Impacting Policy Change

Researchers are increasingly tasked with demonstrating the impact of their research on practice and policy, and often want it to have real-world impact rather than residing only in academic journals and being discussed only among their peers. Yet, many researchers are not taught how to conduct research in ways that are more likely to have an impact on practice and policy, and best practices are still emerging (Oliver and Cairney 2019). This guide equips researchers with guiding questions and useful strategies to help their research impact policy.

While this guide specifically focuses on the impact of research on policy, many of these strategies are also applicable for researchers who want to impact practices or programs.

The research-to-policy gap describes how evidence produced by researchers often encounters one of the following scenarios: 1) It does not make it to the desks of policymakers; 2) it is not used by policymakers to inform policy; or 3) the period between evidence production and policy impact is too long (Martin, Mullan and Horton 2019). Explanations for why this gap exists and is so pernicious generally fall into two categories:

1. **Researchers and policymakers often have different professional backgrounds, training, and approaches to understanding and addressing societal issues**. However, in many cases, they can find common ground and the potential for collaboration. For example, many researchers are under increasing pressure to demonstrate impact on a broader scale, while policymakers face pressure to ground policy in the best available evidence (Sorian and Baugh 2002).

2. **Many researchers assume that policymaking follows a rational and linear process, but it is actually a complex process driven by political environment, budget constraints, and social and economic conditions** (Stone 2011). Research has an important role to play, but is often not designed and aligned with the goal of supporting policy choices. Thus, the goal of impact-oriented researchers should be to increase the use of evidence to inform decision-making and policymaking while recognizing other factors will also play a role (Hawkins and Parkhurst 2016).
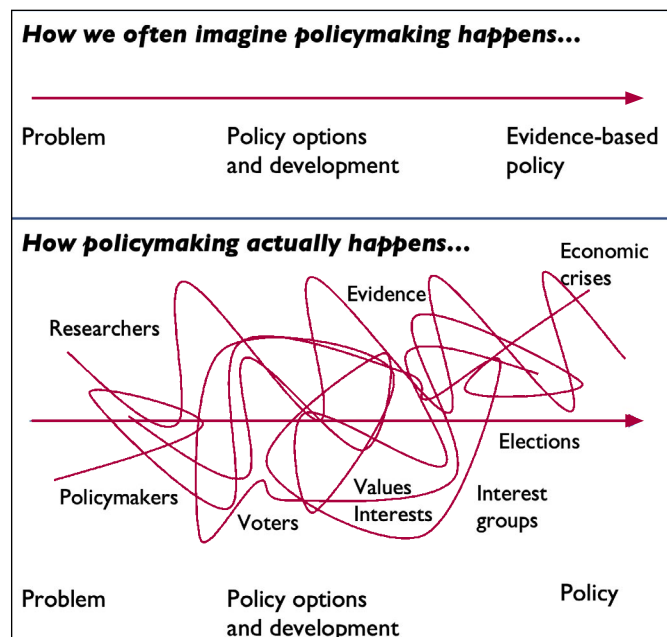
Strategies for researchers to impact policy: Plan, Do, Push, Learn

As a researcher, you can use four strategies to increase the likelihood that your research will have an impact on policy: (1) **Plan** by identifying policy stakeholders and the policy environment in your research area; (2) **Do** by designing and conducting research that is policy-relevant and inclusive; (3) **Push** by effectively disseminating and communicating your research; and (4) **Learn** by monitoring, evaluating, reflecting, and, if necessary, adapting your strategies for policy change.

Plan: Identify policymakers and policy environment

◆ *What is the core issue or set of issues that you want your research to help address or, in other words, what is the problem you want to help solve?*

◆ *Who are the key individuals and groups involved in creating, implementing, evaluating, or influencing policy in your issue area?*

◆ *How does the broader policy environment, including political, social, and economic factors, influence your issue area, and policies and policymaking in this area?*

Planning for policy impact involves identifying and understanding the policy stakeholders and environment related to your area of research. A **policy stakeholder** can be any individual or group that creates, implements, or influences policy, and includes elected officials and lawmakers, bureaucrats, and their advisers (or the **policymakers**) as well as lobby groups, media organizations, and researchers. Each of these different types of policy stakeholders will likely have their own interests and level of influence and decision-making authority as well as their engagement with research in the policymaking process. The **policy environment** encompasses the larger picture of how and why policymaking occurs in the way that it does. A helpful model for thinking about the policy environment is the policy triangle (Figure 1), which includes not only policy **actors** but also the **content** of specific policies, policy **processes**, and the broader political, social, and economic **contexts** that impact policy agendas and possibilities (Buse, Mays and Walt 2012). Often, only when these factors converge is sufficient momentum created for policy change (Kingdon 1984).
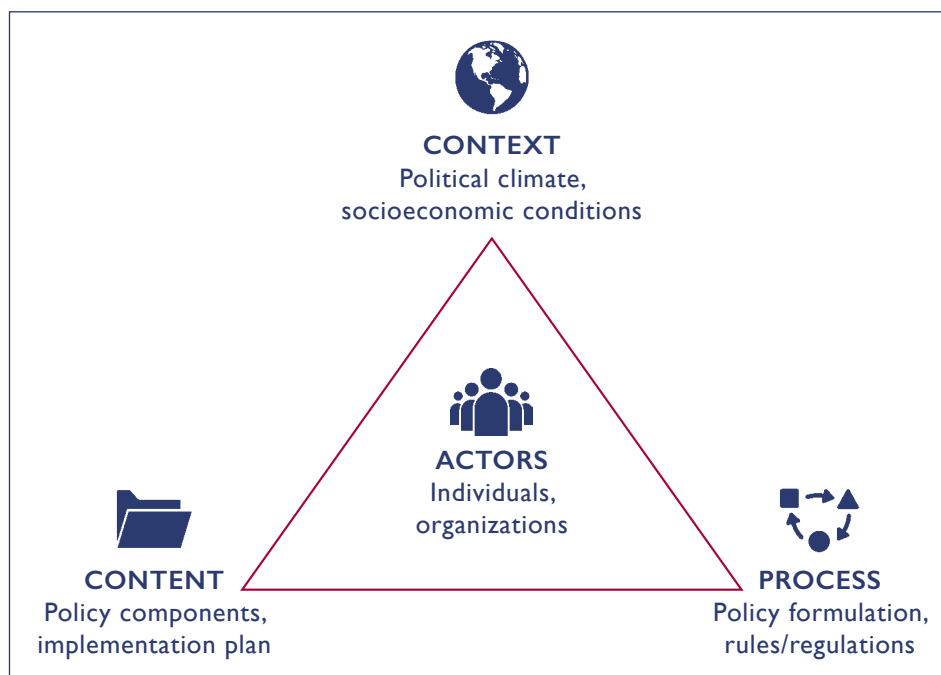

Figure 1: The health policy triangle. Adapted from Walt and Gilson 1994.

To identify policy stakeholders and the policy environment, consider these strategies:

- **Perform literature reviews, and internet and media searches** to gather preliminary information about your policy area.
- **Conduct stakeholder mapping** to identify key actors.
- **Set up informal interviews with key actors** to better understand the policy environment and opportunities for researchers to engage policy stakeholders.

Do: Design and implement relevant and inclusive research

◆ *What policy stakeholders will you engage in your research, how do you plan to engage them in the research process, what are the potential challenges, and how will you mitigate those challenges?*

◆ *What policy impact or policy change do you hope to achieve with your research?*

◆ *What stage(s) of the policy process do you aim to impact (agenda setting, policy development, implementation, or evaluation) and at what scale (local, national, or global)?*

Doing research that is more likely to have an impact on policy requires designing and implementing your research in ways that are **relevant and responsive** to a specific policy issue and policy environment, and **inclusive of various stakeholders** in the research process, including policymakers. The level and forms of engagement with policy stakeholders is on a spectrum (Figure 2). At one end, you may only engage policy stakeholders as consumers at the end of your research by, for example, sharing policy briefs based on your research findings. At the other end, policy stakeholders are deeply engaged in the research process, including participating in aspects of the research design, implementation, and interpretation of findings (Murray 2011).

Less engagement with policy stakeholders

More engagement with policy stakeholders

E.g., sharing research findings, policy briefs at the end of research

E.g., providing updates throughout research, hosting policy dialogues

E.g., coproduction of research at all stages: question, design, implementation, interpretation

Figure 2: Spectrum of engagement with policy stakeholders.

Co-production of research and partnership with policy stakeholders can increase the policy relevance of research as well as the likelihood policymakers will use it in the policy process. It is important for researchers to carefully plan to work with policy stakeholders in the research process, including clearly identifying partner roles and expectations and shared work plans throughout the design, implementation, and dissemination phases of research. It is also important to be clear about your **impact objective** – a statement of what sort of policy change you want to see from your research and how you intend to make this happen, including working with policy stakeholders and other research partners.

Remember, policy impact is not confined to informing new policies; it can also include influencing small or incremental changes to existing policies, changing policy dialogue and the voices that are included in policy conversations, shaping the range of policy options considered by policymakers, assessing the implementation and evaluation of policies, and creating new networks between researchers and policymakers (Hall 1993).

Push: Disseminate and communicate in appropriate ways

- ♦ *Who is your primary audience and what do they need to know? What are the key messages that you want to deliver?*
- ♦ *How will you incorporate dissemination and communication strategies throughout your research (and not just at the end)?*
- ♦ *What types of translation products are most appropriate for your research and your primary policy audience – i.e., how does your audience best receive information?*

Your dissemination and communication strategies will depend on your primary audience and likely how engaged policy stakeholders are in your research process. For example, if your research deeply engages policy stakeholders at all stages, dissemination and communication may be easier since stakeholders will be more familiar with the research and its findings, and feel ownership of it. You should plan for multiple dissemination and communication strategies that occur at various stages of the research project (i.e., not only after the research is completed) and use **multiple translational products**.

Translational products can take many forms (Figure 3) that should be tailored to your specific audience based on what you want them to take away from the research, and how best they receive information. Remember, researchers are not just **knowledge producers**. To be effective policy change agents, researchers also need to be **knowledge translators** who can translate research findings for non-specialist audiences, and **knowledge brokers** who can work alongside policy stakeholders and policymakers to incorporate research findings into policy debates and instruments (Shaxson 2016). In your communications with policy stakeholders, remember to use non-technical language, have clear and concise key messages that relay research findings *and* actionable recommendations, and be engaging. Many LASER PULSE resources can be used to enhance your dissemination and communication.

Policy-Relevant Translational Products
Written materials – e.g., policy briefs, white papers, toolkits and blogs
Digital tools – e.g., websites, data visualizations and digital networks
Events/meetings – e.g., policy dialogues, workshops and webinars
Multimedia – e.g., social media, podcasts and videos

Figure 3: Policy-Relevant Translational Products
(Adapted from Tilley, Ball and Cassidy 2018)

Learn: Monitor, evaluate, reflect, and adapt

♦ *What monitoring and evaluation strategies will you use to track progress toward your impact objective? What metrics and indicators will you develop and use?*

♦ *What strategies (e.g., workshops, interviews, surveys) will you use to ensure that you are reflecting and adapting your research to ensure maximum policy impact?*

♦ *What is your sustainability plan? How will you ensure that your research continues to make an impact on policy after the project is over?*

Learning is an essential part of partnerships and working with policy stakeholders, and includes strategies to **monitor** and **evaluate** all aspects of your research process and impact, reflect on what is working and what is not, and adapt, as needed, in collaboration with your research partners (Mayne et al. 2018). You should cocreate a monitoring and evaluation plan with your research partners to identify and track tangible metrics and indicators to measure progress toward your impact objective. There are many monitoring and evaluation frameworks, so choose one that works for you and your research partners. Some monitoring and evaluation models are specifically designed for research undertaken to inform and influence public policy (e.g., see Hovland 2007). At regular intervals during the research process, consider reviewing your progress with all your partners, with time and space for them to **reflect** on successes and challenges, and to identify ways that

the research and/or partnership should **adapt**, if needed, to better meet your impact objective. Finally, make a **sustainability plan** with your research partners to ensure that your research continues to have a policy impact when the project is over. While researchers may move on to new projects, it is important to identify actions that research partners or project champions can take to continue to engage in policy dialogue about your research findings. For additional information on impacting policy change, continue to visit the LASER PULSE Learning page. Many other resources below may be helpful as you plan, do, push, and learn to maximize the policy impact of your research.
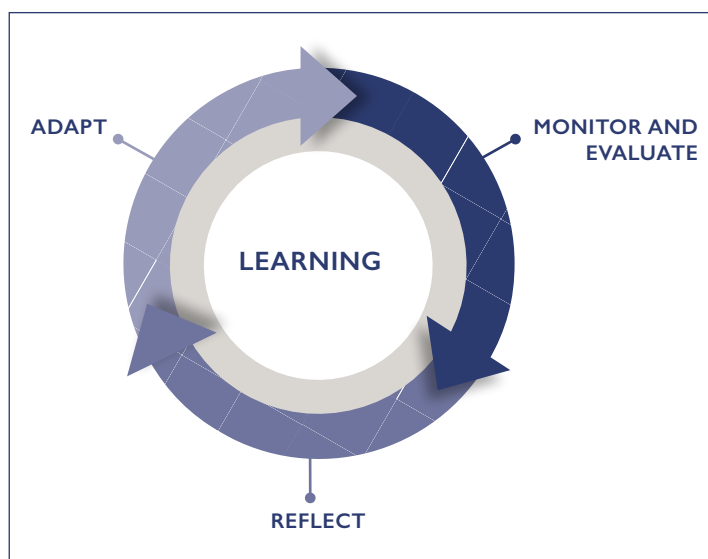

Figure 4: The Learning Cycle

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