



Integration and Implementation Insights

Research resources for understanding and acting on complex real-world problems

Ten things to know about how to influence policy with research

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How can research influence public policy so that it is based on the best-available evidence? What different ways of working are required of researchers? Here are 10 things researchers from the UK's Overseas Development Institute have found helpful.

1. Know what you want to influence

Being clear about the policy issue, theme or process you want to change is the first step to effective policy influencing. Are you looking to influence legislation, or a change in government policy? You might want to encourage greater investment in a certain programme or approach, or a change in practice. You might want to influence perceptions or attitudes, or the language people use around an issue.

2. Know who you want to influence

Who has the power to enact a change in a policy process or change the debate on an issue? Is it a senior government official, a parliamentarian, a government minister or a head of state? You need to be clear about who you want to influence. It's also useful to identify who can indirectly influence your target audience – an adviser, a respected commentator, a media outlet, a well-known academic? Know the routes to the people and organisations you need to influence and build relationships with them. And remember that you might not always be the best messenger. An audience mapping tool can be useful here.

3. Know when to influence

Your research needs to reach your target audience at a moment when they can take action. For example, this could be in the lead-up to an election, during a budget cycle, as part of a

government consultation, ahead of an international decision-making summit, or at a key meeting. Unexpected opportunities will also emerge. So having the flexibility to react and adapt your plans as you go is important. If you can quickly spot policy opportunities as they arise, you may be able to have greater impact. Think ‘strategic opportunism’.

4. Build relationships and networks

You can’t change policy by yourself, no matter how ground-breaking your research is. Find and work with other people and organisations who share your policy influencing objective – your allies and collaborators. Working together, building trust and developing a joint plan will increase your impact.

5. Policy development is not a linear process

It is tempting to think that policy processes are linear: you identify a problem, gather evidence and implement a policy. But they aren’t. Policy-making is complex, dynamic and involves a lot of different people and moving parts. Nonetheless, policy formulation does have its own formal and informal rhythms. If you understand these, you’ll know where your evidence will be most useful and have greatest impact.

6. Policy-making is inherently political

Policy-making is often a very political process. Alongside research, policy-makers’ own values, experience and expertise play an important role in influencing how they make decisions. For example, in the lead-up to a general election it’s not uncommon to see the same research being used by competing political parties to argue different points. Factor this into your plans, considering how working in a political context could affect others’ perceptions of your independence.

7. Plan your engagement

Think carefully about how to communicate your research. Policy-makers are busy so won’t always have time to read a long report. A short, sharp executive summary or policy brief can be a powerful tool. Focus on clear messages and avoid overly technical language. Infographics can also help to make your data accessible. Consider other outreach activities too, such as press releases, public events, bilateral meetings, presentations or side events at summits and conferences.

8. Focus on ideas and be propositional

Policy-makers need constructive ideas, so be propositional. Based on your research, tell them what could happen, who could take action, when and how. It’s important to frame your recommendations within the realms of what is possible, both technically and politically. Be ambitious, but realistic.

9. *It takes time, stick at it*

Influencing policy takes time and commitment. Make a plan, break it down, and be realistic about what you can do. Often it can be a slow process with no obvious impact in the short term. But stick with it, recognise that policy influencing is usually a marathon not a sprint, and be sure to set milestones and capture the small successes as you go. Continue to engage with your target audience and always keep up-to-date on the decision-making process.

10. *Monitor, learn and adjust along the way*

External factors will affect your plans along the way so it's important to remain flexible and adapt to new contexts and opportunities. You should also seek feedback from allies, partners, and even your target audience. Ask them what they need and when, as well as what format they prefer and adjust your plans accordingly. If you find an approach is not working, you should stop, assess and try something new. Continuously review, and capture your learning as you go so you can apply it to future influencing plans. And, be willing to share your learning with key partners.

Do these ideas resonate with you? Is there anything else that you have found to be useful? Do you have examples to share?

This blog post is based on:

Tilley, H., Shaxson, L., Rea, J., Ball, L. and Young, J. (2017). *10 Things to Know About How to Influence Policy with Research*. Overseas Development Institute: London, United Kingdom. (Online): <https://www.odi.org/sites/odi.org.uk/files/resource-documents/11205.pdf> (PDF 128KB)

A useful set of resources for undertaking these steps is:

Young, J., Shaxson, L., Jones, H., Hearn, S., Datta, A. and Cassidy, C. (2014). *Rapid Outcome Mapping Approach: A Guide to Policy Engagement and Influence*. Overseas Development Institute (ODI): London, United Kingdom. (Online): <https://i2s.anu.edu.au/wp-content/uploads/2018/01/9011.pdf> (PDF 1MB); and can also be found on the report's interactive website: <http://roma.odi.org/index.html>

But please also read cautionary words from:

Oliver, K. and Cairney P. (2019). The Dos and Don'ts of Influencing Policy: A Systematic Review of Advice to Academics. *Nature*: **5**, 21. (Online – DOI): <https://doi.org/10.1057/s41599-019-0232-y>

Biography: *Helen Tilley PhD is a Senior Research Fellow at the Wales Centre for Public Policy in the UK. She has worked extensively in international development in Africa and Asia. Her experience has focused on building central and local government capacity to use evidence in policy formulation, to manage public finances and implement budgetary reforms, and to develop public policies in a range of areas including climate, education, health, economic growth and poverty reduction. Her current research interests include the politics of research and evidence uptake, and the economic growth and productivity challenges facing Wales.*

Biography: Louise Shaxson currently leads the RAPID (Research and Policy in Development) programme at the UK's Overseas Development Institute, which focuses on strengthening the uptake and use of evidence in development organisations. She has over 25 years' experience as a researcher, research manager, policy advisor and management consultant in the UK and developing countries. Her work focuses on evidence-informed policymaking in all its guises: helping people outside government trying to integrate evidence into public policy processes, and helping those inside government departments to improve how they use evidence to make decisions. She is particularly interested in how organisational systems and processes create different cultures of evidence—and how those cultures coincide and collide to influence decision making.

Biography: John Young PhD is Executive Director of INASP in the UK. Prior to joining INASP he spent 17 years developing and leading the RAPID (Research and Policy in Development) programme at the UK's Overseas Development Institute, and before that spent nearly 20 years based in Sri Lanka, Kenya and Indonesia developing, implementing and testing new approaches to rural development, and decentralized public services. His interests include research-policy linkages, policy engagement and influence, organizational and institutional development, capacity development, especially of think tanks and think-tank-like organizations, government service reform, monitoring evaluation and learning and strategic communication.

Biography: Louise Ball is the Communications and Research Uptake Coordinator at the School of Oriental and African Studies, University of London for the project *Drugs and (dis)order: building peacetime economies in the aftermath of war*. She is also a freelance communications consultant. She previously worked as communications manager in the RAPID (Research and Policy in Development) team the UK's Overseas Development Institute. She has expertise in communicating for policy engagement, as well as communications monitoring, evaluation and learning.