



**RESEARCH-BASED POLICY MAKING:
BRIDGING THE GAP BETWEEN RESEARCHERS AND POLICY MAKERS**
Recommendations for researchers and policy makers arising from the joint UNCTAD-WTO-ITC
workshop on trade policy analysis, Geneva, 11 - 15 September 2006

A. BACKGROUND

The session related to research-based policy making was the last in a week-long workshop on tools and methods for trade and trade policy analysis. It brought together researchers and policy makers to discuss ways in which information-based research can best be utilized in policy making. In this respect, the session was intended to draw together the ideas and training on research methods and trade analysis tools that had been discussed throughout the week and channel them towards their practical application in dialogue and partnership with policy makers.

The workshop was attended by 20 participants from 16 countries (Bangladesh, Barbados, Burkina Faso, Cambodia, China, Costa Rica, Gambia, India, Jordan, Nigeria, Russia, Senegal, South Africa, Tanzania, Togo, and Uganda). All of the participants were involved in research, and the majority of them also taught on regular academic programmes and short courses for government officials. One participant worked for the International Development Research Centre (IDRC) office for Eastern and Southern Africa and was in charge of setting up research networks in the region.

We all greatly appreciated the contribution and insights of the two principle speakers at the workshop, *His Excellency Mr. Toufiq Ali, Ambassador, Permanent Mission of Bangladesh to the UN in Geneva*, and *Ms. Shazinaz Sahadutkhan, Counselor, Permanent Mission of Mauritius to the UN in Geneva*, who together represented the policy making community. The session was chaired by *Ms. Vlasta Macku, Chief of the Virtual Institute*.

B. OBJECTIVES OF THE SESSION

Research findings can only be used as an input to national trade and development policies if researchers and policy-makers cooperate closely to understand specific needs, ensure relevance of topics, and improve communication, dissemination and implementation of the research recommendations. The session aimed to contribute to this process by providing room for discussion to researchers and policy-makers, and generated ideas and recommendations around the following questions:

How do governments obtain the research inputs needed to inform their policy decisions?

- To whom do policy makers turn if they need information and analysis to underpin a policy decision?
- How is the process of interaction between governments and researchers organized? What is the role of policy makers and researchers in this process?

How can the usefulness of research in policy making be increased?

- What are policy-makers' needs and expectations with regard to research?
- What can researchers do to meet policy makers' needs and improve communication with them?
- What can researchers and policy-makers do to improve their communication, and foster research-based policy making?

At the end of this session, the comments and experience of both researchers and policy makers have been brought together to provide a structured set of recommendations for *researchers* working in the field of trade policy analysis, and also for *policy makers* who use research-based information in the formulation of national policy, or in regional and international negotiating fora.

C. CHALLENGES TO POLICY-ORIENTED RESEARCH

Situation:

There tends to be a lack of communication between researchers and policy makers. Policy makers are not always informed about ongoing research and researchers often lack knowledge of the most pressing policy questions that they would need to make their research more relevant.

Some reasons, consequences.... and further questions

- Policy makers turn primarily to international organizations, international research institutes or their own technical experts or diplomatic missions to obtain information and analysis as policy inputs. Local universities and research institutes may have the capacity but are often not able to engage in cooperation with policy makers.
- Policy-makers consider the credibility of researchers and research outputs a key requirement for cooperation. Outsourcing of research to internationally known institutions may provide credible references that may give weight to recommendations or be used by the government to raise funds to support the implementation of specific policies. Credibility may on the one hand be enhanced by presence in the media, but on the other hand it may negatively affect credibility vis-à-vis policy-makers if it openly challenges the government's position without prior dialogue.

- Governments lack systematic procedures regarding which research institutions to turn to, and when and how to establish contact with researchers. Governments are often not informed about ongoing research in national institutions.
- Can research be policy-oriented and at the same time objective, or do policy-makers 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?
- Data required for informed research may be non-existent or inaccessible.
- Policy-makers demand information; researchers supply it. To what extent should the process be supply or demand-driven?

D. RECOMMENDATIONS

1. How to establish contacts

As a researcher or research institution:

- Try to disseminate information about current research projects as widely as possible:
 - Invite concerned government officials to conferences or presentations of research, or organize specific events bringing together policy makers and researchers
 - Send notes and abstracts to relevant ministries
 - Distribute research to government agencies but also to NGOs, which might also be among its users. Be ready to discuss work in progress with policy-makers after initial contacts have been established.
- Try to get in direct contact, for example with negotiators, by providing them with short notes/abstracts of relevant research findings.
- Establish contact and build a 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 a "champion", and hence, depending too much on the evolution of the "champion's" status.
- Access to high-ranked officials at ministries can be facilitated by involving higher-level representatives at universities (deans, vice-chancellors...) in the establishment and maintenance of contacts. However, more decentralized cooperation can also be productive if the procedures within the university tend to be very hierarchical and bureaucratic.

As a policy-maker:

- Communication flows should go both ways: policy makers should think of channels to inform academia of major policy questions. This would at the same time help make research more policy relevant. Some suggestions in this regard are in the section below.

2. How to make applied research policy-relevant

As a researcher or research institution:

- Involve policy-makers in research. Policy-makers who are consulted at the initial stages of a research project tend to be more open since they can actively participate and hence have a stake in shaping the research questions, and thereby take "ownership" of the research as well. Regular interaction during the research project can help adjusting the questions researched and the tools used to the needs of policy makers.
- Make sure that your research addresses issues of policy relevance to your country by:
 - Approaching permanent missions in Geneva which can act as facilitators by providing information regarding current policy-relevant research questions. This should be in the form of simple information sheets or easy-to-answer questions, recognizing that the workload may not allow permanent mission officials to go through lengthy documents.
 - Attending national or 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 Vi website) the WTO or others, to keep up-to-date with topical issues in the area of trade policy. Websites of some NGOs (ICTSD, OXFAM, for example) can also provide relevant information.

As a policy-maker:

- Involve researchers in policy consultations and the policy-making process to make them aware of specific country needs:
 - Establish partnerships, multi-sectoral committees or policy forums where policy makers, private sector and academia can interact and discuss national development strategies and priorities.
 - Consider making researchers members of official delegations and inviting senior researchers to participate in trade policy reviews to expose them to relevant questions.
- 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.

3. How to communicate research findings to policy makers 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 policy makers are always familiar with the assumptions without you pointing them out.

- Using sensitivity analyses to show the range of potential outcomes. 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 (e.g. in Computable General Equilibrium Analysis of WTO negotiation rounds).
- Making sure that data sources are credible and verifiable.
- Pointing out the weakness of the analysis when presenting its strengths. Recognize that good policy makers will rarely depend on policy advice from one source only – the risks for them are too great. 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.
- Having in mind an “escape” strategy for the policy maker. Not all policy recommendations will be successful if adopted. If your advice should not produce the desired results, how can the policy maker minimize the risks?

Ensure that policy-makers 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 rather than the theoretical background. Provide targeted research, which offers suggestions that can be implemented by policy makers (e.g. with respect to a negotiating position in the Doha Round).
- Producing Policy briefs, which are "custom-tailored" to policy makers' needs, and case studies; these can be useful formats to illustrate findings and communicate the main results to policy-makers.
- Providing concise and readable abstracts or summaries, so that policy makers 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 or marketing strategy, which could involve holding conferences at the university, sending regular policy briefs to relevant ministries and NGOs, establishing personal contacts with policy-makers. A communication strategy should also define the format used to disseminate research findings, such as concise policy briefs.
- Trade is a multidisciplinary topic - think therefore about stakeholders and interested parties beyond the (trade) ministries you are currently involved with.

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

- As a policy maker, 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.
- As a teacher, do not forget that students are future policy makers and researchers. Enhance the role of applied research also 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 could also be involved to get gradually more familiar with policy-relevant questions and research tools.
- To enhance the quality of local research, governments should invest in data collection, as well as dissemination.
- Funds from international donors are increasingly given on unconditional terms, which could help research institutions to provide targeted and country-specific research. The need is to put together a good proposal and, thereafter, seek funding. The missions in Geneva could help if they are convinced the research can help them.