of experiences, permit a focus on the overall objective as outlined in the earlier quote from the IDRC Corporate Strategy.

Methodology review

One of the issues raised in Centre consultations was a need for a guide on how to design, monitor, and evaluate the policy influence (potential and actual) of research. This article is the first step in the development of the review, through a detailed presentation of the methodology as it developed in the study as well as a preliminary reflection on methodological issues in the implementation of the study (below). In its final form, this aspect of the work will build on initial methodological explorations, and will be informed by consultations with experts in the field, experience in the study, and the literature.

Issues in implementation

''Another contribution of the study is the methodological strides it is making. Not many cross-case studies have been conducted with the same attention to comparability of theory, method, and data. This work will surely have much to tell researchers about methods to adopt, adapt, and avoid'' (Weiss 2003: 7). Although it is not yet complete, the study has proceeded remarkably smoothly to date. The time put into the design was critical to that early success and the relevance of the study to the needs of our users was of course a major factor. Co-funding of six of the studies by Centre programmes added to the support the study achieved and did not compromise the integrity of the data gathering. The use of an advisory group within the Centre provided ongoing support to the evaluation team and a sounding board for issues. Engagement of expertise to assist in the design and implementation was a further key.

One of the biggest challenges in implementation of this study was the selection of cases, identification of evaluators and maintenance of a schedule. Finding the appropriate level at which to investigate the cases so that some consistency across regions and programming areas could be maintained took considerable effort as well as extensive discussion across the Centre.

Maintaining a case study schedule was complicated to some extent by the availability of the selected evaluators. But it was even more challenged by the inclusion of additional cases after the study was underway. It was anticipated that further cases would emerge once staff became aware of the case studies already in progress. This indeed occurred and some eight cases were added. These late additions helped with the balance of cases across regions and programming areas. At the same time, they delayed the completion of casework. In any case, most of the casework was completed within a

year, which represents in comparative terms a very compressed timescale.

The design time should not be underestimated in a use-oriented study of this scale. The difficulties should not be underestimated in determining the use needs of a group as diverse as programme staff working in Africa, Asia, and Latin America and in subjects as diverse as community-based natural resources management, peace building and reconstruction, information and communication technologies for development, biodiversity, trade and employment, and poverty monitoring.

As indicated above, the workshop for evaluators at the beginning of the study was an extremely important step, even beyond initial estimates, as confirmed over and over throughout the study in discussions with the evaluators.

Engagement of users in the analysis has been a successful undertaking. The workshops for analysis in the regions and in Ottawa have made a significant contribution to early use of the study findings and to the identification of issues for cross-case analysis.

The study is limited in two regards. First, the exercise has been conducted only once thus far, with no specific plans to repeat it. Therefore, any learning and change over time will not be captured unless some effort is made to repeat portions of the exercise at a later date. Second, because the study was not planned prior to the implementation of the projects, the study had to rely to a certain extent on memory and the tracking down of individuals and project documents, not all of which were easily available. As far as possible, data were triangulated through more than one source, but inevitably some selective memory creeps into a study of this type.

Conclusions

As Carol Weiss notes, "Instead of concentrating solely on the effect of research on individuals in policy-making positions, [evaluators] have begun to take the policy-making *system* as their canvas" (Weiss 2003: 5). This has significant implications for the evaluation of the influence of research on policy. It is no longer a matter of looking at how individuals are influenced but at how systems evolve and how they are influenced. Context matters. This brings us back to the points raised at the beginning of this article: the effect on evaluation of attribution, impact, and time. Bringing context to bear increases the difficulty in claiming impact and in identifying attribution and brings into play changes over time in what the (positive or negative) effects may have been. The adoption of a use-oriented evaluation approach that calls on the users throughout the study reduces the risk of evaluation being irrelevant and increases the opportunities to ensure users define the areas of evaluation and modes of analysis. No doubt involving users complicates life for the evaluation team, not only in terms of the time involved but also in ensuring methodological integrity. However, evaluation should never be done for its own sake, and the trade-off is that user involvement dramatically increases the potential for influence and relevance, which are two of the most important goals in evaluation.

Note: IDRC-published references cited here are available at http://www.idrc.ca/evaluation, and can also be obtained in hard copy from the Evaluation Unit by email request to evaluation@idrc.ca.

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