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Reflections on Influencing Country Policies and Strategies: The Toy Story

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INTRODUCTION

The country strategy support programs are burdened by having to demonstrate that they have influenced the policies and strategies of the countries they serve. The task is particularly onerous as it calls for influencing a particular client. This specific country-orientation may require influencing strategies that are more refined than the generic approach in which a good knowledge product is disseminated with the hope that someone will make use of it. The objective in these programs is not as much to answer the research questions that we are interested in but to answer the management questions facing the countries, which may include guiding them to ask the "right questions."

One may well ask the question: What provides a justification for country-program researchers and their donors to influence the policies of sovereign countries? There is a bit of arrogance in this goal. Many non-economists find the preoccupation with influencing policies downright patronizing, while economists often assume that their research can identify policy options that are superior to those applied in practice.[1]

Thinking a bit more about exactly what we want to influence helps us identify intuitive pathways to influence policies and strategies. Broadly, the aspects of policies and strategies that we would like to influence are:

- The development outcomes that countries are trying to achieve—usually to nudge them towards poverty reduction, nutritional or gender outcomes, or coping with climate change
- The way in which countries organize and implement public programs—to improve their efficiency and effectiveness and reallocate resources
- The institutions, rules and regulations that define the scope of actions by both national and international economic agents in the country, including the country's relations with other countries

The overall thrust, therefore, is to influence what countries choose to achieve and how they go about carrying out their objectives. Effective strategies to influence policies and strategies can be developed by carefully targeting the policies we want to influence, the audience we want to interact with in the process, and the nature of products to use in policy dialogue.

WHAT IS A POLICY?

What comes to mind when one speaks of policies are usually documents with the word "policy" in their titles.[2] Until recently, poring over documents to search for key words and phrases was an integral part of policy analysis. But policies may not be any more than a statement of objectives to work towards, although we usually expect some articulation of how those objectives could be achieved.

First, a bit of digression into differences between policies and strategies. Policies are almost always statements of intentions or objectives. They may contain specific or broad approaches for achieving them. A strategy, on the other hand, deals with how the objectives would be achieved, including a prioritization of objectives. They suggest consideration of various options and selection of one or more options as effective. The strategies can be stated at various levels. For example, food security or self-sufficiency can be an objective that is achieved by focusing on increasing production of rice and maize rather than focusing on cocoa production. Further down, the strategy to increase rice production may be to

[1] Applying Max Weber's famous proposition about value judgements in the social sciences, researchers should not impose their own value judgments. Their research can, however, play an important role in identifying how societies can better or more effectively realize the values that they want to achieve. According to this principle, it would be justified to identify better strategies to reach the gaols that a government has set, but not to tell a government what goals to pursue. See: Weber, Max (1978): Economy and Society – an Outline of Interpretative Sociology. English Edition, edited by G. Roth and C. Wittich, University of California Press, Berkely, Los Angeles and London.

[2] According to the Merriam-Webster dictionary, a policy can be defined as "a definite course or method of action selected from among alternatives and in light of given conditions to guide and determine present and future decisions."

increase irrigation efforts or introduce a new variety for upland rice cultivation.In short, s*trategies* are how one gets there. Strategies result from choices between alternative ways to achieve a particular objective, whereas *policies* are often simply statements of objectives. Policies may also include strategies to varying extents. And strategies include changes in rules of the game or regulations. A well-written policy/strategy provides a good indication of what the government will do. How well policies and strategies are developed depends, among other things, on the capacity of the actors involved—for example, their capacity to do policy analysis. FASDEP II, as a policy, for example, is clear on objectives, but does not reveal how the government will achieve its goals. Its related strategy, METASIP, is more specific. Likewise, the cocoa sector strategy gives a pretty clear indication of what the government plans to do and how they will do it.

The assumption that policies reflect current practices or that principles articulated in policies guide action is often not valid, particularly where policies are merely statements of objectives. Budgets and expenditure patterns, on the other hand, reveal the real priorities. The policies that we want to influence can therefore be put into three broad categories:

- Documents, including policies and investment plans
- Budgets and expenditure patterns, including actual investments
- Rules and regulations that govern both government programs and the private sector

The last of them may appear in documents or may be de facto practices.

THE TOY STORY

Divergence between what the governments say they will do and what they actually do will show up particularly when governments depend on external sources. Governments may need to say one thing and do another when they have to satisfy an external agent, whether it is because of the need to have an acceptable policy or to meet the requirements for budget support. The divergence may arise from various sources: differences in ideology, mental models of how things work, beliefs about how things should be done, political imperatives faced by governments as they want to stay in power, and differences in priorities. Such differences between governments and funding agencies are not usually about the objectives but about strategies employed to achieve them. Policies may be poor indicators of what governments intend to do precisely because they are typically very generic and do not clearly define what would be done.

There is an extensive literature in political science and economics that deals with the problem that the incentives of donor organizations and those of domestic policy-makers are often not well aligned and that, as a consequence, there is a divergence between the commitments that governments express as regards donors, and what they then actually do.[3] Taking a lighter and more humorous approach, one can illustrate this divergence using *Toy Story*, an American family comedy film about a relationship between children and their toys. Of course, this is not to imply that donors are like children and that countries are like toys.

In *Toy Story*, the toys are lifeless if they are in the presence of children and human beings; they are pliable and whatever the children imagine them to be. Children make up the games and toys just go along. Once the children are out of the room, their eyes light up, they come to life and do their own stuff. But in their own world too, they wish that the children never grow up and continue play with them; what the toys do on their own and what they do with children is not of much consequence in the toy world. There is a difference here, because in development, the donor world and the country world collide. In *Toy Story*, the children never get to see the toy world, but in development, those interested in influencing policies have good reasons and the opportunities to see what happens in the real world of country governments.

An important message from this analogy is that there is usually more to the activities of ministries than what is articulated in the policies themselves. One could say that policy documents are similar to the games that children play with the toys, in which their own imagination may be totally fulfilled, but not necessarily that of the toys. In that sense, policies and investment plans are only instruments that governments use to dialogue with the external world. Organizations are more serious in implementing what is of interest to them. Recognizing these other priorities would provide a different perspective on the political economy of policymaking. It also offers a different perspective on capacity. The ministries are not as ineffective as we think they are; they are effective in performing tasks of interest to them. The donors, however, may have difficulties understanding what is truly of in-

[3]Examples include van de Walle's theory of the neo-patrimonial state, a paper by Jayne et al. on „False Promise or False Premise", which questions the premise that African governments did fully liberalize their agricultural sector as part of structural adjustment policies, and Lal's paper *Can good economics ever be good politics?*, which explains why governments have political difficulties changing inefficient economic policies.

References:
Jayne et al. 2002. "False Promise or False Premise? The Experience of Food and Input Market Reform in Eastern and Southern Africa." *World Development* 30:1967–1985
Lal, S. 2006. *Can Good Economics ever Be Good Politics? Case Study of India's Power Sector*. World Bank Working Paper No. 83, Washington, DC: World Bank
van de Walle, N. 2001. *African Economies and the Politics of Permanent Crisis*. New York: Cambridge University Press.

terest to them because they are interacting with them in a different world.

The ministry's efforts on mechanization are a case in point. Ghana and many other countries have been spending a considerable share of their budgets on mechanization of agriculture, which for them is an important part of modernizing agriculture. The development partners have seen this so far as an unwarranted intervention of the state in what would be more effectively accomplished by the private sector. The country is derided for interfering with the private sector while the ministry claims that it cannot just sit back and not do anything if the real demand from farmers goes unmet by the private sector. Similarly, Farmers' Day is a home-grown institution that recognizes agriculture and good farming practices. It is celebrated in every district with great care, but it rarely appears in any documents. Little effort has been put into building on this institution to strengthen the position of farmers and improve technologies.

Donor interests are beginning to align with those of the government. The four major programs of the ministry—fertilizer subsidy, establishment of mechanization centers, block farming, and buffer stock—were not initially supported by the donors. Of course, Ghana could have implemented them anyway using its own resources, even though the government might wish to receive donor. In this respect, the government may appreciate that they have come to be gradually accepted. CIDA and IDA now provide direct sector budget support for these programs and for the METASIP. The ministry is now being encouraged to subsidize seeds as well.

Although the development partners and the country are moving closer, there are limits to alignment and harmonization. So long as there are ideological disagreements over how agricultural transformation should take place, alignment will be limited. Importantly, there is agreement over certain activities such as commercial farming development. Similarly, harmonization is likely to have limits. Donors too have different priorities and preferences for mode of support to countries. They compete with each other to some extent, although they now keep each other somewhat informed of their activities through the sector working groups, the mechanism for sectoral coordination.

Research could make a significant contribution by concentrating on key programs defined according to the resources devoted to them rather than importance given in the policies and plans. If the research can indeed suggest superior to ways to administer such programs, the benefits can be immediate and substantial. In this context, it is important that the research objective is stated in a supportive way (learning how such programs can be more effective) rather than in a judgmental way (finding out whether they indeed have an impact). Research would then become more attractive to policy makers. Moreover, research on key programs can elicit substantial interest from various other parties with an interest in influencing them: program managers, critics, and donors. Importantly, research on such key programs, when designed properly, can produce actionable results.

GLOBAL VS. COUNTRY

The nature of the audience for the results of the research conducted in country strategy support programs is not always the same. Contrasting our target audience at global and local levels, we can pigeonhole the global audience into academic and applied academic, international NGOs, the donors, and the private sector. On the other hand, at the local level, it would be national governments, donors, and academia. These two sets are likely to pay attention to different types of information and knowledge.

Information and knowledge that we produce can be categorized as those dealing with *what*, *why*, and *how* situations. The first is usually a statement of a problem. The second suggests the actions that should be taken, given the situation and the objectives that should be met. And the last focuses on some approaches for the action to achieve the objectives.

Any product on *what* may not elicit much attention from decision makers at local levels, particularly if they only involve refinements of methodologies or more accurate description of the problems. Equally research on *why* urging for actions, or influencing their objectives to some extent, may not be all that appealing, unless both *what* and *why* relate to some significant change in the situation. While all sorts of information may be appreciated by the audience at the global level—dealing in both *what* and *why* of situations—policy makers at the country level are more likely to appreciate research that focuses on the question how certain objectives can be achieved. Generating this information is very challenging as it requires getting to know the details of how a program is implemented and the reasons for taking particular actions. Moreover, decisions on program implementation are often subject to political economy factors—more on this later.

As a general rule, a researcher working to influence policy at a country level can be almost certain that not all of the outputs that might be of interest to researchers would be of interest to decisionmakers. Asking whether the proposed research throws light on any of the questions that decisionmakers are grappling with locally would be one way to ensure that the research is relevant. Even if working on a topic that might be of interest, asking the right question is important. One needs to be able to think of the managerial question that the research might be able to answer.

WHOM TO INFLUENCE?

In spite of its efforts to establish advisory councils for its country strategy support programs, IFPRI, like many organizations looking to influence policy, still envisages what may be called a linear process for influencing policies. Beginning with a research agenda that has been declared relevant by those in the know, IFPRI's process goes from completing a research output to the preparation of a brief for the benefit of policymakers. A dual path is then followed, one that takes it to a publication and the other to a dissemination event. The first is targeted to influence other producers of public goods and global policy makers and the second at these mythical creatures referred to as policymakers in the respective countries and donor community.

Recent technological developments have made it possible to disseminate research to a larger audience through social media and information reaches people through tweeting, face-booking or podcasting. USAID also seems to have a similar process in mind as their reporting indicators visualize outputs going from "policies and regulations analyzed" to "passed for implementation" through "drafted and presented for public/stakeholder consultation," "presented for legislation/decree," and "passed/approved."

This process, however, requires that the research agenda be legitimized as being responsive to the demands of the larger community or a country. This could come from the agenda of the larger system that we are a part of, such as the CGIAR system, or explicit demand from a country or a donor. In any case, there is typically the presumption that any knowledge generated relating to particular issues deemed critical will be relevant. Although this may be true for publication, which is also a key indicator of performance and outcomes, it may not always be the case for influencing decisions.

It depends on how policies are made in the country and to some extent how we think the policies should be made. Ghana has well laid-out processes for policy development that require substantial consultation, but we don't have enough of an understanding of how policies are actually made to be able to say how much influence the general public or the stakeholders brought in through participatory processes may influence them.

Depending on the extent to which the country depends on aid, the donors also play an important role in articulating policies and in budget allocation. Donors may therefore need to be as much of a target for influencing policies as the policymakers in the country are. Although a bulk of the support to the agricultural sector comes through budget support, the donors have a tacit understanding with the ministry about how the funds would be utilized. Fortunately, they are organizationally much more inclined than ministries to make use of research findings, partly because they are not subject to the same political imperatives that domestic policymakers face.[4]

Who should be targeted in the country is something that needs to be thought through. The options are to influence key individuals, organizations, or a broader set of stakeholders. The temptation is to work with individuals or the policymakers, who may include ministers, directors, or heads of policy units. This approach may be most effective if the policy processes are dominated by key policy makers, but it may not be long-lasting in the sense that the rationale for policymaking and reasoning does not become part of the institutional memory. On the other hand, one could argue that even if the individuals move on, what they initiate cannot be undone and the experience from the policy becomes a part of the institutional memory.

The second option is to work with organizations such as MoFA, mostly through mid-level management, to mainstream policy analysis within organizations. Although long-term impact may be more desirable, in the short run it may be ineffective. The absence of communication within organizations limits the effectiveness of this approach. While the organizations may be good at whatever they do, they are quite weak in dealing with the external world as an organization. Notwithstanding transparent policies, it may be difficult for outsiders to understand what the organization stands for. It often seems like visions held by different levels are different. Only the vision of the minister who is ultimately responsible matters, but it is not always easy to figure it out. Pushed and pulled by donors with their priorities, the ministry has so many demands that different parts of the ministry deal with different external agents, without adequate coordination among them. It is not unusual to be constantly surprised by ministry's activities and priorities.

The third option is to target the entire sector or value chain actors, to use the expression in vogue, as we did with our work on tomato processing in the country. The research then would have to be broad in scope, but if those challenges can be met, research can promote the ideal policy processes. Working with organized interests, however, is not always feasible. Unsurprisingly, some of them would have positions that they don't want to be challenged by research.

DID THE GOVERNMENT ASK FOR THIS?

This is one of the questions the donors often ask when presented with a research agenda, particularly by a research organization. Donors expect research organizations to work with governments

[4] In the donor countries themselves, there is often also a range of agricultural policies (e.g. various agricultural policies of the European Union) that have long been identified as ineffective by a substantial body of research, but that are not changed due to political imperatives.

on whatever interests them, which is not an unreasonable assumption. But can research really be demand-based? Our experience suggests that demand is usually limited to drafting policies, doing an investment plan or costing them, usually assistance with documents demanded by donors as prerequisite for funding, but are not necessarily implemented in the way they are formulated. However, there is often also a legitimate demand for information. MoFA, for example, wanted the IFPRI program to do a survey of tractors so that it could better design its mechanization strategies.

It is unreasonable, however, to expect a strong demand for research on programs that are implemented by the ministry. There is usually the perception that they know what they are doing. More importantly, for political economy reasons, they may not want researchers to question the way programs are designed.[5] The Ghana Country Strategy Support Program, for example, offered to both the minister and the chief director that we could assist in the design of the subsidy program but this was not accepted. As a general rule, decisionmakers are not likely to ask for assistance from researchers in the design of programs that are politically sensitive. They might, however, acquiesce to reviews when required. So any research related to major programs of the government will need to be initiated on the basis of potential to generate superior options and influence policies rather than from demand. However, there can be demands for research to guide decisions at a strategic level. For example, the deputy finance minister wanted to know what the country needed to do attain higher growth. Brainstorming on a strategy to develop the North, we were asked by planners whether we had any research that could help evaluate the benefits from improved water control and tree development. Unfortunately, the research programs are not often designed to answer such broad questions.

It is a good rule design programs around what the countries may have demanded, the activities on which they spend significant share of the resources and regulatory issues that might be expected to improve the performance of both public and private organization. Requiring that research be demand-oriented or subjective to approval of an advisory committee does not necessarily make it more effective in influencing policies and strategies for the better. Working closely with the ministry and the donor community to develop a keen understanding of the issues they are grappling with to identify the opportunities and institutional commitment to influence policies would be more effective in making research organizations accountable.

[5] For example, one IFPRI paper indicated that fertilizer vouchers were preferably distributed to swing voter districts in an election year. Reference: Banful, A. B. 2011. "Old Problems in the New Solutions? Politically Motivated Allocation of Program Benefits and the 'New' Fertilizer Subsidies." *World Development* 39(7):1166–1176.

WHAT KIND OF OUTPUT?

A wide range of outputs are potentially effective to influence policies and strategies. Taking the example of mechanization again, the ministry decided to set up mechanization centers with five tractors and limited number of implements in each of the districts. We began with a simple review, characterizing the evolution of farming systems in the country and what is suggested in terms of the need for mechanization. This was done without a great deal of empirical analysis and we had important messages to convey to the ministry: the need for mechanization is likely to vary a great deal depending on the farming system—districts can be prioritized and mechanization limited to plowing alone would make service provision unviable. One could be fairly rigorous in making these recommendations without further detailed empirical work on the basis of information that was available in the literature. That research was, however, inadequate in addressing the larger questions of whether the government should be intervening in the sector. More recent work has been able to develop some hypotheses to initiate a rigorous empirical analysis of the question.

This provides an opportunity to strengthen the research process as well, producing a number of intermediate outputs along the way. Just explaining how things are working is as useful as coming up with solutions. Preliminary stages of research describing institutional arrangements are likely to have significant impact, particularly in the absence of transparency about how the programs are designed and implemented. Our preliminary assessment of how the fertilizer voucher program worked in the country attracted considerable attention.

There are always questions about whether we are engaging in a consultancy that calls for recommendations without any rigor or research. But the first step in research could be considered a "guarded consultancy" which does a pretty good job of characterizing the situation, applying available concepts, and setting out some hypotheses and a research agenda, if not outright recommendations on the basis of available knowledge. It can provide timely answers to questions and help researchers design research to be responsive to local needs and build a partnership for exploration where the audience is engaged throughout the process. An output that exhibits a breadth of understanding is more effective in influencing policy than a rigorous narrow finding.

The knowledge that is generated should also need to be broad enough to compete with various sources of knowledge. All decisions are evidenced-based and the important question is to what extent are they evidence based and how credible is the evidence. It is not unusual for governments to employ consultants to advise them on policy decisions. They may not make use of

research but instead seek guidance from people who are expected to have embodied knowledge. Additionally, as the decisions may be influenced by inputs from other stakeholders, any knowledge that is generated needs to be good enough to compete with other sources of knowledge in a democratic process.

POINTS TO PONDER

- It is essential to participate in committees and other mechanisms through which dialogue takes place between the ministry and its stakeholders in order to understand the priorities of various stakeholders and to identify opportunities for relevant research to improve decisionmaking.
- Any research on the programs that take up a significant share of resources of either the ministry or the donors is likely to attract more attention than research that seeks to influence objectives.
- Research that is done in several stages, beginning with a good overview and application of available knowledge with multiple outputs over longer periods is likely to be of higher quality and have greater impact. Preliminary work that describes the situation is appreciated, particularly in the absence of transparency about how government programs are implemented because it can at least shed some light on how things work.

Working with various stakeholders in conducting and disseminating research through various channels also has the potential to improve research, through a better understanding of institutions in particular, and improve policy processes.

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