*J*ournal of *R*ural and *C*ommunity *D*evelopment

From Policy to Research and Back Again

Author: Julio A. Berdegué, & M. Ignacia Fernández

From Policy to Research and Back Again[1]

Julio A. Berdegué
Rimisp-Latin American Center for Rural Development
Santiago, Chile
jberdegue@rimisp.org

M. Ignacia Fernández
Rimisp-Latin American Center for Rural Development
Santiago, Chile
ifernandez@rimisp.org

1.0 Problem Statement

From the perspective of the researcher, as simple as it sounds, in order for research to inform policy, we believe that the most limiting factor is the researcher's willingness to truly be part of that process. And, from the perspective of the policymaker, also as simple as it sounds, in order for policy to inform research, we believe that the most limiting factor is the widespread idea that research is the opposite of action, and not of lack of better understanding.[2]

Some social scientists chose to dedicate their lives to the perfectly legitimate and socially useful pursuit of academic work with the objective of educating students and advancing theory and our collective body of disciplinary knowledge. It is perhaps easier to take this road if you are a social scientist whose work squarely falls within the boundaries of an academic discipline. But when it comes to issues like rural development, or poverty reduction, or sustainable development, then there is very little space to avoid applied, policy-bound questions. There are no such things as rural development or poverty reduction theories; these are policy-bound fields that rely on the theories of economics, sociology, political science, anthropology, geography, and other academic disciplines. Rural development or territorial development are guided by operational or mid-range theories (Merton, 1949), but it is difficult to build an academic career on such foundations.

So it is no surprise that many if not most researchers working on rural or territorial development declare that their objective is to contribute to improving public policy and society in one way or another. Unfortunately, a common attitude of the researcher is that it is up to the policymakers to see the light and come forth to be influenced. This attitude is based on the understanding that influence on policy will be achieved through the quality of the research process and the force of the evidence that emerges from rigorous methods of systematic inquiry. Many researchers who fall in this tradition will often argue that it is their professional obligation to maintain their professional objectivity and avoid at all costs getting their boots dirty in the mud of policy processes, particularly when these deal with highly contested issues. Taking sides, arguing not only in favor, but also against, is often seen as something not quite up to the standards of the research community.

---

[1] Keynote Presentation to the Annual Rural Workshop 2011 "From Policy to Research and Back Again", Canadian Rural Revitalization Foundation, Federation of Canadian Municipalities, Ottawa, Canada, May 5, 2011.

[2] We paraphrase a statement by Julian Court (Sutcliffe & Court, 2005).

And it is true that we would probably not go very far if in order to influence policymaking, researchers had to stop being researchers, and as such abide by the basic principles, rules and norms of systematic inquiry. In addition, personal advancement in the research community is based on set of criteria and incentives that are less likely to be met if the researcher chooses to invest more time and energy in influencing policy. So it is a tricky question to really want to influence policy and policymaking, while at the same time remaining true to our role and position in society.

On the side of the policymakers there are also limitations. Only a few months ago, one of us visited the Director General of a leading rural development agency in a Latin American country to propose that it would be useful to do an analysis of the smallholder sector in his country; the last thorough analysis was many years old, and in that period huge changes had taken place. His confident answer was that he did not need to commission or even read any studies, since he was "a man of action focused on making decisions on the ground." Policymakers tend to think that they know more than they actually know, or, at any rate, that they know enough to do what they need to do. Perhaps that is one reason why the world is such a mess in so many ways.

Policymakers also face more objective conditions that limit their capacity to engage with researchers and with research-based evidence in the policy process. Sutcliffe and Court (2005, p. 9) cite British MP Vincent Cable's "five S's": speed, superficiality (each policymaker has to cover vast thematic fields and cannot possibly be an expert in each), spin, secrecy, and scientific ignorance (there is suspicion among the general public towards science and scientists, and this puts pressure on the politician to favor certain options even in the face of evidence to the contrary). Carden (2009) concludes that policymakers tend to be inclined to dismiss researchers as "naïve", and that in developing countries mistrust can grow if universities and other centers of research are perceived as political troublemakers. Carden also points out that in developing countries that rely heavily on foreign aid, there is a tendency for policymakers to turn to expatriate experts because they are considered more reliable and closer to the sources of funding.

The question is how to break from these constraints, in a way that does not require that researchers become politicians or politicians become philosophers. It is obvious that it can be done, as it is done daily by hundreds of policy makers and social scientists around the world. The problem itself has been the subject of good research, and leading politicians have contributed to creating more space for evidence-based policymaking. What is surprising is that there are still so many missed opportunities, even though this is a relatively well understood issue and a process that is practiced constantly.

This paper is organized as follows. Section 2 discusses the characteristics of policy processes, as this is the arena of research-policy interaction. Section 3 deals with the characteristics of issues like rural and territorial development as research problems and policy issues, and how they condition research-policy interactions. Section 4 reviews what can be done on the side of policymaking, to enhance research-policy interaction, and section 5 does the same but with respect to the research side of the equation.

2.0 The Policy Process

2.1 The Political-Institutional Environment for the Relationship Between Research and Public Policy

Opportunities for dialogue and interaction between research and public policy are molded by the political, economic and institutional context in which this interaction is developed (Stone, 2005; Uña, Lupica, & Strazza, 2010). We are referring to the macro context, which defines the rules of the democratic game and, as we will see, directly impacts decision-making processes.

We understand that the existence of a representative democratic system is a basic condition. Within that general framework, the system's political-institutional stability, level of conflictivity, opportunities for the effective exercise of civil rights, academic freedom, freedom of the press and political freedoms and a stable and competitive party system play important roles, as does the level of development of civil society (Stone, 2005; Sutcliffe et al., 2005).

In a mature democratic system, the rules of the game are clearer and there are formal and established mechanisms for political participation and incidence. There are spaces for public oversight and accountability, decision-making processes are more open and transparent, and political power is less concentrated. These are important aspects to consider when analyzing the interaction between research and policy in developing countries, as some recommendations and conclusions based on the experiences of northern countries take the existence of a political-institutional climate that is favorable for this type of relationship as a given.

> In terms of the supply of evidence, stable and open political systems allow evidence to be freely gathered, assessed, and communicated. In terms of demand, democracy implies a greater accountability of governments and therefore a greater incentive to improve policy and performance. Democratic contexts also imply the existence of more open entry-points into the policymaking process and there are fewer constraints on communication. (Sutcliffe et al., 2005; p. 11)

A basic issue in this regard is the existence of regular mechanisms for accountability and social control. Though this seems evident in light of the experience of strong democracies, it is not in developing nations, where each new space for the participation of civil society is an achievement that forms part of an incremental process that is still very incomplete and subject to the will of political officials. In Latin America, we still consider the provision of information and opening of spaces for consultation on public policy to be valid levels of participation; we are happy when our governments invite civil society to participate in decision-making processes and we study social oversight processes that manage to modify an already defined course of action as isolated cases of "best practices."
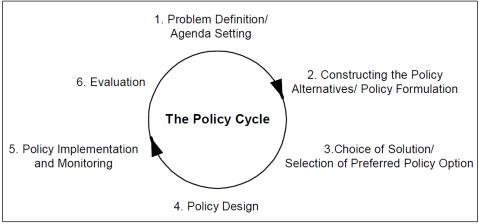
Many of the limitations of the general institutional and political environment are signs of the stages that countries have reached in their development. However, the researcher should never lose sight of the fact that these are often *institutional failures by design*, i.e., they are the way they are because it is convenient for someone in a position of power, not because the policymaker is unaware or does not understand or does not know of any better alternatives.

2.1 The Policy Process

Factors of context have a direct impact on the policy process. As Meny and Thoenig (2002, p. 17) note, "public policies are not produced in a vacuum; they don't only tell us about the socio-economic environment, but also the State."

The policy cycle contains four general stages (Sutcliffe et al., 2005; Meny & Thoenig, 1992; Uña et al., 2010; Young & Quinn, 2002) (See Figure 1). They are: i) the identification of the problem (agenda setting), ii) policy formulation (constructing the policy alternatives), iii) policy implementation, and iv) monitoring and evaluation.

Figure 1. The Policy Cycle

Source. Young and Quinn (2002).

The first step, which we will analyze briefly below, corresponds to the moment at which the social matter becomes a problem of public policy. The second corresponds to the design of alternative solutions to the problem, including the selection of one of these alternatives in the form of a public program, bill, investment, etc. The last two stages of the process correspond to the implementation of the proposed solution and its monitoring and evaluation, including the formulation of recommendations for improving the policy or similar policies. This brings the cycle to a close.

Identifying the various phases of the cycle is useful for analytical purposes. However, it does not reveal the complexity of real decision-making processes, in which the phases can overlap or simply not emerge. It is common for governments to formally establish mechanisms for making the policy process more transparent and robust. However, in practice, decisions continue to be made according to informal rules and mechanisms that have little or nothing to do with what is stated in public.

This is the case of the monitoring and evaluation phase, which is practically absent from a significant number of the public policies and programs that are implemented in Latin America. Whether by initiative of the governments themselves or international credit agencies, this trend has been partially reversed, and evaluation criteria are established from the design stage in an increasing number of programs. For example, in Chile, between 1997 (when the Government Project Evaluation Program was implemented) and 2011, 238 government programs from different ministries were evaluated (DIPRES, 2011). Argentina,

Brazil and Mexico also have institutionalized public program evaluation systems (see for example, Neirotti, nd). [3]

However, use of this evidence is limited, and the reports generated following many assessments rest in the drawers of mid-level officials' desks. Rimisp's frustrating experience in this area speaks to this. Between 2000 and 2010, Rimisp completed a dozen assessments of important public programs at a cost of nearly US $2 million to the governments that hired the Center. Only the assessment of Chile's Fund for the Promotion of Agriculture and Livestock Exports, which was completed at the request of the Ministries of Agriculture and Foreign Affairs, has been utilized for the purposes of redesigning and improving the program. In other cases, officials have even made decisions that the assessment expressly advised against. Our conclusion is that while these countries are legally obligated to evaluate policies and programs, progress is limited unless that obligation forms part of a system of accountability that prevents the agency from treating a report as a secret or private document or from pretending to have no obligation to state its position regarding the recommendations.

The same thing happens with the generalized adoption of policies designed to broaden spaces for consultation and citizen participation during the initial stages of the policy process. Tens of thousands of councils have been created in Latin America and linked to national, provincial or local entities. In Brazil alone, there were 27,000 fora of this type in the country's 5,507 municipalities (Schattan & Favareto, 2008); hundreds of millions of dollars have been spent on the preparation of participation plans for a wide range of public policies. The evidence suggest that this was a formal exercise in a large proportion of the cases; officials were required to listen to or at least pretend to listen to, but in practice this exercise had limited influence on the real policy process.

These examples of window dressing in different stages of the policy cycle confirm the strong influence of the institutional and political context on the practicalities of formulating, implementing or assessing policies. What this means is that it is quite easy for a researcher in developing countries to unwittingly become part of purely formal, ineffective research-policy interactions in which he or she thinks that the work will make a meaningful contribution when, in fact, the evidence and the advice will fall on barren soil.

The complexity of the *real policy cycle* has direct implications for our argument. First, in the best of cases, evidence is one of several factors that inform policy processes, even in strong democracies. *"At best, research is only one element in the fiercely complicated mix of factors and forces behind any significant governmental policy decision. Policies in most governments, most of the time, are the outcomes of all the bargains and compromises, beliefs and aspirations, and cross-purposes and double meanings of ordinary governmental decision making. This is why it is usually a mistake to adopt a model that imagines policymaking as a rational, orderly, or unitary and linear progression from problem to decision and solution."* (Carden, 2009. p. 19)

Second, policy decisions always respond to limited rationality. In practice, those who make decisions minimize the search for and analysis of alternatives. As Lindblom (1968) notes, the decision maker's role is to remember and explore the

---

[3] Felix Modrego, Personal communication.

limited number of choices of which he is aware or that seem acceptable to him or his closest advisors.

Third, Latin America has a very strong historical overlapping of politics and policy[4] that exceeds that of advanced nations and has a substantive effect on decision-making and public policy design. Oszlak (1980) describes this tension by comparing two models of rationality: the technical and the political. According to the first of these logics, organizations think of their action as a preconceived plan with which an ideal system of relationships is configured according to pre-set, planned guidelines. The political logic is dominated by conflicts, negotiations and transactions. As policies are implemented, unexpected results and costs emerge, which motivates actors to make adjustments using specific criteria.

> "The planners [and, we would add, researchers] regularly fail because even though they do not set it out in these terms or are not conscious of it, they look to influence the game–politics–that is played according to different rules. There is nothing further from politics than the premise of neutrality in regard to values, substantive rationality and certainty." (Osklak, 1980, p. 30. Our translation.)

Political and technical rationality are part of the policy process in every country. Yet in contrast to that which takes place in other regions, the limits between the two are not clear in Latin America. The spaces that have been generated for technical evidence and for political decisions are not clear. Two decision-makers faced with a single situation in a single country can utilize different logics. Even more complex is the fact that there can apparently be a greater space for technical logic, though in reality decisions continue to be made in informal and opaque processes far from the stated rules.

We will illustrate these complexities, paying close attention to the first phase of the policy cycle: the decision-making process. The literature notes that there are three key aspects of the decision-making process: i) key actors, their characteristics and the nature of the relationships between them; ii) the decision: when and where the idea is born, why it is born and the paths taken to place it on the public agenda and transform the idea into a decision; and iii) the style of the process.

The actors. The government and, more precisely, political authority is the actor par excellence of the decision-making process. However, Grindle and Thomas (1991) argue that public actors bear a greater weight in the formulation and decision-making process in developing countries than in industrialized ones that have active and organized civil society and have established clear procedures for civil society's participation.

The question is what space is open to the participation of other actors in the decision-making process. Experience shows that multilateral agencies are important actors in public policy decisions in Latin America. When one observes,

---

[4] Politics is a process by which groups of people make collective decisions. The term is generally applied to the art or science of running governmental or state affairs. It also refers to behavior within civil governments. It consists of social relations involving authority or power and refers to the regulation of public affairs within a political unit, and to the methods and tactics used to formulate and apply policy. A policy is typically described as a principle or rule to guide decisions and achieve rational outcome(s). Source: Wikipedia

for example, the proliferation of conditioned transfer programs in the region, the influence of the World Bank is readily apparent through credits to governments for financing cash transfer programs or technical orientation for the design of these programs based on the Social Risk Management approach developed by Holzman and Jurgensen (2000).

Researchers also are important stakeholders. In general, however, they do not participate directly in decision-making processes, but go through specialized agencies commonly known as think tanks. The main purpose of these bodies is "connecting researchers and decision-makers" (Stone, 2005)

Regardless of which actors have greater or less relative weight, the key is understanding that the policy decision-making process involves several parties. The political decision-maker serves as a spark for the development of new policies but does not have a stable leading role in the process. Though he makes decisions, he depends on concrete solutions whose detailed and technically constituted formulation is not his work. Third parties provide these solutions, develop options and ensure their operational legitimacy. Towards the end of the process, the measures adopted are not necessarily mandatory answers to the general requirements of society and its political representatives, but the product of the intermediary activities of experts and advisors.

Where and how a policy decision is born. A public policy decision does not emerge from a vacuum. There is "something" that positions an issue on the public agenda, someone who tries to make it a priority, someone who turns it into concrete solutions and someone who ensures the legitimate operation of these solutions. A policy, program or decision can come from an assessment of the social reality, a concern or political consensus with or without an understanding of said reality, the evaluation or reformulation of an existing policy or program, a demand that places a certain term on the public agenda and forces policy makers to study it, or a directive issued by the multilateral agencies that finance and support development processes in countries like those in our region.

Decision-making styles. Two parameters are generally used to define the style of the decision-making process: the level of agreement regarding the objectives and values linked to the problem, and the level of certainty regarding the means that should be used, knowledge of the facts and the efficiency of the solutions. Based on the combination of these two dimensions, Meny et al. (1992) defined four decision-making styles: programmed, negotiated, programmatic and chaotic (see Table 1).

Table 1. *Policymaking Styles*

		Level of agreement regarding objectives and values	
		Strong	Weak
Level of certainty regarding the means, facts and knowledge	Strong	**Programmed Process** Routines, automatisms, not occurrences Dependence on technical aspects Bureaucratization Planning	**Negotiated Process** Ideological debates Turning to experience and tradition Official controversies and hidden commitments
	Weak	**Programmatic Process** Turning to "the experts" Empiricism (the best possible), search for strategic variants	**Chaotic Process** Prevention Decentralization Turning to authority or the "lucky man"

Source. (Meny et al., 1992).

3.0 Development Issues and the Policy-Research Interaction

There are three characteristics of policy and research issues like rural development, poverty reduction, or territorial development, that also condition the likelihood and effectiveness of the research-policy relationship.

The first one has to do with how central (or, in contrast, how peripheral) is the policy issue to the power structures and power balances in society. Issues like macroeconomic policy, labor policy, tax policy, foreign relations, and national security and defense are examples of core policy issues. In the context of developing countries, the decision-making process about these core policies is highly restricted to a limited number of experts, all of whom look very much like each other. While opinions count in all policymaking, it is probably true that systematic evidence is of great importance in shaping policy changes in these core areas. The specialist that is invited to sit at the table in these deliberations, is likely to be heard with attention, otherwise he or she would not be there.

Rural development, we are sorry to say, is a peripheral issue for decision-makers even in developing countries that still have large rural populations and where agriculture is still a major component of the national economy. Participation in the policy process in this field is far easier, and as such it is possible for a variety of researchers and other experts to present their viewpoints and their evidence. However, these policies tend to be more opinion-based than evidence-based, more driven by politics than by policy considerations. The researcher's voice is one among very many, and in all likelihood the policy is not going to be decided on the merits of scientific evidence. So the real challenge is not one of access, but of being heard.

The argument can be illustrated with the case of three of the Presidential Advisory Commissions set up by Chilean President Michelle Bachelet (2006-2010). The first commission was the result of massive protests by high school students in the first months of her administration. The students took to the streets in the hundreds of thousands to demand better public education, and President Bachelet eventually agreed to appoint a commission to propose changes to the laws governing the

education system. The second commission on "Labor and Equity" was charged with proposing measures to improve labor markets and labor relations; it was formed in response to the debate started when the Catholic Church called for an "ethical wage" in the middle of the annual minimum-wage negotiations between the trade unions, the business sector, and the community. The third Commission dealt with reforming social security, and it emerged directly out of the electoral platform with which Bachelet ran for office.

The first commission, in our opinion, was dealing with a very important public issue, but one that did not threaten power relations, in particular in the domain of economics. The second commission on labor markets and labor relations, clearly dealt with a core policy concern as it related to a key aspect of the economic model. The third commission, on social security, also dealt with a core policy issue, one that would impact public finances in a fundamental way.

The Commission on Education had 81 members, of whom 32% were researchers and technical experts and 64% were representatives of different civil society constituencies and interest groups. The Commission on Labor and Equity had 48 members, of whom 75% were researchers and technical experts and only 29% represented civil society sectors. The Commission on Social Security was even more narrowly-based, with only 15 members, of whom 87% were researchers and technical experts and only 13% represented civil society interest groups (Aguilera, 2009). All of the major recommendations of the Social Security Commission have been implemented, and the law with the reform was approved unanimously by Congress. Several of the recommendations of the Commission on Labor have been implemented, including several major policy reforms. Very few of the recommendations of the Commission on Education have been implemented; in fact, the commissioners were unable to agree on a consensus report, and then most of the legal reforms sent to Congress were rejected or only partially approved.

Another aspect of the same question of core or peripheral policy issues is that of the political power of the policy counterpart. Rural policy in developing countries has traditionally been associated with the Ministry of Agriculture (in several countries it is called Agriculture and Rural Development). This worked fine many years ago when rural was indeed almost synonymous with agriculture, and when these ministries actually had real power. But neither of those conditions hold true anymore. Ministries of Agriculture care very little for the non-agricultural aspects of rural society. And, even if they did, ministries of agriculture today have very little political weight, having been deprived of many of their policy objectives and tools, and with many of the key variables being now the responsibility of other ministries or agencies. If you are a social agent interested in influencing agriculture or rural society, you are better off talking to the Ministries of Finance (about exchange rates or trade regimes), of Public Works (about roads, irrigation or electrification), or of Science and Technology (about innovation). Peripheral policy issues are deal with by peripheral policy agents.

The second issue has to do with the fact that rural development is essentially an inter-disciplinary issue, or, from the perspective of the policymaker, inter-sectorial. Rural development researchers are in fact proud of the inter-disciplinary of our chosen field of work. We should think twice: when it comes to policymaking, inter-disciplinarity and inter-sectoriality is a problem, not a blessing. Governments are organized in well-defined sectors, and they have great difficulties in dealing effectively with issues that cut across their organizational boundaries. If you want

to influence housing policy, you go to the Ministry of Housing and if you are interested in labor issues, it is also clear who you talk to. But if you want to influence rural development, or poverty reduction, or territorial development policies, you are in trouble: it is not clear who is clearly responsible, or whether the problem belongs to many or to no one in particular. Cross-boundary, inter-sectorial policy issues, often lie ignored in the interstices of line agencies, or, even worse, are given to inter-agency commissions to deal with. So, if you want to comply with a research funder's request to demonstrate impacts in three years, our friendly advice is to stay away from inter-sectorial policy issues! (even if you believe, like David Ellwood, Dean of Harvard's Kennedy School of Government, that "all the interesting problems cross boundaries").

A third issue is that of centralization or decentralization of policy making. In developed countries, rural development and territorial development policies have been largely decentralized. In developing countries, it is common to find that they remain highly centralized policy domains, or, worse, that they have been partly decentralized without much clarity about who owns what and who has the resources to deal with the issues. In the former case, you end up dealing with rigid bureaucracies that, as we have said, have little time for "rural" or "territorial" because it falls outside their sectorial mandate, and in the later you have a situation of overlapping and competing jurisdictions, that makes it easy for decision-makers to pass the buck to others if the issue of concern presents any difficulty or can be a source of political tensions.

The case of territorial development policies and programs in Chile exemplifies how difficult it can be for researchers to inform policy processes when the issue lacks a clear institutional home. Ropert (2009) identified over a dozen major territorial development policies and programs, implemented by at least 10 agencies, in no less than four ministries and 15 regional governments. In the field, at the level of one single municipality, this translated into an enormous offer of separate, often disconnected, and sometimes contradictory public sector initiatives.

It is under these particular conditions that the rural or territorial development researcher has to design an appropriate policy influencing strategy. Two questions ought to be answered as a starting point:

- Do I want to inform or influence the policymaking process, or a specific policy? Influencing the policymaking process requires a medium or long-term engagement, and a set of alliances or partnerships that is broader than that which you probably would need if you have a more specific policy objective in mind. Changing the ways in which policies are produced, probably has a greater likelihood of happening in circumstances where many actors perceive the need to introduce deeper changes in the political-institutional environment around a particular issue, perhaps because of a crisis, or because of a major change in the political orientation of the government. On the other hand, if you influence the decision-making process, you will have an impact on several policies, perhaps over a longer period of time.

- And of what of the three kinds is the policy objective of my research: agenda setting, myth busting, or greasing the wheels[5]? Agenda setting and "myth busting" are efforts that aim at changing the "why" and "what"

---

[5] We refer to the classification used by David Kaimowitz, personal communication.

questions, probably of a more strategic nature. Research aimed at "greasing the wheels" looks at operational questions: how, who, when. In a sense, "myth busting" research is relatively easier, as at least in the first stages the objective can be achieved by showing that a social phenomenon is not what is assumed to be, without the need to propose a detailed alternative. One good example is the work done in the 1990's to demonstrate that in Latin America the rural economy had diversified to such an extent that it was no longer possible to assume that "rural" was equal to "agricultural" (Reardon, Berdegué, & Escobar, 2001). Busting that myth later led to numerous policy changes of the "greasing the wheels kind", for example, to remove constraints to rural credit or designing technical assistance programs that could attend a greater variety of firms, not only farms and farmers. Such myth busting research also was very influential in opening the door to new "agenda setting" research and policy questions around the issue of what could be the new guiding principles of a rural strategy and policy in societies in which the rural was no longer agricultural.

Perhaps ideally, the most effective strategy would be one that starts by making evident why certain strategies and policies can no longer work ("myth busting"), hence creating the need for new approaches ("agenda setting"), followed by research that informs policy design and policy implementation ("greasing the wheels"), and ending with good evaluations of what worked or not, and why. This of course is difficult to achieve, not least of all because it would require: (a) a sustained commitment over relatively long periods of time, surely closer to 10 years than to the usual 3 or 4 of research funding cycles; (b) a network of partners in the research process that can provide a broad set of skills; and (c) systematic engagement over time with a diversity of agents in the policy process, including those who make strategic decisions, those who design policy solutions, those who prepare operational manuals for the approved policies, and those who implement policies.

4.0 What to Do? The Policy Side

This section presents an analysis of exogenous factors, that is, factors linked to the governments' motivation and willingness to utilize the results of the research in decision-making processes. Just as the researchers' willingness to cross over from academic and neutral research to get involved in policy processes is important, the space that governments open and the types of tools that they generate in order to be informed by the evidence is key (Uña et al., 2010).

The discussion regarding governments' will and openness is not very conclusive, even in the contexts of strong democracies. Some argue that the proliferation of think tanks can be explained as a response to the growing demand for evidence-based policy (Stone, 2005). Less optimistic voices note that with the exception of contexts in crisis, governments do not tend to spontaneously solicit innovative advice from the academic community because they do not want to address new topics or because they do not want to listen to uncomfortable solutions (Carden, 2009).

In what follows, we will not return to the issue of the factors of institutional political context or the characteristics of the policy cycle. We will instead discuss the set of instruments and tools that governments can place at the service of better and more fluid relationships between their work and research.

If we start from the supposition that the more rational and technical government work is, the greater the amount of space there is for evidence-based policy, it is clear that efforts to modernize government and rationalize the public function open up some interesting perspectives for the use of research-evidence in policy.

Oszlak (1980) identifies six indicators of government modernization: i) the creation or reactivation of public administration institutes, technical offices of the Presidency, ministerial advisory cabinets, etc.; ii) the creation of a hierarchy for planning, policy formulation or management oversight agencies that gives them the status of ministries, secretariats or national offices; iii) the creation of a hierarchy for professional technical staff through training courses, internal competitions, re-categorization and salary levels that firmly set them apart from staff members who have not been trained; iv) the modernization of services through the incorporation of highly sophisticated technologies, the construction of modern buildings and facilities and the provision of all necessary equipment; v) the rationalization of personnel and services through cut-backs and the closure or transfer of companies, goods and services; and vi) making public companies accessible to administrators who apply authentically business-oriented criteria to their management that are more similar to those seen in the private sector.

We argue that the installation of these tools limits the amount of space available for discretion and good will on the part of officials and makes the "rules of the policy influencing game" clearer.

To extend this analysis, we will examine four aspects linked to the rationalization of the public function that have a direct impact on the space available for research to impact development policies: the role of policy evaluation institutes, the creation of specialized agencies within ministries, the growing standardization of evaluation methods and the importance of experimental designs, and the creation of public agencies focused on the promotion and development of scientific activities.

4.1 Public Policy Evaluation Agencies

Developed countries have externalized public policy evaluation, creating specialized autonomous agencies for this purpose. This is the case of Spain's Evaluation and Quality Agency, New Zealand's Social Policy Evaluation and Research Committee and Switzerland's Public Policy Evaluation Commission. The only country in Latin America that has this type of agency is Mexico, which created the National Council for the Assessment of Social Development Policy in 2007.

The contribution that these institutions can make to the generation of evidence in order to inform the policy cycle is evident: they are autonomous, focus on assessment and are supported by external specialists. However, their implementation in Latin America is neither easy nor evident.

The discussion of the creation of a Public Policy Assessment Agency that took place in Chile during the administration of President Bachelet (2006-2010) is illustrative of this. Proposals were drafted by the government and the Consortium for Government Reform,[6] but no bills were created and nothing came of these

---

[6] This pluralist political-technical consortium sought to become a technical referent with political legitimacy comprised of think tanks of every political stripe. Its work resulted in a proposal for government reform and modernization. The consortium's Executive Secretary directed the Universidad Católica de Chile's Public Policy Program.

efforts. The resistance that came from within the government was most likely one of the main obstacles. The Agency would have taken away a significant level of oversight over policy decisions as the recommendations coming from evaluation processes would be reported to Congress for consideration during budget discussions. That function is currently handled by the Ministry of Finance's Budget Office, which is not autonomous.

Public Policy Evaluation Agencies: Two Experiences for Consideration	
Evaluation and Quality Agency, Spain	**National Council for the Evaluation of Social Development Policy (CONEVAL), Mexico**
This public legal entity is attached to the Ministry of Territorial Policy and Public Administration. It was created in July 2006 in accordance with a new public management model based on the European Union's principles of governance: responsibility, efficiency, participation, openness and coherency.	This decentralized public agency forms part of the Federal Public Administration. It was created in 2007 as an autonomous agency with the technical capacity to generate objective data on social policy and the measurement of poverty in Mexico in order to improve decision-making in this area.
Objectives: • To promote a culture of evaluation and quality of services and its practice in public management. • To develop and propose methodologies, accreditation and certification activities and evaluation and quality management information systems and indicators. • To evaluate and analyze public policies and programs. • To promote the improvement of the quality of public services with a commitment to the people. • To provide effective, efficient and quality services in a context in which there is a balance between responsible management and the autonomy and flexibility of the same.	The main roles of CONEVAL are as follows: • To regulate and coordinate the evaluation of National Social Development Policy and the policies, programs and actions executed by public offices; and • To establish the axes and criteria for the definition, identification and measurement of poverty, ensuring the transparency, objectivity and technical rigor of said effort.

4.2 Research Departments within Ministries

Over the past ten years, the region has begun to see the emergence of research and policy analysis departments within various ministries. The idea is to endow governments with the ability to conduct their own research or work more productively with the specialists who are hired for specific projects. This is a positive and auspicious sign of increased valorization of the use of evidence in decision-making. The challenge that we face now is identifying how these units relate to specialized external knowledge and the effective spaces for collaboration that emerge.

4.3 Experimental Evaluation Methods

There also is growing interest in ensuring that the results of public programs are evaluated in a rigorous manner. At times, this concern borders on an obsession for experimental or quasi-experimental methods.

There are strong critiques of the linearity with which these types of methods address complex interventions in changing environments like those linked to social problems and development interventions, the difficulty of generalization, the difficulty of interpreting the results (Victora, Habicht, & Bryce, 2004) and others. In the specific case of social experiments, there are strong ethical concerns. Some argue that researchers may implement experiments that cause damage, violate informed consent (including the random selection of groups of households and individuals), include "non-blind" treatments, intentionally fail to provide benefits to the needy (and vice versa), etc.

A good example is the experiment that provided incentives for obtaining fraudulent driver's licenses in India (Bertrand, Djankov, Hanna, & Mullainathan, 2007), which was published in one of the most important journals in the field of Economics. The authors randomly assigned incentives for bribing officials in order to obtain licenses and put disabled persons behind the wheels of vehicles. [7]

Our concern with this obsession is that it can cause non-experimental evidence to lose credibility. It is as if decision-making processes could only be influenced by arguments based on experiments and that any other type of evidence is merely based on lose opinions or ideas.

4.4 Institutes for the Development and Promotion of Scientific Research

Many Latin American nations set aside resources in order to promote scientific and technological development and have created specialized technical agencies. Several of them have similar names, such as Chile's National Commission for Scientific and Technological Research (Comisión Nacional de Investigación Científica y Tecnológica, CONICYT) and the National Councils for Science and Technology (Consejo Nacional de Ciencia y Tecnología, CONACYT) of Mexico, Paraguay and El Salvador.

The mere existence of these agencies is a positive sign regarding the valorization of research. However, when we explore the type of research that is funded, we see a strong tendency to privilege the hard sciences over the human and social sciences. We also have the impression that pure academic research is given priority over applied and public policy-related research.

5.0 What Can Researchers Do to Improve Their Influence on Policymaking Processes?

We trust that the reader by now will be convinced that the arena of policy-research engagement is a messy and complex one, and that this is an issue that probably cannot be boiled down to a few easy steps to get it right. For the researcher, engaging in policy processes is closer to being an art than a science. Having said that, experts in the subject have agreed on a number of recommendations and guidelines (Carden, 2009; Stone, 2005; Stone and Maxwell, 2004; Sutcliffe et al., 2005; Young & Mendizabal, 2009).

Fred Carden in his book *Knowledge to Policy* (2009) has summarized the extensive work of the International Development Research Center (IDRC) on the interaction

---

[7] Felix Modrego, Rimisp, internal working paper.

between development research and public policy. This work included 23 case studies in about 20 countries, and is one of the most comprehensive and systematic efforts in this area. Carden highlights "strategies that have enhanced the influence that research exerts on development policy and action" under five different scenarios or contexts (p. 26-32):

1. Clear government demand. In this ideal scenario, the researcher has little to do but carry on with his or her work and respond to the demand. Carden stresses that those researchers that find themselves in this situation, tend to be those who have made the investment to build trust among policymakers.

2. Government interested in research, but leadership absent. The key strategies are communicating with policymakers and strengthening the structures needed to implement the recommendations.

3. Government interested in research, but with a capacity shortfall. The key strategies recommended by Carden are to enhance governmental research capacity, and place the issues in the radar screen of the policy agenda.

4. A new or emerging issue activates research, but leaves policymakers uninterested. The key strategies to be pursued are three: consolidate a strong research agenda by producing "advice worth heeding"; implement an advocacy plan to bring the research to decision makers; and energize popular interest in the issue and in the policies being proposed.

5. Government treats research with disinterest, or hostility. The advice of Carden is to recognize the low probability of success in influencing the policy process and to plan long term, hoping that political conditions will eventually change.

In addition to these context-sensitive strategies, Carden (2009) also proposes three critical operational recommendations for producing research that can have an effect on policy:

1. Establishing intent to influence. What Carden emphasizes, is that "intent is not merely a state of mind… intent is method… intent informs the early research questions… helps decide the pace and conduct of [the research]… it frames the content and vocabulary chosen for reporting results... imparts purpose to the work of cultivating lasting relationships between researchers and policymakers" (p. 35).

2. Creating networks for research and policy. What we would like to highlight in relation to this recommendation, are two points. First, in our experience policy-influential networks are those that have a strong emphasis on the "work" part of the concept, that is, that are more than fora where like-minded people meet to share ideas, methods and research results: these networks are instruments for actual collaborative and distributed work. Second, diverse networks, that is, those whose members or participants come from different backgrounds, and at a minimum include people with real and substantive policymaking experience, in addition to researchers, will be more effective than more homogeneous collectives where everyone more or less looks alike and has a similar history and background.

3. Communicating with policy makers and the public. "Influence demands communication. And communication is best understood as a long-term process of building trust and confidence between researchers and policy-makers, punctuated by just-in-time deliveries of information or advice that helps decision makers decide" (p. 37).

Young et al. (2009) summarize several years of work of the RAPID program at the Overseas Development Institute in "six lessons that are essential to any researcher or organization wishing to generate evidence-based policy change" (p. 1):

1. Policy processes are complex and rarely linear or logical.

2. Many policy processes are only weakly informed by research-based evidence.

3. Research-based evidence can contribute to policies that have a dramatic impact on lives.

4. Policy entrepreneurs need a holistic understanding of the context in which they are working.

5. Policy entrepreneurs need additional skills to influence policies.

6. Policy entrepreneurs need clear intent.

Young et al. (2009) also outline an eight-step approach, called ROMA (RAPID Outcome Mapping Approach) "to maximize the impact of research on policy" (p. 3). Figure 2 depicts the ROMA approach. The eight steps are:

1. Define a clear, overarching policy objective

2. Map the policy context

3. Identify the key influential stakeholders

4. Develop a theory of change

5. Develop a strategy (and implement it)

6. Ensure the engagement team has the competencies necessary to operationalize the strategy (and develop or acquire them as necessary)

7. Establish an action plan (and implement it)

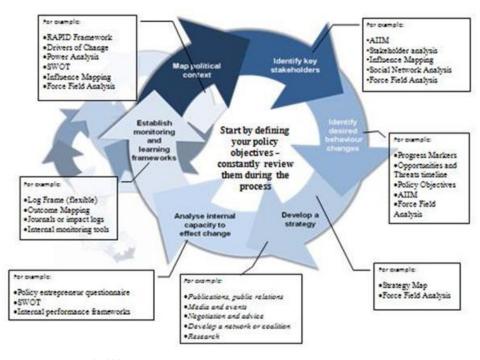8. Develop a monitoring and learning system (and implement it)

Figure 2. RAPID Outcome Mapping Approach

Source. Young et al., 2009

Our own approach at Rimisp, never explicitly formulated but developed over more than 25 years of practice, is based on the organization being, what Bebbington (2006, p. 49) called, "a social capital dense institution", which is capable of combining strong and weak ties (Granovetter, 1973) to do applied research and exert influence. Bebbington goes on to state that "Rimisp implements many of its projects through networks (as discussed above) but as an organization it works through its social capital, understood as a composite of non-formal ties imbued with a measure of trust and mutual accountability" (p. 51). The Rimisp informal network of partners involves about 100 organizations with whom we implement collaborative projects; however, not all partners will be involved in all projects. Figure 3 shows the network of partners (i.e., directly responsible for delivering program results) and collaborators (i.e., organizations working with one or more of the program partners) of the Rimisp-coordinated Rural Development Dynamics Program.
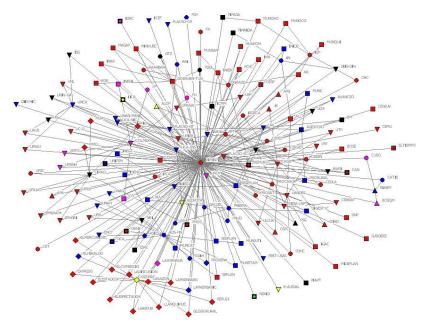
Figure 3. Partners and collaborators of the Rural Territorial Dynamics program

Note: Shapes and colors denote different types of organizations

The Rimisp networks will usually involve at least seven types of partners: development NGOs, independent non-for-profit research centers, universities, agencies of national governments, rural organizations, and multilateral international agencies[8]. In addition, six less frequent types of partners together contribute around 10% of the participants in these networks.

There are at least two important positive outcomes of this organizational form that are pertinent to our discussion of research-policy interactions:

1. Timely and relevant research issues and questions. Each partner organization in effect acts as a 'sensor' in its own country and domain of work, and by involving different perspectives in prioritizing and defining the issues, you improve the chance that they are relevant and important to a wide group of sectors in society, across different countries;

2. Proximity to, if not actual participation of decision makers in the whole process beginning at the early design stage of project proposals. With such a diverse network of partners, it normally does not take too much effort to find a way to gain systematic access to and dialogue with important decision makers in one or more countries or influential organizations.

What Rimisp has never done formally or explicitly, are such things as formulating theories of change or developing advocacy or policy influencing strategies or action plans. Perhaps if the decision-makers are close to, or directly involved in a given project, those formal practices are less important. In effect, this means that Rimisp's model is *to pro-actively build clear decision-maker demand and engagement*, that is, to help create the first type of Carden's (2009) types of contexts.

---

[8] Social movements, private sector associations and sub-national governments, are notoriously under-represented, and Rimisp is making an effort to correct this imbalance.

There are two shortfalls to this approach: first, it works best when your primary interest is to change the policy agenda rather than improve the specific policy options or their implementation, within an already defined agenda. Second, the approach requires certain opportunism: you invest in changing the agenda when you detect that there is political space to have a reasonable degree of success, so you think twice before getting involved in situations such as those described in Carden's fourth context ("a new or emerging issue activates research, but leaves policymakers uninterested"), and definitely try to stay away from contexts where the decision-maker has absolutely no interest. This means that you work with, or in proximity to, reformist forces within the decision-making structures, and this probably excludes the possibility of developing a radical agenda that requires direct and persistent confrontation with those that have the capacity to make policy decisions.

However, it can be very rewarding to do policy-oriented research in unfavorable policy contexts (such as Carden's fourth one). Two experiences of Rimisp come to mind. The first one started in 1998-1999, and was our collaboration with Prof. T. Reardon of Michigan State University to bring "the supermarket revolution" to the attention of policy-makers in Latin America, Washington DC and London. The second one is our current work on rural territorial development, in collaboration with numerous partners in Latin America and elsewhere.

The first issue was kept out of the policy radar screen because of the force of a myth: in the developing world food markets were composed of traditional, local and wholesale markets, and export markets. When our research busted that myth, the supermarket revolution rapidly became a 'best-seller' in international development circles and is now informing tens of millions of dollars worth of development policies and projects.

The second issue faces a more difficult challenge: territorial development is fundamentally an "inter-sectorial" policy issue, and hence there is no one single radar screen to try to place it on. There is hardly anyone in policymaking positions that does not recognize the advantages of the territorial approach to rural development; the "lack of interest" that Carden (2009) speaks of, is because policymakers have difficulties seeing how it can be implemented by highly centralized and compartmentalized public agencies. Thus, creating interest is not so much about producing evidence about the benefits of place-based policies, but about finding ways to circumvent the institutional constraints to implementation.

A second important element in our approach is to build and nurture credibility. The issue to be emphasized is that credibility is in the eye of the beholder, and as far as policy influence is concerned, the beholder is the decision maker. The research community has guidelines, rules and practices, to define the quality, accuracy, and reliability of the research process and results. The good news is that policymakers tend to accept that evidence provided by researchers is more reliable and, therefore, more credible, than that which is provided by other groups of society. The bad news is that to many policymakers, reliable, accurate and credible results are those that emerge from quantitative methods that make use of data collected from representative samples and analyzed through statistical methods. Case studies based on qualitative research results, are often looked at with suspicion. Nowadays this is strongly favoring the randomized research approaches to policy analysis and policy evaluation, prominently championed by the MIT's Abdul Lateed Jameel Poverty Action Lab (Duflo, Glennerster, & Kremer, 2006); international developing agencies and governments are rushing to join the bandwagon of this

highly sophisticated and amazingly reductionist approach to policy analysis. Another important aspect of the issue of credibility is that policymakers will often not have the time, the inclination, or the skills to be able to actually conduct a technical review of the research process and results that the researcher presents to them; instead, they will tend to use the reputation of the organization where the researcher works, as a proxy for reliability of the research.

Another component is the communication strategy. To be frank, Rimisp managed to work for 25 years without an explicit communications strategy or a communications department. As we said before, the approach to bring policy recommendations to the table of the decision maker, has been to rely on person-to-person communication, capitalizing on the scope and reach of the extensive network of partners. In the past three years, however, we have started to close this gap, because it is clear that often it is not possible to rely on direct access to the relevant policymaker, or because such access is insufficient to trigger the policy change we are interested in.

Timely and relevant research questions relate to: important policy issues; good, active, working partnerships; credibility; and communications. That is our formula. It is implemented through developing an organization over time that has and nurtures those assets, rather than through project-bound, *ad hoc* policy-influencing strategies.

And this brings us to our final and perhaps most important point. We strongly believe that–aside from the giants of the social sciences–individual researchers, through time-bound projects, will have strong limitations to engage efficiently or effectively in policy processes. The competencies and skills necessary to do this kind of work, and the processes required to engage with policymakers systematically, are too time-consuming and too expensive to be acquired and implemented by an individual or a typical applied research project. This is why societies have come up with *think tanks* and other similar institutes, as specialized organizations that can bridge research and policymaking. Thinks tanks include not only independent non-profit institutes, but also policy research centers in universities, government-sponsored research institutes, business-affiliated or sponsored centers, or think tanks that reflect the views of political parties, or trade unions (Stone, 2005). Such organizations can direct the energy and make the investments necessary over time to acquire and develop the conditions to bridge research and policymaking. But what makes an effective think tank is another story.

6.0 References

Aguilera, I., C. (2009). "Las Comisiones Asesoras Presidenciales del Gobierno de Michelle Bachelet". Documentos de Trabajo Programas de Gobernabilidad. FLACSO, Santiago de Chile.

Bebbington, A. (2006). Rimisp – Latin American Center for Rural Development: An institutional evaluation. Manuscript. Available at http://www.rimisp.org/FCKeditor/UserFiles/File/documentos/docs/pdf/0239-006406-rimispevaluation2006en.pdf

Bertrand, M., Djankov, S., Hanna, R., & Mullainathan, S. (2007). Obtaining a Driver's License in India: An Experimental Approach to Studying Corruption. *Quarterly Journal of Economics*, *122*(4), 1639-1676.

Carden, F. (2009). *Knowledge to Policy. Making the most of development research*. International Development Research Centre.

DIPRES. (2011). Government Program Evaluation. Programs Evaluated by the Ministry. Spanish-language document. Available at http://www.dipres.cl/572/articles-21965_doc_pdf.pdf.

Duflo, E., Glennerster, R., & Kremer, M. (2006). *Using Randomization in Development Economics Research: A Toolkit*. Discussion Paper Series No. 6059. Centre for Economic Policy Research. London.

Granovetter, M. S. (1973). The strength of weak ties. *American Journal of Sociology*, *78*(6), 1360-1380.

Grindle, M. S., & Thomas, J. W. (1991). *Public Choices and Policy Changes*. John Hopkins University Press, Baltimore.

Holzmann, R., & Jorgensen, S. (2000). *Manejo Social del Riesgo: Un nuevo marco conceptual para la Protección Social y más allá*. Washington DC: Banco Mundial

Lindblom, C. (1968). *The Policy Making Process*. New Jersey: Prentice Hall Inc.

Meny, I., & Thoenig, J. C. (1992). *Las políticas públicas*. Barcelona: Editorial Ariel Ciencia Política.

Merton, R. K. (1949). *Social theory and social structure*. New York: Free Press,

Neirotti, nd. "La función de evaluación de programas sociales en Chile, Brasil y Argentina."

Oszlak, O. (1980). Políticas públicas y regimenes políticos: reflexiones a partir de algunas experiencias latinoamericanas. Estudios CEDES, Vol. 3., N° 2, Buenos Aires.

Reardon, T., Berdegué, J. A., & Escobar, G. (Eds.). (2001). Rural Nonfarm Employment and Incomes in Latin America. *Special Issue of World Development*, *29*(3), 395-573.

Ropert, M. A. (2009). Evolución de la Política de Desarrollo Económico Territorial en Chile: Principales Iniciativas. Documento de Trabajo N° 56 Programa Dinámicas Territoriales Rurales Rimisp – Centro Latinoamericano para el Desarrollo Rural.

Schattan, V., & Favareto, A. (2008). Questioning the relationship between participation and development. *World Development*, *36*(12), 2937-2952

Stone, D. (2005, August). Think Tanks and Policy Advise in Countries in Transition. Paper prepared for the Asian Development Bank Institute Symposium: "How to Strengthen Policy-Oriented Research and Training in Viet-Nam". Hanoi.

Stone, D., & Maxwell, S. (Eds.). (2004). *Global Knowledge Networks and International Development: Bridges Across Boundaries*. Routledge.

Stutcliffe, S., & Court, J. (2005, November). Evidence-Based Policy Making: What is it How does it work? What relevance for developing countries? Overseas Development Institute.

Uña, G., Lupica, C., & Strazza, L. (2010, December). Think Tanks, Decisores Gubernamentales y Actores Políticos: Factores criticos para fortalecer el vinculo entre el conocimiento y la spolíticas publicas en Argentina. Documento de Trabajo Nº2, 12/2010. Fundacion Siena and Fundacion Konrad Adenauer. Buenos Aires.

Victora, C. G., Habicht, J-P., & Bryce J. (2004). Evidence-Based Public Health: Moving Beyond Randomized Trials. *American Journal of Public Health*, *94*(3), 400-405.

Young, E., & Quinn, L. (2002). *Writing Effective Public Policy Papers: A Guide To Policy Advisers in Central and Eastern Europe*, Budapest: LGI.

Young, J., & Mendizabal, E. (2009, September). Helping researchers become policy entrepreneurs. How to develop engagement strategies for evidence-based policy-making. Overseas Development Institute; Briefing papers.