
COMMUNICATING RESEARCH FOR IMPACT AND CHANGE: A GUIDE TO ENGAGING WITH POLICY MAKERS

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Introduction

The uptake of evidence based research into the policymaking process is complex. It requires innovative knowledge translation initiatives between researchers, policymakers and other influential stakeholders such as NGOs, industry and the media. Academics who wish to communicate their research to inform policymaking and achieve impact can face significant challenges. A number of key structural and professional challenges of information generation, sharing and usage persist between researchers and policymakers which can sometimes prevent effective communication and uptake of research evidence for policymaking.

This guidance aims to outline and tackle some of the key challenges by exploring the following four broad areas:

1. Why should we engage with policymakers?
2. Who should we engage with?
3. How do we communicate?
4. When do we communicate?

Why should we engage with policymakers?

Academics share many common concerns around engaging with policymakers. To help alleviate these anxieties, it can be helpful to start with the basic question: why is it important and what are the potential benefits?

Why should I try to engage with policymakers?

Academics are able to contribute expertise and evidence, and provide new ways to frame policy debates. Their contributions can lead to changes in legislation, regulation or affect funding to specific services. This kind of policy influence can make a real difference to peoples' lives.

It is important that policymakers don't just engage with the 'usual suspects', but hear diverse views that reflect different genders, religions, ethnic groups and alternative perspectives.

Will my research have to adapt to answer policymakers' questions?

Many researchers feel quite strongly that research should not be limited to or directed by the demands of society.

However, by taking this position, research projects may struggle to steer policy change, because they do not take into account the complex realities of a country or a sector. They may fail to involve key stakeholders in the research process.

Yet, better and more active use of research and evidence in development policy and practice can help save lives, reduce poverty and improve quality of life.

A critical issue affecting uptake of research into policy is whether the research provides a solution to a problem. Policy influence is strongest when the research is topically relevant and has operational usefulness.

I don't have time to start engaging with policymakers

Policy engagement is certainly time-consuming, and the rewards are sometimes only felt much later – perhaps only after many years of implementation. Academics have busy schedules for research, teaching and administration and they may not be given time out for policy-related work.

Taking time away from focusing on writing peer-reviewed journal papers and teaching can be tricky, yet this type of exchange is crucial to improving connections and building networks.

Team talk

Try these strategies to build support for your policy engagement activities:



Speak to your Head of Department and win their trust



Work with your Public Affairs/ Communications team to share the urgency and benefits of your work with others



Engage with your institution's administration so they understand the importance

When to engage will be covered in more detail in **Section Four**

I don't understand the complexities of policymaking and government

The complex landscape of government can be different in every national setting, ranging from very formal routes such as civil servants and parliamentarians to informal meetings with local groups. Methods and formats for engagement activity can vary widely depending on the your subject area.

Who to engage will be covered in more detail in **Section Two**

What will the rewards be if I work with policymakers?

Will I have to change what and how I write for different audiences?

Will my research have to adapt to fit what policymakers want?

I don't know anyone in government, how do I reach out?

I don't understand the complexities of policymaking and government

I don't have time to start engaging with policymakers

Academics voice many concerns that may limit or even prohibit, them from engaging with policymakers.

Will I have to change what I say for different audiences?

Researchers need to find ways to communicate their research so it is easily understood and digestible for policymakers. A policy brief or report that is aimed specifically at policymakers is a good idea. However, even a short summary of research findings can be useful – although it is important to avoid using technical jargon.

How to engage will be covered in more detail in **Section Three**

What are the rewards?

There can be multiple rewards to working with policymakers!

- Your work helps to inform, design, test and scrutinise government policy.
- You have a chance to engage in knowledge exchange and bring key stakeholder perspectives into your work.
- You contribute to better, evidence-based policy design
- You establish new connections.
- You gain valuable insights into government processes.
- Your work is read by a larger audience.
- Your research may lead to greater impact through policy.

Summary

It can be daunting to try and explore the complex world of policymaking whilst managing existing work commitments. You will have to juggle many issues and conflicts around time management, networks of influence and different ways to communicate; it may seem too challenging or frustrating. However, don't forget the benefits and rewards! Most significantly, you may find your research makes an impact on people's lives.

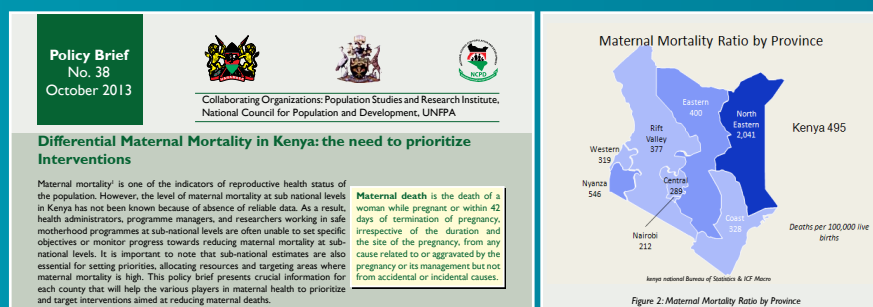
Case Study 1:

The population studies and research institute University of Nairobi, Kenya

University of Nairobi Demonstrator Research Project

Rationale:

- Lack of a comprehensive set of indicators for population and development programmes in Kenya
- To mainstream population dynamics, reproductive health and gender issues into National Development Strategies
- Achievement of MDGs/SDGs and Kenya Vision 2030
- Data for developing and implementing policy interventions



The project informed The First Lady's 'Beyond Zero' initiative to reduce maternal and infant mortality in Kenya.



Partners

Lead Partner and Advocacy:

- Government of Kenya
- National Council for Population & Development (NCPD)

Leading the PSA Process:

- University of Nairobi
- Population Studies & Research Institute (PSRI)

Technical & Financial Support:

- United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA)
- Kenya Country Office

Other Partners:

- Ministry of Devolution and Planning; NACOSTI; KIPRA; NADD; Kenya Red Cross; FIDA; UNDP; UN-HABITAT; UNICEF; UNEP

Beneficiary

The Government and People's of Kenya

Output and Impact

- 7 key Policy Briefs on Fertility
- Reproductive health
- Youth
- Maternal mortality
- Urbanisation

Who should we engage with?

It can often be a challenge to establish initial connections with policymakers, especially for those who are at early stages in their career. It is important to understand the full range of individuals and groups involved in the policymaking process – who are the key players and who do they talk to?

This section will help you identify the key influencers and implementers who you will need to identify and approach. It considers how you can engage internally (i.e. within your institution) and with external stakeholders.

Engaging internally – know your environment

How do I engage?

Utilise informal networks by attending events focused on issues relating to your research to make connections

Who do I talk to?

Identify key colleagues / influencers to:
Share their experience
Make introductions
Provide mentorship

What can my institution do?

Identify key departments i.e. Public Affairs who can provide support and invite you to key seminars / events with policymakers

Engaging externally – who to engage with?

Policymaking has to take into account many voices and interests. So rather than going straight to government, you may find it is easier work more indirectly. There are many organisations who work closely with officials responsible for designing policy; you can also lend your expertise and research insights to these intermediary organisations.

The illustration below highlights key considerations on who you might engage with and how you can make these stakeholders aware of and interested in your research.

How do I engage with government?

- Identify the department leading research in your area, are there contact details on their websites?
- Who is the Chief Scientific Advisor (or equivalent) who advises civil servants? Can they connect you?
- Check for ongoing government consultations relating to your area of expertise to submit your evidence and to build a relationship.
- Investigate recent debates on your research area to identify parliamentarians interested in your issues and who are part of policy-specific groups.
- Which inquiries are currently being held by parliamentary committees as they will often accept both written and oral evidence from external experts to inform their work, presenting an opportunity to draw attention to your research and also potentially influence government policy if the committee's recommendations are accepted.

How do I engage with influencers and implementers?

- Identify influencers to collaborate with by writing reports or hosting joint events to provide access to their networks and help promote your own research. Suggested organisations include:
 - » Think Tanks
 - » Media
 - » Civil Society
 - » Charities and non-governmental groups (NGOs)
- Work with those who enact policy at the point of delivery – this will give you an understanding of how policies are interpreted and impact on the community. For example:
 - » Charities
 - » Schools
 - » Businesses
 - » Those working in local government

Summary

Engaging with policymakers and knowing who to approach can be complex. It is important to know your environment and seek support from peers/influencers and your institution. By identifying key players from a government and non-governmental perspective, you will strengthen your approach for further engagement and foster wider impact from your research.

Case Study 2:

The Unit for the Study of Corruption, St John's University Tanzania

Hidden Treasure: Communicating policy thoughts through university platforms

"For one reason or the other, universities in Tanzania and Africa at large struggle with how to effectively communicate policy options to those making decisions that affect the lives of millions. This is not as it should be.

One of the fruitful mechanisms that my university has adopted is to use its platforms to communicate policy thoughts. Based at St John's University of Tanzania, the unit for the Study of Corruption (SJUT-USC) is Tanzania's first academic unit dedicated to interdisciplinary research, consultancy and teaching on corruption. Although the unit is widely recognized for combining academic approaches and research with practical experience of how corruption can be addressed in Tanzania and beyond, including but not limited to passing on this expertise to students by teaching, it also serves as a platform to address policy options and communication gaps. This is done through seminars and workshops, writing columns, public discussions, media engagement, and this has helped in communicating research and our policy thoughts from diverse disciplines much more effectively.

All activities are done with the aim of keeping information simple and clear for the audience to understand and well received by decision makers; their response to information shared is what tells us that our message has been captured and in cases adopted and adapted. However, this being a complex task which needs acquired skills, there is a need for constant capacity building efforts for researchers in this."

*Dr Alfred Sebahene,
Unit for the Study of Corruption, St John's University of Tanzania.*



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How do we communicate?

Communicating with policymakers and governments requires different skills to academic writing or presentations. Policymakers are often pressed for time and, in general, will not have specialist knowledge about your specific area. They often receive a lot of correspondence, so it is really important to grab their attention and keep information succinct.

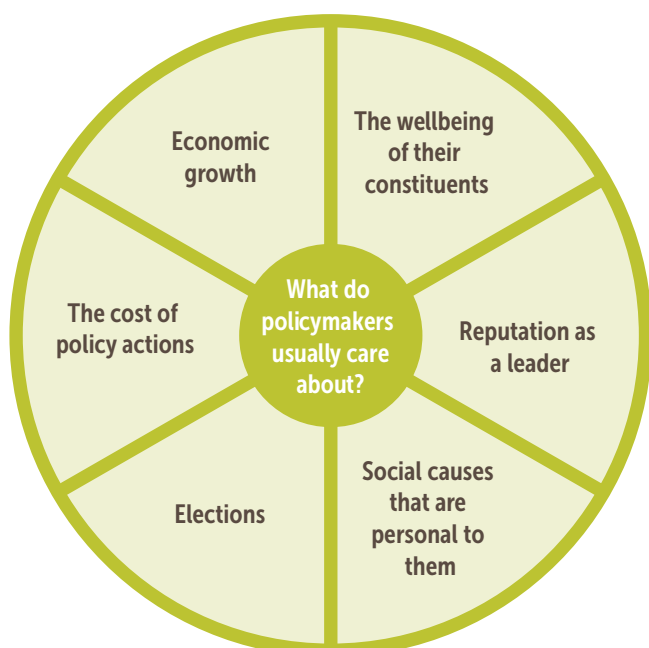
Use the questions below to guide how you communicate your research evidence to policymakers:

What is the nature of the information that you want to share?

It is important to think carefully about the information or findings you want to share or disseminate with your target audience. Don't try to convey everything, but focus on a few key points that you want to get across. You can always follow-up with extra information at a later date. For your first meeting or policy brief, keep the message short, sharp and compelling.



Top tip: Tailor your message. Put yourself in the shoes of the policymaker. Try to understand what they care about.



How can you package the information?

The most common way to communicate research evidence is through policy briefs.

However, there are many other ways for researchers to communicate their work. For example, you could try policy dialogues, seminars, conferences, meetings and other fora. A simple Microsoft PowerPoint presentation can make your findings digestible for the non-academic audience. You can even email a presentation straight to a policymaker – you don't always have to 'present' your work in the traditional sense.

The information you provide should be precise and clear. It should relay a key message to your target audience.

Important: Make sure you have a clear policy recommendation. Never assume that the recommendations are implicit in the findings.

Example policy brief structure

1. Title: clear and explanatory
2. Introduction: author, institute, collaborators
3. Research summary: in laypersons language
4. Key findings: only focus on those that are relevant to your policy recommendations
5. Policy recommendations: clear, specific, and realistic.
6. References

Does the audience understand the key points?

Irrespective of the audience, avoid complex information and high-level academic language. Your key messages should be easy to grasp and understood by all readers. It is also important to be persuasive and convincing in your arguments. Make sure that you show mastery of the information being relayed.

Key tips for writing for policymakers



- Language should be clear, simple, and easy to understand
- Avoid academic terms, jargon, and acronyms
- Short, clear headings
- Short paragraphs
- Write and re-write until the language sounds natural - not like an academic paper or project report

Key tips for talking with policymakers



- Prepare a five minute 'elevator-pitch' – this method of science communication is useful for many settings, particularly at networking events
- Incorporate real-life stories – trigger empathy in your audience
- Know the issues your policymaker cares about and tailor your message accordingly

Tips for developing a five-minute 'elevator pitch'

This is about storytelling. Research shows that narratives help increase comprehension and therefore engagement. Good storytelling captures attention and triggers empathy.

- Act 1:** Set the scene. Who are the main characters? What role do you play?
- Act 2:** Outline the issue. Why is it important? Why does it urgently need solving? Remember to focus on just one problem.
- Act 3:** Provide a solution to the problem (i.e. your research).

How can you ensure that decision makers receive the information?

It is almost impossible to guarantee that decision makers will engage with your work. However, don't give up! Be formal where necessary and, if it is possible, try to deliver the message directly to those in decision making positions. You may also need to identify social media platforms and channels that have influence in the policy process; use them formally or informally to share your message.

Is it possible to keep track of the information shared with decision makers? How do I know if it has been noticed, adopted or adapted?

It can be hard to know if decision makers have read, or used, the information you have shared. If you can, keep in close contact with policymakers' key offices, online platforms, and follow media on current trends in government programmes. When it is appropriate, you may be able to make follow-up inquiries with policymaking offices.

Summary

Learning how to communicate with policymakers can be one of the most challenging steps in successfully influencing policy change. It can involve using completely different styles of communication to most academic practice. When writing, you may have to think about the length of the document, the style of language and the key messages you want to convey. Similarly, on social media or in conversations, it is important to think about how you get your point across in clear, concise language that is suitable for a non-expert audience.

Case Study 3:

Three perspectives from Uganda

The view of a research manager

We normally communicate to policymakers through policy briefs. The policy briefs are submitted to the cabinet secretariat for distribution to relevant offices for final input in Ministerial policy statements. Tracking where the cabinet secretariat distributes these policy briefs is yet to be established. We are also yet to track how our views and research evidence is integrated into the policies made.

The view of an academic

I am a researcher and a scholar of policy studies. My bookshelf is full of collections of empirical reports, with indications of dust-rusty folder surfaces. I keep pondering who could consume my writings. On several occasions I have presented some of my study reports to academic audiences and sometimes mentioned highlights of my findings to random gatherings comprised of practitioners, scholars and other diverse community members. Informally, I often interact with media to whom I share some of my brief findings in a more informal manner of media discussion nature. I have rare opportunities to interact with some political shorts in the high circles to whom I informally relay hints of my policy thoughts whenever I am chanced to be with them. My hopes of having my policy research taken seem to be fading over time though, and I feel quite saddened for my less appreciated brains, energy, times and purpose. My left and right turn to two of my adjacent fellow academics to soothe my feeling. I find from a quick chat with them that they are in the same boat. I whisper to myself – where are we going wrong?

The view from a policy practitioner

There is a need to convince the policy practitioners that [policy communication] is a good idea. There is also an assumption that researchers are good at communicating, which is not always the case. Policymakers should be involved in the process of generating evidence, they should be consulted, they should not be mere consumers of the research findings. The timing also matters. Information brought in should match the national planning cycles so that ideas are captured in the planning and budgeting process.



I have rare opportunities to interact with some political shorts in the high circles to whom I informally relay hints of my policy thoughts whenever I am chanced to be with them.

When should I engage with policymakers?

You may have identified who you wish to engage with and the various methods of communication you will use. One final, vital aspect to communicating with policymakers is timing. Academics sometimes face challenges at this point in the journey because they tend to operate within different timeframes to practitioners. Policymakers are usually driven by short-term, changeable, political demands; they have to make fast decisions and be seen to commit to them for a reasonable amount of time. Academics, on the other hand, are typically more reflective, less reactionary and tend to take a longer-term view on research and impact.

Another challenge is simply finding the time to engage. Academics face increasing pressures on their time, and it can be a challenge to factor real-life impact and policy engagement into their busy schedule of research and teaching.

This section offers tips and recommendations on how to address some of these challenges.

Invest time to develop and maintain relationships with policymakers

It is really important to invest time to build trusting relationships with key policymakers. It can be an effort to maintain such continuous engagement, but you will be laying the foundations for future opportunities. By taking the time to get to know the person or team you wish to influence, you'll gain an appreciation and awareness of their environment and processes. You'll better understand the time pressures they face, their deadlines and how you can fit into the policymaking cycle.



Things to consider:

- Are there opportunities for sustained, frequent engagement with policymakers? For example, is there a regular seminar series you can invite them to? Can you email them with regular research updates?
- What are their key political priorities and commitments?
- When does their term end?
- Do they have any important deadlines, such as national budget deadlines?

Engage early on by embedding communication and impact into your research

Communicating your research findings should not be an afterthought or an optional extra at the end of the research process.

Academics who effectively engage with policymakers tend to factor engagement and impact into their research from the very start. It can be helpful to involve policymakers early on in the research process; maybe you could invite them to be involved in the research itself, or regularly share findings with them as your project evolves?

It might be useful to embed a communications plan into your work and schedule key milestones or opportunities for engagement. Be prepared and continue to engage even when there are no immediate benefits. You never know when your research might become topical in the dynamic world of politics.



Things to consider:

- Can you set time aside each week to invest in policy engagement?
- Are there parts of your research you could already be sharing now?

Be flexible and prepared to engage at strategic moments

Whilst planning ahead for communicating with policymakers is hugely beneficial, in reality it is not always possible to follow an orderly, planned process. Academics can be reluctant to share their research until it is complete or published, but by staying silent you may miss important 'windows of opportunity'. Successful research communicators tend to be pragmatic, flexible and open to engaging when the political conditions are right. It helps to have an awareness of the local, national and international policy environment and know the topical issues that may relate to your research. Effective 'policy entrepreneurs' look for issues to arise and are ready-prepared with an evidence-based solution.



Things to consider:

- What are the current, topical issues your research may relate to or underpin impact? What issues are dominant in the current public discourse?
- Are there any upcoming 'windows of opportunity' to communicate your research? For example, an international summit, a parliamentary discussion or an upcoming election.

Engage with the media

What if the political conditions aren't right? What if your research is not perceived as important or relevant to policymakers at this time? This is where engaging with the media can provide a significant boost. We know the media can play a powerful role in setting the political agenda and promoting debate. By engaging with journalists and using social media, you may find you're able to reach a wider audience, quickly raise the profile of your research, and gain credibility with decision makers.



Things to consider:

- Why is your research relevant right now?
- Why should people care about it right now?
- What makes your research urgent and important?

Seek support

Finally, if you feel like you don't have the time to influence policy, remember that it is much easier to engage policymakers as part of a team than as an individual. Consider who in your team or section might be interested and/or have the capacity to help communicate your research to policymakers. Perhaps an interested PhD student or a member of professional services? Some institutions may also have support functions who act as 'knowledge brokers' between academia and policy, for example people working in public affairs or a communications professional.



Conclusion

Engaging with policymakers may sometimes be a daunting or frustrating task. It is often complex, it can sometimes go unrewarded and can seem like additional work without clear, concrete outcomes.

Unfortunately, there is rarely a one-size-fits-all model. Every government policy comes with its own context and specific scenarios; each will bring its own challenges and rewards.

However, the potential impacts arising from policy change and implementation can be far reaching and highly rewarding. You have the potential to drive real change in society and improve people's lives.

Developing networks with decision makers and policy practitioners can often be the start of a long-term, mutually beneficial relationship which may span the course of your career. Moreover, by improving how you communicate your research findings, you may find the influence of your work reaches far into society, touching the media and the public as well as policymakers.

Good luck!

