

How to communicate research for policy influence

Toolkit N°1

First approach to research communication

This toolkit is part of a series addressing different aspects and tools on research communication for policy influence.

Good evidence based policy making is not simply about drawing conclusions from a group of statements or a set of data (Shaxson, 2011). Although economic and social development research is largely being conducted with the purpose of helping policymakers understand the challenges in development and hence produce better policies, these objectives have been partially achieved. Weak and poor communication is one of the reasons of this failure.

Research communication is at the heart of evidence based policy making, as it includes **understanding the obstacles preventing the uptake of research** by decision makers and **reflects on the most appropriate strategies, tools and channels** to reach key audiences that can promote policy changes.

“In development research, to get a new discovery into policy and practice is just as important as the discovery itself.”

Maureen O’Neil, President and CEO of International Development Research Centre

What is “Research Communications”?

Each organisation and individual is going to describe differently what research

communication is, depending on their vision, values and objectives. However, there are also some common organisation challenges in terms of communicating research more effectively: there are always several players with different roles, who do not necessarily have the same intentions and information needs. On the other hand, usually there are **multiple different interests involved in the policymaking process**, and various stakeholders interacting simultaneously; thus making communication both a crucial and complex challenge.

To inform policy processes, research needs to be communicated effectively to key target audiences (Von Grember et al, 2005). However, communicating research is not just about disseminating research findings as a *fait accompli* at the end of a project, but rather about **making evidence provided by research bring about change through influential development policies and programs.** This entails reflecting on the ways in which evidence can influence those who decide, as well as those who influence key players and those who can be affected by the decisions made. It is about “shifting” from a unilateral vision of communication (associated mainly with the dissemination of a proposal expressed in the organisation’s own language) towards

a **bilateral, multi-directional and interactive communication that involves decision-makers and other key actors in a permanent dialogue and exchange process, thus increasing the probabilities of influence.**

There are many definitions of research communications. In this document, we follow the definition provided by DFID (2011), that states research communication is about “**communicating research outputs to a range of intermediate and end users, through and iterative, interactive and multi-directional process involving** a wide range of stakeholders from planning, through implementation, monitoring and evaluation”. Additionally, the Institute of Development Studies defines it as “the ability to interpret or translate complex research findings into language, format and context that non experts can understand”.

Some recurrent challenges when communicating research to policy makers

We assume that think tanks, **policy research institutes and other civil society organisations produce knowledge in order to have an impact on policies in their countries and bring about change to their realities.** Communication helps you achieve these goals since it allows you to:

- **Move strategically in your political context and decision making process.** Communicating clear and precise policy messages, based on solid research, and a clear understanding of the political context, represents the core of a good evidence-based policy proposal and a powerful means to raise your organisation’s profile.
- **Better engage with policymakers.** Therefore, it is important that you communicate effectively your research outputs by engaging early on with policymakers

and end users through an interactive and multidirectional process.

- **Expand the audience interested in public policy.** A good research communications can expand the scope of people interested in evidence, and engage the public directly or indirectly affected by public policy.

In a talk on evidence-based policymaking at ODI in 2003, Vincent Cable said that policymakers are practically incapable of using research-based evidence because of the 5 Ss:¹

- Speed: they have to make decisions fast;
- Superficiality: they cover a wide brief;
- Spin: they have to stick to a decision, at least for a reasonable period of time;
- Secrecy: many policy discussions have to be held in secret; and
- Scientific ignorance: few policymakers are scientists, and don’t understand the scientific concept of testing a hypothesis.

The needs of researchers and policy makers differ as much as their professional routines. Therefore, it is key to **consider what policy makers need to know and how**, to successfully influence their decisions.

Last but not least, **researchers’ other interests and pressures besides communications are another important challenge:** most researchers are often more interested in researching than communicating (Mendizabal, 2012).

Thus, researchers should learn how to communicate effectively their research outputs by **engaging early on with policymakers and other stakeholders** through an interactive and multidirectional process.

1 Dr. Vincent Cable – MP for Twickenham, in The Political Context, Does Evidence Matter Meeting Series, ODI, May 2003.

Essential tips for Research Communication

- **Identify and describe your target audiences.** Who do you want to reach? Where is your audience? Tailor different messages for different audiences. Investigation findings need to be translated in a language your target audience can understand.
- Before communicating, **consider the context and think about opportunities and risks to communicate.** Who are the key actors involved in the decision making process? Engage early and directly with them.
- **Different audiences need different messages and different channels.** Mass communication is surely massive, but not always effective. Do not underestimate the effectiveness of traditional communication channels to reach key actors: face to face meetings, events and presentations.
- Design a communication plan that briefly identifies your target audiences, characterize them and list the main channels you will use to contact them. Furthermore, establish a communication guide to define who you need to communicate first with, according to the importance of the different audiences. Think about who should communicate first and why depending on the context.
- Identify at least two **successful communication formats** to communicate with different audiences and stick to them, thus making it easy for your target audience to recognize your think tank.

Source: CIPPEC based on IDRC (2011) and European Commission

2 For further information see Weyrauch, Vanesa and Echt, Leandro. (2012): Toolkit N° 8: How to communicate. Define the strategy and key messages, in *How to design a policy influence plan?*, Buenos Aires: CIPPEC. Available at www.vippal.cippec.org

Planning research communication

Often, a **proposal's efficacy is assessed by its communication value**: it is not about a mere transmission of an idea, or of a policy recommendation, but about ensuring that political and social actors understand the policy proposal, use the proposal as a benchmark for decision-making, and adopt and apply it in practice (IDRC, 2007). Therefore, only communicating at critical moments of the process is not enough: **communication actions must be planned**. A communication plan consists in defining a series of steps which help determine problems, aims, actions and necessary resources to better communicate research findings. In general, the plan visualizes the change we seek to address and helps us effectively organize time, knowledge and other needed resources. There are different ways of planning communication, but everyone should focus on and clearly identify: **objectives, audiences, key messages, strategies, communication tools and channels, schedule, budget and human resources, and monitoring and evaluation**².

About the series

To face the communication challenges described above and move strategically in the research communication field, CIPPEC with the support of GDNet, has produced a series of How-to-Guides focused on crucial strategies and tools aimed at helping researchers improve the way they communicate research. These toolkits share the most promising tools in terms of communication and those who are more frequently used by researchers and research organisations. This series includes:

- Toolkit 2. Policy briefs
- Toolkit 3. Engage with media
- Toolkit 4. Online tools
- Toolkit 5. Dynamic formats to communicate research

To continue exploring!

Recommendations from CIPPEC

- *Communicating Research. A beginner's guide for researchers in Vietnam*, Ajoy Datta and Arnaldo Pellini, Overseas Development Institute, 2011.
Available at: www.odi.org.uk
- *An opportunity looking for a home – Research Communications at IDRC*, Wendy Quarry and Ricardo Ramírez, International Development Research Centre, 2011.
Available at: www.idrc.ca
- *Interview to Laura Zommer*, CIPPEC, 2012.
Available at: www.onthinktanks.org
- *Developing research communication capacity: lessons from recent experiences*, Enrique Mendizabal, On think tanks, 2012.
Available at: www.onthinktanks.org
- *Guide to successful communications*, European Commission.
Available at: www.europa.eu

Next Toolkit:
Policy briefs

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How can we monitor and evaluate policy influence?

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