Overseas Development Institute

Background Note

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Policy briefs as a communication tool for development research

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Policy briefs are short documents that present the findings and recommendations of a research project to a non-specialist readership. They are often recommended as a key tool for communicating research findings to policy actors (Young and Quinn, 2007). However, there has been little systematic research in the development field about the communication needs of developing country policy-makers and how such research can be used to inform policy brief content and design. This background note presents recent research by the Research and Policy in Development (RAPID) Group at ODI and the Science and Development Network (SciDev.Net) on the research communication environment involving researchers, policy-makers and development practitioners from the North and South in science, technology and innovation.

We begin with an overview of the theoretical literature on bridging research and policy, with a focus on insights from scholars interested in the science–policy interface. Drawing on an international survey and country case studies, we then highlight the barriers to, and opportunities for, strengthening communication between researchers, knowledge brokers and policy-makers working in international development, and the key requisites of policy briefs to meet the challenges of this landscape.

Characterising the divide between the research and policy communities

Scholarship on the research–policy interface in recent years has done much to unpack the complexities of the uptake of research evidence into policy-making processes (Cash et al., 2003; Scott, 2006; Choi et al., 2007; Fairhead et al., 2006). There is now a growing focus on thematic advocacy coalitions that cut across government agencies and research institutes (Buse et al., 2005) as well as innovative knowledge translation initiatives such as multi-stakeholder research partnerships between researchers, NGOs and policy-makers (Jones and Villar, 2008) and the establishment of dedicated knowledge hubs within line ministries in some developing countries (Lavis, 2007). However, a number of key structural and professional tensions persist between researchers and policy-makers. These are presented below, with a particular emphasis on the natural science field.

Specialised research expertise vs democratised knowledge

Efforts to communicate research-based information for policy application underscore tensions between scientific knowledge as 'privileged' information and the perceived diluting effects that a democratised knowledge-base may introduce (Weingart, 1999). Some fear that the capacity of the current system of communication between researcher and policy communities is inadequate to rule out excessive dilution of scientific knowledge (Clark and Juma, 2002). Moreover, the pluralisation of knowledge in policy can, in fact, cause debate to stagnate rather than encourage it. Policy-makers, constrained by time and overwhelmed by various sources of information, are likely to make a snap decision by selecting the 'evidence' most appropriate to their political leanings (Edwards, 1999). The clear warning is that, without efforts to improve these communication channels, research may lose its 'purity' when used in the short timeframes of the political sphere.

Engagement vs objectivity

A divide between 'engaged' and 'objective' researchers is highlighted in the literature concerning science communication in developed countries in particular, and to a lesser degree in studies on developing countries.

Two broad categories of researchers emerge: researchers engaged in policy-making processes and those who separate themselves from policy. The divide often occurs between 'strictly objective' researchers, who believe that engaging in civic debate undermines objectivity, and 'citizen scientists', who believe researchers can – and at times should – help decision-makers incorporate sound scientific knowledge into policy (Higgins et al., 2006). Debate between these camps is said to render many researchers unwilling to engage in civic discourse: some are convinced by the argument for strict objectivity, while others recognise that it is safer, professionally, to focus solely on research and risky to advocate on behalf of anything, even science. However, more nuanced arguments suggest that when researchers recoil too far from the policy implications of research, they leave a 'vacuum' that is filled by politically motivated parties who offer their own interpretations, and without credible opposition, can mislead the public towards their own goals.

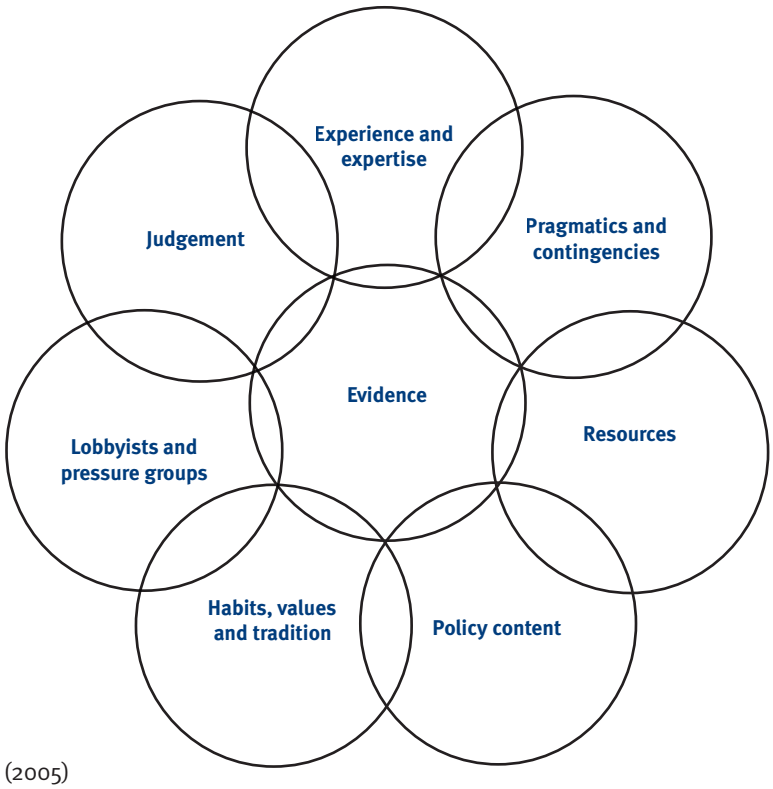
Researchers' vs policy-makers' incentive structures and timescales

Problems caused by the divergent timescales and incentive structures of researchers and policy-makers lie at the heart of communication issues at the research–policy interface. On the one hand, the time-consuming nature of 'pure' research, not bound by time constraints, is difficult to integrate with the policy demands of politicians who are often compelled to work under very tight deadlines to produce short-term, tangible policy results. On the other hand, policy-makers often struggle to stay apace of new scientific thinking, especially in terms of developing relevant policies and infrastructure to enable as well as regulate the implementation of scientific and technological advances (Clark and Juma, 2002).

Evidence vs contextual factors in policy decision-making

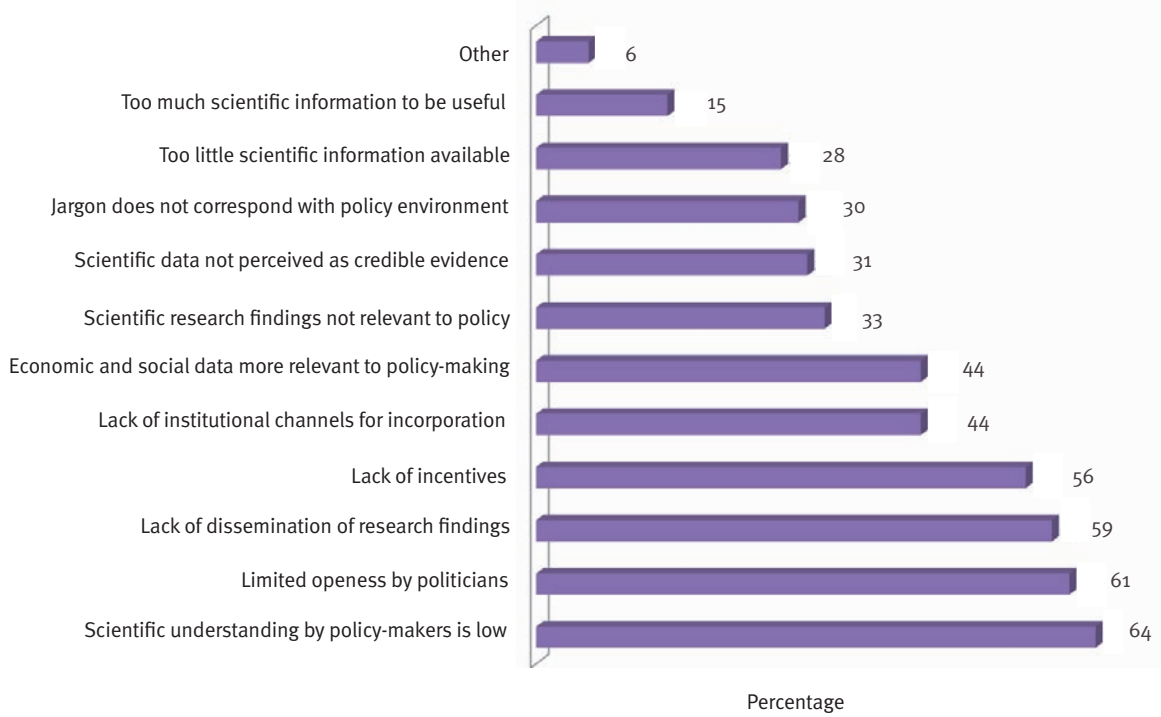
Research findings have been responsible for many improvements in quality of life. Better use of research evidence in development policy-making can save lives through more effective policies that respond to scientific and technological advances, use resources more efficiently and better meet citizens' needs (WHO, 2004). However, too often the linkages between research and policy-making are viewed as a linear process, in which research findings are critically analysed and the best option implemented into policy (Young and Court, 2004). In reality, the integration of evidence into policy decision-making is a complex process of multiple, frequently competing and / or intertwined sets of influences in which evidence plays just one of many roles (see Figure 1). In practice, research evidence is considered through the lens of policy-makers' experience, expertise and judgement, contextual pragmatics, available resources and

Figure 1: Factors influencing policy-making



Adapted from Davies (2005)

Figure 2: Obstacles to the uptake of scientific information in development policy-making



the policy context, along with the habits, values and traditions of policy-makers, and the influence of lobbyists and pressure groups (Davies, 2005). Increasing the usage of evidence in policy-making therefore requires a communication approach that is informed by an understanding and engagement with these competing influences.

Research methodology

This background note is based upon the findings of a 2007 ODI/SciDev.Net international study on the research–policy interface in the field of science, technology and innovation. The study involved a systematic literature review, expert interviews, seven developing country case studies (China, Cambodia, India, Ghana, Zambia, Nicaragua and Bolivia) and an international survey with researchers, policy-makers and intermediary organisations. Research questions focused on how research information is accessed for development policy-making (particularly in developing countries), what types of communication of research evidence are most useful / effective for policy actors, and the ways in which an intermediary organisation can facilitate the communication process between researcher and policy-making communities.

This note draws primarily on the survey findings,[1] as well as more in-depth qualitative work undertaken with an expert panel[2] and key informant interviews in Brazil and India.[3]

Study findings

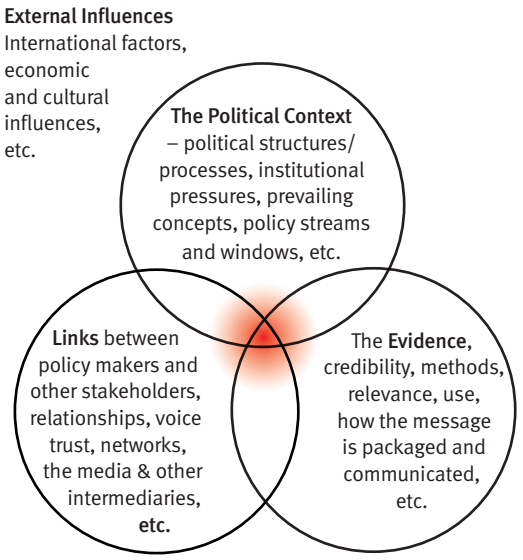
Despite the emphasis in the literature on the polarisation between researcher and policy-maker communities, the 2007 ODI/SciDev.Net study found that greater opportunities for interaction, discussion and deliberation between researchers and policy-makers would significantly improve the uptake of research findings in policy decision-making. The survey findings underscored the large unmet need for greater communication of scientific and technological evidence for policy-makers. Some 50% of policy-makers and 65% of researchers felt that there is insufficient dissemination of research findings for policy uptake (59% of respondents overall, see Figure 2). Policy briefs were identified as a key tool for addressing this gap, with 79% of respondents from both developed and developing countries ranking policy briefs as valuable communications tools along with opinion articles written by experts, news items and discussion fora. Similarly, more in-depth interviews with sub-national developing country policy-makers confirmed that they not only read policy briefs, but often actively seek them out to inform their decision-making processes. As one Indian sub-national level policy-maker emphasised: 'I often read policy briefs for both my official and non-official needs. I cannot think of going forward without consulting policy briefs. It expands my knowledge as I get an opportunity to understand what is happening around me'.

Table 1: Key ingredients of effective policy briefs

Evidence	**Persuasive argument**	• Clear purpose • Cohesive argument • Quality of evidence • Transparency of evidence underpinning policy recommendations (e.g. a single study, a synthesis of available evidence, etc.)
	Authority	• Messenger (individual or organisation) has credibility in eyes of policy-maker
Policy context	**Audience context specificity**	• Addresses specific context › national and sub-national • Addresses needs of target audience › social vs economic policy
	Actionable recommendations	• Information linked to specific policy processes • Clear and feasible recommendations on policy steps to be taken
Engagement	**Presentation of evidence-informed opinions**	• Presentation of author's own views about policy implications of research findings • But clear identification of argument components that are opinion-based
	Clear language/writing style	• Easily understood by educated, non-specialist
	Appearance/design	• Visually engaging • Presentation of information through charts, graphs, photos

To be effective, our research findings emphasised the importance of a number of key ingredients. These are in line with the RAPID framework on bridging research and policy (Figure 3), which emphasises: 1) the importance of embedding an understanding of the political context within the design and communication of research, 2) the necessity of providing quality evidence and twinning this with the communication of key findings through a credible messenger, and 3) the value of fostering linkages and active engagement between researchers and policy-makers to ensure that research products are part of an ongoing dialogue. A summary is provided in Table 1.

Figure 3: The RAPID Framework: Context, evidence and links



Evidence

Developing a persuasive argument

Our key informants stressed the need for the purpose of a policy brief to be expressed clearly and early in the text. A statement of purpose should convey the essence of the brief, act as an enticement to readers and provide an overview of the contents for busy research users. Much like a newspaper article, this statement of purpose should both 'hook' the reader and provide a concise statement of what the policy brief will tell the reader.

As scientific evidence represents just one of many competing influences on policy-making decisions, policy briefs also need to persuade the reader of the importance of the evidence and recommendations. Policy brief reviewers in developing countries emphasised the high volume of information with which they are presented. Given this plethora of information and time constraints, a policy brief should persuade a reader that the evidence presented is important and that the recommended policy actions are necessary. To do this, effective policy briefs should develop a persuasive line of argument that maintains the scientific credibility of the information, while highlighting its relevance and urgency for policy issues. This entails distilling the complexity and nuances of research findings into clear and concise messages that the audience can easily digest and remember. The argument must also take into consideration the competing externalities that will influence decision-making, such as donor priorities, historical-political sensitivities, cultural values and timing of elections among others.

Transparency of the source of the evidence behind policy recommendations is essential to promote broader access to new scientific knowledge. Are the recommendations derived from a single study, a

Box 1: Views of developing country policy-makers

'Policy briefs provide valuable information in an understandable format...when I read policy briefs I look for the quality of the information, adequate tables and figures, and connection of the evidence to policy processes.' (Sub-national level policy maker, Brazil)

'Briefs should be inspiring. They should be practical, realistic and relevant to the local contexts.' (President of local-level government body, Kerala State, India)

'When I read policy briefs I look for concise information that takes into account the policy process, and provides information relevant to the problems at hand.' (Sub-national level policy-maker, Brazil)

review and synthesis of existing information, or the culmination of a programme of work? This transparency can be aided by providing a short annotated list of the most important sources and publication on the topic for further reading.

Credibility of the messenger

End-users of policy briefs emphasised that they do pay attention to who is producing the policy brief and that this influences their acceptance of the evidence and argument presented. Legitimacy stems not only from the quality of the evidence base, but also from the author of the information and / or the organisation publishing the brief.

Survey respondents identified professional scientific and international organisations as the most legitimate potential mediators between researcher and policy-maker communities. However, mediating at the science–policy interface is not necessarily part of the mandate of such organisations. This suggests that there are many undefined roles to be filled in this area by other possible knowledge brokers such as: policy advisors, donors and web-based organisations. When acting as a knowledge broker and producing policy briefs, organisations should consider partnering with authoritative research institutes so as to augment their credibility.

Context

Tailoring findings to political context

Presenting results so that they are applicable to the specific national and sub-national contexts in which policy-makers operate emerged as an important challenge. Policy-makers do not represent a homogenous group of actors, but rather have different needs, priorities and uses for information based on their position by sector, level of government, and role in policy-making. A policy brief should, therefore, be written to address the needs of the target audience as well as in accordance with the particular point in the policy cycle that one aims to influence, whether it be agenda setting, policy formulation, implementation or evaluation.

Patterns of evidence use differ by audience segment, including country, sector, role in policy-making (e.g. legislator, minister, policy engaged NGO), level of government, etc. For example, non-science related ministries report employing scientific information primarily in the stages of policy evaluation (64%) and implementation (59%). By contrast, science-related ministries use scientific information primarily for policy conceptualisation (88%), and formulation (85%), suggesting that non-science policy-makers use scientific information to legitimate and evaluate policy decisions, whereas science-related ministries rely more heavily on scientific information to formulate policy. There is also strong demand for more regionally and locally specific policy briefs: over 50% of developing country based policy-makers prefer regionally specific information over globally applicable information. Having this information translated into local languages is also important if readership and engagement with new research is to be enhanced.

Tailoring findings to audience interests

The purpose of a policy brief should be linked to the target audience. As shown above, the ODI/SciDev.Net survey found that the informational needs of science-ministry officials differ from those of non-science ministries. A policy brief should therefore be written to address the specific purpose for which its target audience uses information, whether it be to formulate or validate policies. As a policy-maker from Kerala State, India, explained:

Box 2: Country Case Study Examples

In India and Cambodia, the uptake of scientific information into policy is also closely linked to its resonance with broader national development priorities. For example, in India the framing of biotechnology research findings in pro-poor discourse (improved crop yields as a means to reduce rural poverty) has contributed to widespread policy implementation. In Cambodia as in other post-conflict societies, research messages presented as part of broader socio-economic rehabilitation efforts are more likely to receive policy support. In both cases, demonstrating the complementarity of research evidence with social and economic data is often highly effective.

'Primarily, I look for applicability within my working framework. Usually, there are a hundred policy briefs on a single subject but the majority are irrelevant to local contexts and situations.'

This suggests that there may then be a need for separate tailored versions of policy briefs for different policy actors, not only according to the level of the political arena (international, national, sub-national and local) but also depending on the policy sector in which they work, and whether or not they are civil servants or elected officials. In this vein, persuading the reader to take a particular course of action based on research evidence can be enhanced by highlighting the benefits that are likely to accrue by following a particular course of action. Country case studies in the ODI/SciDev.Net study showed, for instance, that linking research evidence to socio-economic benefits in particular can be especially persuasive, due to overarching attention to poverty reduction and economic growth.

Presenting actionable recommendations

Given the time pressures on policy-makers to deliver policies with rapid and visible impacts, recommendations must be actionable and clearly connected to specific decision-making junctures in the policy-making process. Evidence-based recommendations must provide the necessary information to differentiate between various policy options. Moreover, policy brief authors also need to take into consideration the intersection between new knowledge and complex power relations that underpin policy processes. The presentation of research evidence that challenges prevailing understandings has to tread a fine line between opening up new policy horizons while avoiding being too confrontational and alienating readers. For example, in Ghana, key informant researchers explained that they are wary of presenting evidence that is framed within a political viewpoint at odds with the politics of those in power, as their work may be disregarded. This reinforces the importance of policy briefs framing research evidence in a way that is sensitive to the political context if the messages are to be accepted and potentially acted upon.

Engagement

Not shying away from opinion and value judgements

One of the most striking findings of the study was the fact that, while policy-makers value research evidence, they do not want to be simply presented with research findings. Instead, 80% said that they value researchers' opinions about the policy implications of their findings. Interestingly, while those in both the North and South preferred researchers to express their opinions, the demand for opinion, value judgments and advice on policy actions was particularly high in the South, both at the national and sub-national levels.

Presenting messages in clear language

There was a strong consensus among study participants that briefs need to be written in clear, jargon-free language, and pitched towards educated non-specialists in the topic. This is because many policy-makers are generalists and do not come from research or even strong educational backgrounds: 64% of ODI/SciDev.Net survey respondents were of the view that low levels of scientific understanding by policy-makers constituted a significant obstacle to the uptake of scientific information (Figure 2 above). Moreover, a significant number of policy-makers emphasised that much research evidence is unnecessarily verbose and dense.

Engaging audiences visually

To make a significant impact on an audience, policy briefs must not only be conceptually engaging, but also visually appealing. Policy-makers have limited time to read: the ODI/SciDev.Net survey findings indicated that most policy-makers spend just 30 to 60 minutes reading information on a particular issue. Policy briefs must, therefore, draw readers' attention and present information in a way that is easily remembered. Over 80% of respondents in the same survey found graphs or explanatory diagrams helpful, while a systematic review of policy briefs found that those that were visually stimulating were consistently rated more highly.

Conclusions

Policy briefs, if carefully designed, can be a powerful tool for communicating research findings to development policy audiences. However, the effectiveness of any tool depends upon appropriate usage. Producers of policy briefs aiming to increase uptake of scientific and technological research in development policy need to focus on, and actively address, the communication tensions at the research-policy boundary. Policy-makers operate in a complex environment of competing concerns. The provision of research information alone is not, therefore, sufficient to influence the policy agenda. The value of a policy brief needs to be viewed not only in terms of presenting quality evidence, but also in translating new knowledge into context-relevant messages and guidance for policy-makers. Most importantly,

however, even with a well-crafted policy brief in hand, the research communication process has not ended but is only beginning.

To foster uptake and implementation, face-to-face and / or electronic discussion and deliberation with policy-makers about the policy brief evidence and policy guidance is critical. What is needed is active mediation and translation among knowledge producers, knowledge brokers and end users, as well as an integrated communications approach that takes into consideration individual, organisational and systemic levels. It is critical to foster close collaboration between researchers and policy-makers from the outset, rather than disseminating research results at the end of a project, to reach consensus on the key questions to be addressed and to promote understanding of research methodologies as well as ownership of findings.

Constructing an appropriate platform from which to communicate is also key, especially if research findings challenge current policy approaches. Informed by insights from literature on advocacy and user engagement, there is a growing realisation of the efficacy of promoting broad engagement and participation on an issue, and using public engagement (e.g. global advocacy campaigns, community radio) as a platform from which to approach policy-makers and advocate for more accountable decision-making (Hovland, 2004). This approach was also strongly endorsed by over 90% of ODI/SciDev.Net survey respondents who called for more efforts to build the public's capacity to engage in research-policy debates. Improved research communication is therefore critical, not only between researcher and policy-maker communities, but also among the broader public. Lastly, efforts to strengthen researchers' communication and knowledge brokering skills need to be complemented by efforts to strengthen the institutional capacity of policy agencies to take up research. This includes enhancing individual capacities and skills, as well as developing institutional channels, procedures and incentive structures to promote evidence-informed policy processes.

This Background Note was written by Cora Walsh and Nicola Jones and is based on work conducted in the RAPID programme at ODI, commissioned by SciDev.Net and funded by DFID. For more information contact Nicola Jones (n.jones@odi.org.uk) or visit www.odi.org.uk/rapid. More information on science and policy can also be found at www.scidev.net

Endnotes and further resources

Endnotes

1 The international online survey had a total of 617 responses, sampling policy-makers (18.3%), intermediary communicators (34.7%) and researchers (46.7%). Most respondents (63.9%) were from developing countries. The survey results were compiled and analysed using largely descriptive statistics, disaggregating responses by sub-groups of respondents (policy-makers, intermediaries, and researchers), as well as by region. Results were then compared across these categories to discover significant patterns and differences. Large differences between groups and variables were then tested for significance using the Chi-square test.

2 An initial policy brief review panel was convened involving participants from the North and South, academia, a think tank, the NGO sector and a communication specialist. Panel participants reviewed 16 sample policy briefs across four thematic areas (Health, Technology, Environment, and Agriculture) according to set of criteria decided upon by the panel: clarity of purpose; persuasive argument with actionable recommendations; clear source of evidence; clear language / writing style; appearance / design; and authority.

3 Two case studies were coordinated by ODI and conducted by CGEE in Brazil, and PRAXIS in India to further investigate the use of policy briefs by developing country policy-makers at national and sub-national levels. Policy-makers were asked to review three example policy briefs according to the criteria employed by the international panel, and to discuss the relative importance of each criterion in affecting the usage / effectiveness of a policy brief.

Suggested further resouces

Translating evidence for development policy:

Cash, David W., William C. Clark, Frank Alcock, Nancy M. Dickson, Noelle Eckley, David H. Guston, Jill Jager and Ronald B. Mitchell (2003) Knowledge systems for sustainable development. PNAS. (https://rapid.odinet.org.uk/rip/rap0056/rap0056shared/Process/Inception%20study/literature/Knowledge%20systems%20for%20sustainable%20development.pdf).

Clark, W. and Juma, C. (2002) Mobilizing Science and Technology for Sustainable Development. Forum on Science and Technology for Sustainability. (http://www.ksg.harvard.edu/sustsci/ists/docs/ists_cfia_rpt_final.pdf).

Court, J., Hovland, I., and Young, J. (2005) Bridging Research and Policy in Development: Evidence and the Change Process. Warwickshire, UK: ITDG.

Mediating between scientists and policymakers:

Choi, B. C. K., Pang, T., Lin, V., Puska, P., Sherman, G., Goddard, M., Ackland, M.J., Sainsbury, P., Stachenko, S., and Morrison, H. (2005) Can scientists and policy makers work together ? Journal of Epidemiology and community health 59: 632-637.

Higgins, P. A. T., Chan, K. M. A. and Porder, S. (2006) Bridge over a philosophical divide. Evidence and Policy 2(2): 249-255.

Communication toolkits:

Hovland, I. (2005) Successful Communication: A Toolkit for Researchers and Civil Society Organisations. London: ODI. (http://www.odi.org.uk/publications/rapid/tools2.pdf).

Influencing policy:

Majone, Giandomenico (1989) Evidence, argument and persuasion in the policy process. New Haven: Yale University Press.

Shaxson, L. (2007) Practical tools for evidence based policy making: developing lines of argument. Presentation at: Impact & Insight Workshop. UK: Kings College London. 25 Oct. 2007. (http://www.slideshare.net/ODI_Webmaster/lines-of-argument-presentation-at-insights-to-impact-meeting/).

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Penn State University (2002) Preparing a policy issue brief. (http://www.courses.psu.edu/hpa/hpa301_fre1/IBInstructions_fa02.PDF).

Princeton University (2007) Thoughts on writing a policy paper. Writing Centre Web Resource Guide. (http://stokeslib.princeton.edu/writingelements.htm).

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Young, J. and Court, J. (2004) Bridging Research and Policy in International Development: An Analytical and Practical Framework. RAPID Briefing Paper 1, London: ODI.

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