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**LOCAL ACTION WITH INTERNATIONAL COOPERATION TO IMPROVE AND  
SUSTAIN WATER, SANITATION AND HYGIENE SERVICES**

**Research into policy: a literature review**

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*Water & Sanitation for the Urban Poor (WSUP) is embarking on a new research programme dedicated to improving urban sanitation in Ghana, Kenya and Bangladesh. The driving aim of the programme is not only to produce rigorous research, but research that can drive sector change in each of the three focus countries. For this to be achieved, research must be timely, relevant and communicated in a manner that is useful to those who are in a position to drive change in urban sanitation policy on all levels. This paper presents a broad overview of the literature produced on research uptake and the actions recommended for researchers seeking to ensure that their work makes a sustained impact where it is most needed. This will inform WSUP's sector influencing strategies and guide its development of a research uptake strategy.*

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**Introduction**

Driving sector change through research is challenging but not impossible: rigorous research has impacted on public, professional and policy consciousness, steering sections of the WASH community into new and/or improved thinking and practice. As WSUP begins a new research programme examining urban sanitation provision in Ghana, Kenya and Bangladesh, examining how research outputs can translate to sector change is a key first step – the findings of which will guide the programme over its five year duration.

How best to translate valuable research that could improve WASH practice and outcomes into sector change is not a set process with defined steps – and it is certainly not one size fits all, particularly in a sector as convoluted and complex as urban WASH. However, there is “*surprisingly little rigorous evidence on interventions that effectively and sustainably improve access to WSH services for the urban poor*” (Duflo et al 2012). This does not mean that there are few interventions or programmes that seek to improve access to WASH for the urban poor, but that interventions do not necessarily result in strong post-intervention analysis and learning that contributes to shifts in policy or practice (Buekens et al 2004; Lancet 2008).

If research is to ‘compete’ alongside the myriad other issues that policy makers, stakeholders and other interveners will be considering, then research into improving WASH service provision must be bolstered by an understanding of what actually pushes a piece of research from, say, an academic journal to a policymaker’s or utility manager’s desk. This paper examines how research into the urban water and sanitation sectors can translate into sector change, and how research is viewed by practitioners and domestic stakeholders.

**Researchers and policymakers**

Researchers have dedicated significant time and effort to analysing why they and policymakers seem to communicate on different wavelengths. The ‘two communities’ thesis suggests that policymakers and academic researchers inhabit two different worlds, complete with different languages, motivations and metrics for measuring success (Caplan 1979). When there is no centre ground, the two sides naturally do not see the other as potential partners or resource sites and opportunities for collaboration are missed.

This view of the research-policy nexus has since been questioned and/or adapted. But its overarching argument that researchers cannot be passive if they want their work to be heard by policy has broadly contributed to sector self-analyses as a whole.

Acknowledging the constraints that prevented the direct take up of knowledge and evidence by policymakers, Weiss argued that a linear process between clearly defined knowledge producers and consumers is inaccurate: instead, research and ideas can follow multiple indirect routes to influencing policy. This could be through journals, the media, lobbying, conferences, and even casual conversation between interested parties. Sector change is therefore an aggregate effect of different formal and informal inputs (Weiss 1982). This means that research uptake is possible despite the barriers between academics and policymakers, but it may be difficult to quantify the source.

Some of the ‘indirect’ routes to research uptake that Weiss described have since been integrated into more holistic understandings of research-into-policy processes, identifying and defining these actors and/or initiatives as ‘research brokers and intermediaries’ that are involved in producing, analysing and communicating evidence-based research ‘*for a particular purpose to particular social groups*’ (Fisher & Vogel 2008), or ‘policy entrepreneurs’ who perform a variety of roles (Court & Maxwell 2005). Cooper (2010) states that these organisations must understand research methodology, have a broad knowledge of the relevant literature, some degree of experience with both implementation and theory, good interpersonal skills and an ability to present complex research to users (in Shucksmith 2016).

Other work has focused on how researchers can attract the interest of policymakers and stakeholders. Publications from organisations such as the Overseas Development Institute or the Institute of Development Studies are prime examples, demonstrating that there is ‘*no simple blueprint for what will work*’ and acknowledging that ‘*more than just research skills are required*’ for researchers’ work to take root in policy circles (Young 2008). Others explore the non-static nature of the relationship between academia and policy, categorising it as much more dynamic and non-linear (McGee & Brock 2001; Court & Maxwell 2005; Young 2008). In this scenario, there are opportunities for research to translate into policy influence, but it depends on the context and relevance of the research itself, how it is presented, and how that process is managed within the policy environments it seeks to influence (Boyce 2000; Court & Young 2006; Brigg et al 2015).

Different scholars will provide various recommendations and frameworks for approaches to research that can affect policy. These approaches examine the research process beyond the content of any research output, from design and implementation to presentation and/or publication – the audience that researchers wish to impact must be taken into account at each stage. According to Jones & Villar (2008), an effective communication and translation strategy distinguishes research that converts into policy change (see also Barnard et al 2007 and Harvey et al 2012). Researchers must not only engage with a wide range of stakeholders, but even be prepared to use ‘*multiple ‘languages’ at various stages of the research process*’ (Datta 2012; see also Benequista & Wheeler for a more general framework on how different researchers communicate their research).

### **Examples of research-utilisation programmes**

The ODI’s RAPID (Research and Policy in Development) framework emphasises moulding research to international development policy landscapes, creating ‘*organisational strategies of policy entrepreneurship that extend to longer term influence through creating human capital, building networks and engaging policy communities*’ (Stone 2009). Those that wish to see their research move into policy must design strategies that map major influences on the policy process, key external stakeholders and identify changes that stakeholders must make in order to enable the desired policy outcome (Young 2008; Mendizabal, Datta & Young 2011).

The Research-inspired Policy and Practice Learning in Ethiopia and the Nile Region (RiPPLE) programme produced action research with the explicit proviso that it ‘*should respond directly to the needs of sector practitioners, policy-makers, and ultimately service users...*’ (Tucker et al 2013). RiPPLE worked with sector stakeholders to identify research priorities and questions, encouraged the participation of end-users throughout the process, carried out research alongside implementers, explored underlying causes, and promoted a collaborative research process. RiPPLE’s ‘*primary goal was to understand the implications of findings for policy and practice*’ (ibid).

The Communicable Diseases Health Service Delivery programme co-ordinated by the University of Leeds prioritises the needs of stakeholders when deciding their research focus i.e. to ‘*start from the perspective of the decision-makers even before devising the questions*’ (COMDIS-HSD 2007). The research consortium’s overt aim is to produce health-related research with clear outcomes for policymakers, health practitioners

and communities, not just through directing their dissemination and communications to intended audiences, but by embedding their operational research within relevant ministries (health, mostly) and national programmes. This is achieved through constant engagement with high-level health stakeholders, international agencies who can widely promote any research findings and with networks of practitioners and policymakers (Walley et al 2012).

If research uptake depends on a myriad of factors that go beyond the substance of the research itself then this kind of multifaceted approach is required. DFID's recommendations for researchers seeking to ameliorate their work for policy spheres echo this: work must be relevant (from engagement with potential users and audiences), communicated effectively (beyond academia) and repackaged for different audiences. Researchers should build the capacity and commitment of users so they are willing and able to access, analyse and use any resulting evidence to build policy (DFID 2016).

Research uptake is therefore a holistic process, thereby affording researchers opportunities for their work to translate into policy or sector change. Features of the larger environment—such as the number of points of access through which research findings can flow, the openness of the system to the entry of new ideas, the democratic nature of decision making—will come together in different combinations to make systems more or less responsive to research uptake.

### **Research uptake in developing countries**

Interestingly, one examination of the barriers to and facilitators of evidence use by policymakers shows that, while there are differences between evidence uptake in developed and developing countries (developing countries' health care systems are less likely to be effective, for example), there was also a high level of consistency (Oliver et al 2014; Flitcroft et al 2011). Common blockages to research uptake were lack of research availability or relevant research, time constraints on policymakers, and lack of capacity in terms of research methodology amongst policymakers and others. Most of the research reviewed reported that access to and dissemination of research were the clearest facilitators to evidence uptake by policymakers. Collaboration and relationships between researchers and practitioners/policymakers were also important (see also Uneke; Garner; Flitcroft; and Sumner et al 2010, who notes that of the 13 studies they examine, the most positive factors for research uptake were very high rates of research output, recognition of an enabling political environment, and long-term relationships with policymakers).

However, the context of urban service provision and policymaking is permeated by so many caveats, and official and unofficial pressures that it can be difficult to clearly identify research that has definitely translated into policy in developing countries (and, indeed, developed countries): *'to say that research has exerted an influence in a particular case is only to say that the influence of research has counted as one of numerous influences'* (Carden 2009). An analysis of the Integrated Community Case Management of Childhood Illness programme, for example, demonstrated that while national stakeholders valued its data, *'evidence may not be enough to overcome resistance if the policy is viewed as incompatible with national goals'*.

DFID's examination of research and international development (DFID 2014) does provide examples of work (often impact evaluations) causing change in developing countries, such as J-PAL's evaluation of modes of distribution of anti-malarial bed-nets that led to governmental and INGO policy shifts on whether or not to charge for their distribution. Others have sought to examine research's influence (or lack of) on policy actors around the world. Ahmed (2012) describes research utilisation in two projects in Bangladesh (an oral therapy extension and a grants-based programme). Although it didn't translate into high-level policy change, the interaction between researchers and practitioners (from identifying research issues to customised dissemination) meant that the projects successfully transmitted timely findings to the wider policy environment.

Others examine the particular issues that development research as a whole has to contend with in developing countries. Hyder et al (2011) ask policymakers in a range of different countries whether they are well served by (health) research and researchers. What is their view of research's place in the policymaking process? The overwhelming response from policy actors from several countries is that while health research's policy potential is appreciated, institutional and informal barriers continue to block its transferral into policy (poor communication and dissemination, lack of technical capacity in policy processes and the influence of the wider political context). As the ODI have reported in several outputs on the topic, familiar barriers block the path of research in developing countries: namely, problems with unstable political

contexts, research supply, and external influences, although the emergence of civil society as a new voice in the policy arena could mitigate these (Young 2005).

Strengthening the capacity of policymakers within developing countries is frequently recommended, although the political environment and the incentives for policymakers to take up (or not take up) evidence from research will always be a considerable factor. Strengthening the capacity of other key actors in the policy sphere regarding research dissemination and/or knowledge of research methodologies (such as CSOs and research organisations in the global South) could also have a positive effect (Hamel & Schrecker 2011).

### **Effective WASH research**

A number of research programmes typify themselves as ‘action research’, working alongside decision makers who are in a position to suggest areas in which they require support and to potentially act upon any findings. Indeed, the dichotomy of ‘research’ and ‘policy’ is much more fluid than it used to be. Research can be generated from institutions beyond universities and think tanks, such as community organisations and transnational federations that circumvent the more traditional channels between research and policy/professional uptake, disseminated by the policy ‘entrepreneurs’ who have carved out a niche connecting knowledge producers to knowledge seekers and enabling knowledge co-production.

While this new focus on research applicability has raised some interesting points about knowledge production and reception, does this have any impact on sector change in complex areas such as urban and peri-urban water and sanitation provision in low income countries? And if so, where should researchers concentrate their efforts?

#### ***What can researchers do to promote their findings to policymakers and key sector stakeholders?***

Research uptake in developing countries requires long-term engagement and activities that go beyond research alone. This could be a point made of developed countries more generally as well (there is a great deal of work that provides researchers with guidelines on engaging with policymakers and stakeholders around the world e.g. Shucksmith 2016), but there are questions that researchers should ask while developing a communication strategy and a research strategy:

- Who will your audience be? Are there multiple bodies that could use your research and if so, will that strengthen or complicate your message? Will the needs of your audience (or audiences) shape the project? Could this distort findings to suit the interests of others?
- How will they respond to your work? Is there already a base who are engaged with the research process, or will those relationships have to be created and nurtured during the project?
- What are stakeholders’ other considerations? Will these negate or improve the project’s impact?
- What is their capacity for utilising research?
- What would their reasoning be for using any findings? Would that affect how they use any evidence (would findings just be used for political point-scoring, for example)?
- What is the dissemination strategy for different audiences?
- What is the current state of ongoing research in this field? Single pieces of research are valuable, but complementary projects from potential partners can strengthen messages and contribute to larger shifts in policy focus.

#### **Can research overcome structural barriers to sector change?**

Research could provide strong evidence on the benefits (or not) of certain actions, policies, technologies etc., but that does not mean that it will translate to uptake or sector change. Policymakers and stakeholders could have the incentive and/or political will to enact change (supported by a good research dissemination strategy), but this can be negated by a fundamental lack of capacity or larger structural issues. If this is the case, then research into these issues could be helpful, but at the very least research into the WASH sector should take those limitations into account when designing a project and presenting stakeholders with their recommendations.

The rather rigid definition of where knowledge and research is produced has shifted over the last few decades. This is a good thing -- research on improving urban service delivery produced within the countries that need it will highlight valuable opinions and foster ongoing dialogue between researchers and policymakers in those cities and regions. However, there are certainly still research-related capacity and implementation gaps, such as a lack of rigorous research availability or dissemination strategies that takes into account policymakers’ lack of time or inclination to discuss methodologies. The availability of research is not just about timing outputs to match with policy discussions, but also about whether publications are

widely available and shared amongst decision makers and other researchers (the ‘publish or perish’ phenomenon having an impact where access to journals is limited).

More generally, though, research could be a significant part of WASH sector change, provided that it is well designed, takes into account the potential opportunities and risks, builds on a network of key relationships with other stakeholders and decision makers, and presents relevant, timely evidence to as wider audience as possible.

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