RESEARCH-BASED POLICYMAKING:
BRIDGING THE GAP BETWEEN RESEARCHERS AND POLICYMAKERS

Recommendations for researchers and policymakers arising from the joint
UNCTAD-WTO-ITC workshops on trade and trade policy analysis, held in Geneva
11-15 September 2006 and 10-14 October 2011

A. BACKGROUND

Research and analysis undertaken by universities and research institutes in developing countries can
serve as useful inputs to the formulation and implementation of national trade and development
policies and negotiating positions of their countries. To this end, researchers and policymakers need to
cooperate closely to understand each other's specific possibilities and needs, ensure relevance of
research topics, and improve communication, dissemination and implementation of research results.

In support of research-based policymaking, the UNCTAD Virtual Institute encourages interaction and
cooperation between researchers and policymakers. Roundtable discussions that bring university
lecturers and researchers together with the policymaking community are therefore an integral part of
the Virtual Institute's professional development workshops.

The recommendations below are the outcome of two round tables convened at the end of week-long
workshops on trade and trade policy analysis jointly organized by UNCTAD, the WTO and the ITC in
2006 and 2011. The workshops, co-sponsored by the Government of Finland and the participants’
institutions, were attended by 42 academics from Africa, Asia, Latin America and Eastern Europe. All
of the participants were involved in research, and the majority of them also taught in university
programmes. Some had experience in working with policymakers as consultants or lecturers, or
worked for the government in research-oriented positions.

Developing country representatives from Permanent Missions in Geneva served as panelists for the
round tables, and provided insights into the challenges of trade-related policymaking and trade
negotiations. Among them were H.E. Mr. Toufiq Ali, Ambassador, Permanent Mission of Bangladesh;
Ms. Shazinaz Sahadutkhan, Counsellor, Permanent Mission of Mauritius; H.E. Mr. Faizal A. K. Ismail,
Ambassador, Permanent Representative to the WTO, Permanent Mission of South Africa; Mr. Elijah
Manyara, Minster Counsellor (Economic Affairs), Permanent Mission of Kenya; Mr. Leulseged Tadese
Abebe, Counsellor, Permanent Mission of Ethiopia; and Mr. Guillermo Valles, Director, Division on
International Trade in Goods and Services, and Commodities, UNCTAD, and former Ambassador of
Uruguay to the WTO.

The following questions guided the discussion:

How do governments obtain the research inputs needed to inform their policy decisions?
  - To whom do policymakers turn if they need information and analysis to underpin a policy
decision?
  - How is the process of interaction between governments and researchers organized?
  - What could researchers and policymakers do to establish contact and cooperation?

How can the use of local research in policymaking be increased?
  - What are policymakers’ needs and expectations with regard to research?
  - What can researchers do to meet policymakers’ needs, improve communication with them and
increase the likelihood of their research being used in policymaking?
  - What can policymakers do?
At the end of the sessions, the comments and experiences of both researchers and policymakers were assembled into a structured set of recommendations for *researchers* working in the field of trade policy analysis, and for *policymakers* using research-based information in the formulation of national policies, or in regional and international negotiating fora.

## B. CHALLENGES TO POLICY-ORIENTED RESEARCH

### Situation:

Policymakers are not always aware of the research that is underway in local academic institutions. Similarly, researchers are often unaware of the priority policy questions for which policymakers need research input. In addition, there tends to be a lack of communication - and sometimes trust - between researchers and policymakers, which may be due to insufficient understanding of each others’ needs, possibilities and constraints.

### Reasons and consequences:

- Policymakers in developing countries primarily seek the advice and draw on the analysis of international organizations or NGOs, international research institutes and foreign consultants, or their own technical experts in ministries and diplomatic missions. Outsourcing research to internationally known institutions may be perceived as “neutral” and thus give weight to the recommendations emanating from such research, or be used by the government to help raise funds for the implementation of specific policies.
- Policymakers do not systematically approach research institutions unless they have been established by their government and/or are affiliated with its ministries. They may also lack funds and/or flexibility for the allocation of research contracts.
- Universities and think tanks in developing countries may have the capacity to provide research inputs but are often not able to engage in cooperation with policymakers. This lack of access to the government may also cause difficulties in obtaining data required for policy-relevant research.
- Policymakers consider the credibility of researchers and research outputs a key requirement for cooperation. Competence, intellectual independence and a two-way dialogue with the government are the building blocks of such credibility.
- Policymaking does not take place in a vacuum but is influenced by a number of political, cultural, historical and geographical factors. Consequently, policymakers must take into account a myriad of needs while keeping an eye on their electorate. The policy options that they adopt may therefore be constrained by considerations of political feasibility and represent a less-than-optimal compromise.

### Further questions:

- Can research be policy-oriented and at the same time objective, or do policymakers look primarily for research that supports their position? Do researchers or research institutions also have their own "political" agenda? To what extent do political economy considerations impact on the role of research in providing objective advice?
- Policymakers demand information; researchers supply it. To what extent should the process be supply- or demand-driven?

## C. RECOMMENDATIONS

### 1. How to establish contact and cooperation

**As a researcher or research institution:**

- Disseminate information about current research projects as widely as possible:
  - Invite concerned government officials to conferences or presentations of research, or organize specific events that bring together policymakers and researchers.
  - Provide negotiators and other government officials with short notes and abstracts of relevant research findings.
Develop long-term cooperation with relevant ministries. The start can be facilitated by having a "champion" in the ministry. However, the researcher/research institution may need to avoid being too closely identified with the "champion", and hence, depending too much on the evolution of the "champion's" status. An option may also be to use the alumni of your university working in the government.

Involve higher-level representatives at universities (deans, vice-chancellors, etc.) in the establishment and maintenance of contacts, particularly with high-ranking ministry officials. However, direct contacts between the researchers and their counterparts in the ministries may prove more efficient if the procedures within the university tend to be very hierarchical and bureaucratic.

As a policymaker:

- Create channels to inform academia of major policy questions to help make research more policy relevant.
- Provide timely feedback to researchers so that they may be better able to quickly respond to your needs.

2. How to make applied research policy-relevant

As a researcher or research institution:

- Involve policymakers in research. Policymakers who are consulted and involved at the inception and throughout the research project tend to be more open since they have a stake in shaping the research questions, and thereby take "ownership" of the research, which in turn may facilitate the implementation of its findings. Regular interaction during the research project can help to fine-tune the questions researched and the tools used to the specific policymakers' needs.
- Make sure that your research addresses issues of policy relevance to your country by:
  - Keeping up-to-date with government policies, national development plans and priority issues in the area of trade and development, as well as policy relevant discussions reported in the press; and striving to provide quick responses to emerging issues.
  - Participating in multi-stakeholder committees set up to advise or interact with the government on trade and development issues, or obtaining relevant information and documentation from senior colleagues who are members of such committees.
  - Approaching permanent missions in Geneva which can act as facilitators by providing information regarding current policy-relevant research questions. Considering that the workload may not allow officials to go through lengthy documents, your request should be presented in a brief and simple form.
  - Attending national and international conferences whenever possible; alternatively, background papers for expert meetings at UNCTAD, for instance, can also provide suggestions of possible areas of trade-related research.
  - Consulting websites of international organizations, such as UNCTAD (and the Virtual Institute), the WTO, the South Centre and others, to keep up-to-date with topical issues in the area of trade policy. Websites of NGOs, such as the ICTSD and OXFAM, also provide relevant information.
  - Attending training courses or events organized for researchers to keep your knowledge of topical international economic issues, as well as your analytical skills, up-to-date.
  - Networking with fellow researchers at the national and regional levels, as well as at international organizations such as UNCTAD, the WTO of others, to share experience, materials and information about policy relevant issues on their (and their governments' or institutions') research agendas.

As a policymaker:

- Involve researchers in policy consultations and the policymaking process to acquaint them with priority country needs:
  - Establish partnerships, multi-stakeholder committees or policy forums where policymakers, private sector and academia can interact and discuss national development strategies and priorities.
  - Consider including researchers as members of official delegations and inviting senior researchers to participate in trade policy reviews to expose them to relevant questions.
- Consider providing researchers with opportunities to undertake internships or secondments at relevant ministries to allow them to get direct exposure to practical policymaking.
- Facilitate the access of researchers to relevant data, for instance, by creating a "trade data desk" within the ministry of trade to facilitate research or other dissemination activities.
- Publicize the development plans of the government so that researchers understand which issues are relevant and should be addressed.
- Make sure that in-house capacity is available in government institutions to guide researchers and be able to understand research results and translate them into policy actions. Well-defined TORs and regular exchange with researchers are fundamental.

3. How to communicate research findings to policymakers and disseminate your research

**Build trust and credibility by:**

- Being honest about underlying assumptions used in models and other methodologies, and not "selling" simulation outcomes as certain predictions. The researcher also has the responsibility to explain the caveats of a model and its results. Do not assume that policymakers are always familiar with the assumptions without your pointing them out.
- Showing a range of potential outcomes and policy options. Provide a benchmark case and various scenarios in your simulation analysis. Research that shows the effects of several options will be more credible than presenting absolute numbers. In adopting policy decisions, policymakers need to reconcile research findings and recommendations with political feasibility, and providing them with options can prove useful in this regard.
- Making sure that data sources are credible and verifiable.
- Pointing out the weakness of the analysis when presenting its strengths. Recognize that good policymakers will rarely depend on policy advice from one source only – the risks for them are too high. If you do not point out the weaknesses of your advice, someone else will – you will have destroyed your chances and, perhaps, the potential benefit from the application of what would have been good advice.
- Cooperating with colleagues from other areas (e.g. political scientists, lawyers, sociologists, etc.) to be able to approach research from a multidisciplinary point of view, better reflecting the increasing complexity of the issues at hand in the globalized world.
- Having in mind an “escape” strategy for the policymaker. Not all policy recommendations will be successful if adopted. If your advice should not produce the desired results, how can the policymaker minimize the damage?

**Ensure that policymakers understand your research by:**

- Making your findings readable and understandable to non-economists: use simpler language, provide a brief and concise non-mathematical outline, and focus on the application and recommendations rather than the theoretical background. Provide targeted research which offers suggestions that can be implemented by policymakers (e.g. with respect to a specific negotiating position in the Doha Round).
- Producing tailored policy briefs and case studies to illustrate findings and communicate main results to policymakers.
- Providing concise and readable abstracts or summaries so that policymakers are encouraged to go deeper into the findings.

**Reflect on the ways in which you disseminate the results of your research:**

- Research institutions should develop a dissemination strategy, which could involve holding conferences at the university, sending regular policy briefs to relevant ministries and NGOs, and establishing personal contact with policymakers.
- Trade is a multidisciplinary topic – think therefore about stakeholders and interested parties beyond the (trade) ministries with which you are currently engaged.

4. How to secure funding and build sustainable capacity for research

- As a policymaker, consider contacting and funding national research teams instead of outsourcing research. Investing in local research represents a means of long-term local capacity-building and institution-building. One way of doing so could be to earmark some funds from donors for locally conducted research and the strengthening of local research
capacities. To enhance the quality of local research, governments should also invest in data collection, as well as dissemination.

- As a teacher, do not forget that among your students are your country’s future policymakers and researchers. Enhance the role of applied research in your teaching by integrating policy-relevant topics and methodologies into the curriculum. Although policy research will be mainly conducted by senior researchers, younger researchers and even Master's students could be given a role so that they gradually become more familiar with policy-relevant questions and research tools.
- Strive to put together a good, policy-relevant proposal and seek funding from international donors. The missions in Geneva could help if they are convinced the research can help them and their countries.