id21: Tracking routes towards impact
Summary

1. Overview of id21

id21 aims to increase the influence of UK-funded development research through the communication of research findings and policy recommendations to policymakers and development practitioners world wide. To this end id21 produces accessible, jargon-free reports ('research highlights') of the latest UK-funded research, which are disseminated, free of charge, via three main platforms:

- The id21.org website, which combines an Internet journal interface with a searchable database of over 1200 current research highlights;
- id21 email news bulletins; three-weekly updates on the latest research included in the online database, organised into four development themes (Economy and Society, Health, Education and Urban Poverty); and
- Insights, a quarterly print review of current topical issues within development research

2. Aim and purpose of study

This study aims to assess id21's success in increasing the influence of UK-funded research within international development policy. In the process of this assessment, the study first examines the ways in which policymakers access and employ research. The study then uses these findings to assess the validity and performance of the dissemination methods id21 currently uses [1.01*].

The study draws on four primary sources:

- Over 90 face to face, semi-structured interviews with existing and target potential id21 users located in South Africa, India and Uganda in April 2002;
- A survey of id21 email news subscribers (generating 1414 usable responses);
- A survey of subscribers to id21's quarterly print review Insights (generating 348 usable responses); and
- A survey of researchers, mainly based in the UK, whose research has been highlighted by id21 (generating 83 usable responses)

Field and desk research for the study was undertaken by id21 in partnership with external consultants Coe, Luetchford and Kingham. Collected data was then analysed by the external consultants, with inputs from id21. The external consultants (referred to here as 'the authors') wrote the full report. The recommendations, summarised at the end of this document, form the consultants' independent assessment of id21's performance and their recommendations to id21 that follow from this. This summary was prepared by id21.

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[*] All references refer to relevant sections in the full report *id21: tracking routes towards impact*, by Coe, Luetchford and Kingham (October 2002), which is available at http://www.id21.org/id21-info/index.html

3. The research to policy dynamic

Drawing on evidence from interviews in each of the three countries visited, the report is critical of models which view the research/policy relationship as one of simple lineal progression [2.02].

Interviewees described research knowledge as a source of power that can influence the policymaking process. But of course research knowledge is not the only source of power within politics, and its influence varies depending on who voices and holds it (see section 11 below). Research disseminated with the intention of influencing policy is a political intervention in a political context, and it is thus vulnerable to political exploitation and distortion.

Interviewees referred to the exploitation of research to confer spurious objectivity upon predetermined policies, or to delay addressing politically sensitive issues. Interviewees also referred to the way in which dominant political ideologies act as constraints upon new research knowledges, determining which perspectives are deemed relevant and which are not at both national and international levels. Finally in this respect, attention was drawn to certain political contexts in which the prevalent attitude is one of indifference to development, and therefore to development research [2.03].

4. Research capacity restraints

Aside from the potential for exploitation and distortion which research knowledge encounters once it enters the political domain, interviewees gave testimony to the current weakness of capacity within developing country executives, legislatures and civil society organisations to carry out, engage with and use research.

A lack of money, time or human resources, means that research is either not carried out, or is conducted by external consultants, often disconnected from the policy context. Governments may also be too overwhelmed by immediate crisis management and resource-scarcity to commission and consider any research other than that focused on short-term problems. Even where research is carried out and is of adequate quality and foresight, some developing country legislatures and bureaucracies lack personnel with the necessary educational background to engage with and use research.

In all three countries in which interviews were conducted there was a sense of a growing research capacity within government. Interviewees reported however that the majority of governmental research was still externally funded, and this introduced the need to consider the role of the funders' agenda within the research-policy dynamic[2.04].

5. Funders' agendas

Interviewees reported how funders' agendas can exert a strong influence over local NGO and think-tank research programmes and the policies they draw from them. A refusal to conform to funders' agendas may result in a reduction, or even cessation of funds. The influence that (often foreign) funders can wield over local NGOs was cited

by interviewees as a potential source of suspicion in relation to any research and policy recommendations they might produce [2.04.2].

The growing trend in some countries for international funders' money to be channelled through government was not seen by all interviewees as the solution to the problem of agenda-influence, as this risked the replacement of donor-dependency with government-dependence, and a concomitant threat to the independence of civil society organisations [2.04.2].

The report thus describes the relationship between NGOs, research institutes, international donors and governments as one of 'latent conflict' over control of policy development agendas. In all three countries visited, governments appear to be increasingly asserting their interests in this conflict; seeking to generate and lead research projects from within, independently from donor-led agendas [2.04.3].

Finally, interviewees were wary of an additional influence international donor organisations may have over indigenous research, through their role as shapers of dominant development paradigms and therefore definers of research programmes and foci [2.04.3].

6. Trends influencing the research-policy dynamic

In addition to the increased interest of governments in shaping the direction of local policy research, the report identifies two further trends in the countries in which interviews were conducted. One is the shift in South Africa and Uganda towards more government decentralisation, offering, in theory, an increased role for grassroots participatory research[2.04.4]. The other is the movement of NGOs towards policy research as part of advocacy for social change and a view of sustainable development as requiring policy influence in addition to simple service provision [2.04.5].

7. Geo-political contexts of the research-policy dynamic

Interviewees unanimously favoured country specific research, yet were often reliant on research based on different international contexts due to local funding constraints and the greater availability of international research [2.05].

Some felt that globalisation entailed a steady increase in the relevance of international research, whilst others questioned the transferability of 'imported solutions' to local problems. Some interviewees highlighted nationalist sensitivities towards UK-funded policy research in India in particular. However, the validity and importance of international comparisons in policy research was generally noted[2.05].

8. Research relevance

Interviewees complained that much development research conducted by researchers based in developed countries is of limited relevance and value to the lives of most people in developing countries, who are the intended users and stakeholders of such research. The report refers to a 'two communities model' to describe this perceived distance [3.01.1].

Yet evidence gathered through in-country interviews appears to suggest that the 'two communities model' does not apply to the relationship between researchers based in developing countries and their intended users and stakeholders. These researchers based in developing countries appear to be more engaged and user-focused, and enjoy a more fluid relationship and interaction with policymakers [3.01.2].

9. Research dissemination

Interviewees reported that the common means through which they received research information were

- policy networks
- policy briefs
- media promotion and press conferences
- conferences and workshops
- publications, working papers, journal articles

Interviewees complained however about the general ineffectiveness, absence or scarcity of efforts to disseminate research findings to non-academic audiences. Typical academic publications such as books and journal articles were described as 'obscure'. Policymakers explained that they needed short, concise research information, translated into clear policy recommendations and action-points[3.02].

The lack of adequate research dissemination on behalf of researchers appears to be both a problem of academic culture and of capacity[3.02; 3.03.1; 3.03.3]. The report also makes reference to the dispiriting perception of some researchers that politicians are not receptive to research findings, however well disseminated [3.02].

Interviewees pointed to a need for more research on the channels of policy influence research(ers) can take; on potential audiences, agents of policy change, and policy networks[3.03.1]. There was a sense that access to these audiences, agents and networks had been increased through the development of the Internet[3.03.1], but that researchers still needed to be more pro-active and explicitly seek out engagement with these audiences[3.04.2].

Interviewees suggested that changes need to be made to academics' working culture in order for their research to reach intended audiences more effectively: research programmes need to be developed in conjunction with political processes, and to have influence, research outputs need to be delivered quicker[3.03.2; 3.04.2].

10. Implementing research findings

Implementation of research findings is not merely a problem of getting policymakers to take note of research findings. There is also an under-capacity to formulate policy and implement change. A lack of technical and legal skills, experienced personnel and an absence of co-ordination between central and local government was highlighted in this respect[3.04.1].

11. Routes of policy influence

Based on evidence accumulated through the interviews, the report outlines five channels through which research information flows to policymakers:

- **Insider influencing**. Organisations, such as policy units, on the inside of government enjoy the most direct route to policy influence. From the earliest stages, their research projects are engaged with stakeholder interests and the policy-making process. Closeness to government however, can also be a hindrance to the development of critical analysis and advocacy for change[3.05.2].

- **Academic**. In certain disciplines and in contexts where further education is reserved for an elite, university students are typically destined for government and positions of political power. For this medium-term route to policy influence to be made more effective however, the importance of new thinking needs to be given a more prominent place in teaching curricula and student assessments[3.05.1].

- **Influencing the policy debate**. A long-term route to policy influence is experienced by those strongly networked organisations able to operate in the public domain, generating discussion and debate on new thinking and policy solutions[3.05.3].

- **Community organisation**. Community organisations provide a route to policy influence by acting as catalysts for change at a grassroots level. Local research is preferred by such organisations over international comparative research[3.05.4].

- **Media, public opinion and action**. The popular media forms a route through which existing bad practices and new policy solutions can be brought to public attention, stimulating civil society debate and action, and pressure for change brought to bear on government[3.05.5].

12. id21's methodology - the Internet as a route of policy influence

Internet access in developing countries is the preserve of mainly urban and peri-urban decision-makers and elites. Top universities, central government, individuals in local government and urban NGOs have Internet access, and for them it is an important source of information[4.01.1; 4.01.3]. For the remainder, electricity supply, connectivity speed, cost, gender-based social exclusion, literacy and IT skills act as significant barriers to the potential influence of Internet-based communication strategies[4.01.1;4.01.2].

Networking is also an important, although intangible, source of research information and dissemination. Email is increasingly being used within networks to share and distribute information, updates and research papers[4.01.4].

The ease with which information can be found on the Internet and distributed via email brings with it however, problems of information overload[4.01.5]. (Concerns regarding the credibility and quality of information available on the Internet are addressed in the section 13 below.)

13. Quality web-based dissemination

Based on data gathered through in-country interviews and the survey of subscribers to id21 email News bulletins, the report outlines four criteria for quality in web-based research dissemination:

- **Accessibility**. Websites should be quick to download, with few graphics and 'text only' options for those with slow connectivity. Sites should provide clear search facilities and organising categories. Further access to primary (i.e. full-text) documents and researchers is considered essential[4.02.1].

- **Language and presentation**. It is imperative that website content is written in a language accessible to non-experts[4.02.2].

- **Issues of trust**. Whilst credibility and quality was a concern for some in relation to web-based information services, most individuals surveyed felt equipped to employ their own judgement as to the quality of the information presented. Authority is something a website gains through range, durability and perceived balance or at least transparency[4.02.3].

- **Editing**. Summaries of research reports are very much wanted. An ideal dissemination model works on tiers of detail, from brief email alerts on newly available reports, to summaries, through to access to full text documents and further information, including engagement with researchers[4.02.4].

14. The importance of printed sources

Preferences for printed and web-based sources of information vary of course depending on Internet connectivity - 82% of African respondents to the Insights subscribers survey reported a preference for printed sources compared to 67% of EU respondents, for example. Connectivity issues asides, however, printed sources are felt to have certain advantages over online sources: for some, they are easier to disseminate onwards (via fax and photocopier for example); the layout is easier to read and less distracting; paper products can be taken and read anywhere[4.02.5].

15. id21's service

The authors find an encouraging correlation between the ideal research dissemination programme described by surveyed individuals, and what id21 delivers. Interviewees and survey respondents were also complimentary about the existing id21 services. Those who had not used id21 prior to being interviewed were also positive about the id21 format. New users liked the 'newsy feel' of id21 research highlights, the packaging, language and thematic content. Some commented however that they would prefer more locally-specific information, and others felt that the service should be more reactive to current topical debates and events[4.03]. Some interviewees were also critical about id21's focus on UK-funded, rather than international, research[4.04.5].

16. id21 user profiles

Given higher rates of Internet connectivity and the greater capacity to take part in surveys in developed countries, the authors describe it as 'reasonably heartening' that 47% of respondents from the id21 user survey were located within developing countries[4.04]. The authors remark however, that the proportion of developing to developed country respondents to id21 user surveys has improved only slightly in the past two years[4.04].

Survey respondents were asked for details on their occupations. The authors find that, when the spread of respondents' occupations (from NGOs to consultancies to government and education) is compared to the study's analysis of routes policy influence (section 11 above), 'id21 is well placed to reach into policymaking processes in all fields and in all areas of the world'[4.04]. Academics formed 27.5% of respondents to the user surveys, and the authors argue that, although academia is an important and valid route to policy influence, a re-distribution of users away from academia and towards sectors more directly involved in policy formation should be an aim for id21 over the future years[4.04].

17. Researchers' target audiences

id21 surveyed the mainly UK-based researchers whose work had been highlighted through id21. Nine out of ten of these researchers stated that development policymakers and/or practitioners formed at least a part of their target audience. 77% researchers also reported that, following collaboration with id21, they had been contacted about their research, the majority of these contacts being policymakers and practitioners. Whilst some surveyed researchers were positive about this engagement, almost half (46%) reported that the engagement had not produced any benefit for their work. Some commented that dissemination activities consumed too much time and energy for already over-burdened academics[4.04.4].

18. id21 and impact

It is the authors' assessment that the dissemination methodologies id21 currently uses successfully enable the programme to play an important contributory role in research-to-policy processes, providing context and secondary evidence to policy formation, and adding to wider debate[4.05.4]. The authors highlight specific cases in which id21 has been directly influential in policy formation, notably by providing access to credible research information and therefore power to organisations previously excluded from policymaking processes[4.05.2], and providing a focus for discussion within government departments and planning commissions[4.05.3]. The report concludes that id21 does have an impact on policy formation in developing countries, and goes on to make eleven recommendations the authors feel will both enable the id21 programme to be further extended, as well as to measure and monitor its impact on international development policy.

19. Summary of the eleven recommendations

- **Questioning the UK-funded criterion**. id21 should develop criteria for accepting international research as this would remove a stumbling block to achieving greater credibility and impact within its target audiences.

- **Utility**. id21 should develop a systematic means through which research considered for inclusion could be assessed and scaled according to anticipated policy relevance.

- **Promoting dialogue**. A contract should be drawn up with researchers that would require them to notify id21 of any contact with users stemming from their inclusion in the id21 programme. This would both encourage further researcher-policymaker dialogue and assist id21 in monitoring the effectiveness of its dissemination programme.

- **Marketing**. id21 should increase its marketing activities to raise awareness of the services it offers within its target audiences

- **Targeting and topicality**. id21's marketing strategy should involve the direct targeting of specific user groups, including those who can act as intermediaries in the transmission of research findings between academics and policymakers, such as NGOs, journalists, members of parliament and international bodies. An improved marketing strategy should also aim to place more emphasis on topicality when selecting pieces of research to be highlighted within the programme.

- **Audience led**. In order to understand and therefore cater to its users' needs more comprehensively, id21 should implement a web-based right-to-reply facility at the end of each research highlight.

- **Improving the site**. The full report recommends that a number of technical improvements be made to the design of the id21 site, and in the interests of transparency, the site should contain more information about the highlighting and editing processes.

- **Breadth and depth**. The breadth and depth of the id21 website could be improved by better signposting readers to the existing topic-overview articles provided in Insights. To this end id21 should also consider providing additional topical syntheses within the website, and improve the categorisation of research highlights.

- **Developing networks**. id21 should develop research-to-policy networks by, for example, seeking in-country partners, organising policy dialogues between researchers, policymakers and intermediaries, and by linking up with other organisations involved in dissemination.

- **Tracking policy initiatives**. id21 should track the impact of research on policy and develop case studies to provide more useful information to policy makers.

- **Business plan**. id21 needs to develop a business plan for implementing the recommendations and creating mechanisms for the on-going monitoring and evaluation of the programme.

The full report can be found at http://www.id21.org/id21-info/index.html

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