

Why Strengthening the Linkages between Research and Practice is Important: Learning from Young Lives



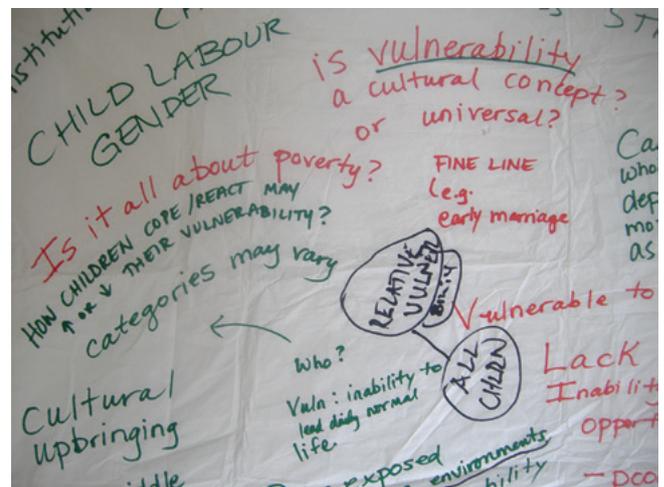
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September 2012

Over the last decade, there has been increasing debate around how to most effectively use research evidence to inform policy processes. A two-year study led by Young Lives set out to identify challenges and opportunities for translating research into policy and practice in the area of child poverty and child protection. On the basis of two case studies – one focusing on orphanhood and vulnerability in Ethiopia and the other on children’s work in Andhra Pradesh, India – the team developed a consultative approach involving a mixed group of stakeholders in each country. The groups identified several barriers to using research to improve policy and practice for children. These included lack of interaction between stakeholder groups, problems with who sets research agendas, lack of resources for supporting research uptake, and researchers’ lack of awareness of policy contexts. Part of strengthening the links between research, policy and practice is supporting the inclusion of children’s perspectives and participation in this process.

Policy decisions have to be taken, often in a political environment, even in the absence of good quality research, and they are influenced by a number of factors (only one of which is research). Over recent years there has been an increasing push to make policymaking in international development more ‘evidence-based’. This has been accompanied by much debate as to how to achieve this most effectively – on the one hand, how to help policymakers engage more with research evidence in policy processes, and on the other hand, how to communicate research in a more influential way. A further dimension is how research not only links to policy, but also to practice, and strengthening the relationships between all three. This policy brief offers a practical case study of researchers working with policymakers and practitioners to both understand and suggest ways to overcome the challenges of integrating research into policy and practice in the field of child poverty and protection.

Numerous frameworks, toolkits and case studies have outlined important factors, approaches and methodologies for increasing research uptake. International networks, forums and websites are also devoted to strengthening the role of research evidence in formulating global development policies. While making an important contribution, the literature is often theoretical and/or mechanistic in nature and usually comes from a single perspective: that of donor, or civil society organisation, or research institute. It is often generated at a global level rather than in developing country contexts, risking reinforcing the very barriers and assumptions that might be modified through a more contextually rooted approach. Debate also focuses on the relationship between research and policy rather than extending the linkages between research, policy and practice.



Agreeing a research agenda calls for effective interaction and shared concerns [Consultation workshop 1, Addis Ababa] © Young Lives

Research to practice in the area of child poverty and protection

In the context of international development, the evidence base for child protection policies and programmes is still relatively weak. Policies tend to be guided by conventional approaches that define child protection in universal terms, as children’s right to protection from abuse, neglect, exploitation and violence. Critics argue for more contextualised approaches that emphasise children’s well-being, and that reflect local culture, community contexts, and the multiple sources of children’s vulnerability (see Myers and Bourdillon 2012). Numerous international agencies are in the process of reviewing their approaches to child protection and its relationship to broader strategies for reducing child poverty, which makes this an opportune time to examine the role of research in this field.

Over a two-year period between 2009 and 2011 Young Lives brought together over 70 researchers, policymakers and practitioners working in the area of child poverty and protection in Ethiopia and India for a consultation process to define research questions related to children's risk, vulnerability and resilience within the context of poverty. A core aim was to identify the barriers to using research to inform policy and practice in this area.

In Ethiopia, the consultation process and research fieldwork focused on the topic of orphanhood and 'orphans and vulnerable children' (OVCs), the prevailing framework guiding policy on orphans in the region. In India, it centred on children's work in agriculture, a common phenomenon and a highly contested question for policy. The consultation process was multi-staged, involving an initial workshop to agree priority research questions, followed by field studies carried out by the Young Lives team in each country. The field work was followed by a second meeting of the consultation group to discuss findings before they were published. Consultation members participated in decisions at all levels of the process, for example, around research design and sampling, as well as routes for dissemination.

Key barriers to research to practice

The consultation groups identified a number of barriers between research, policy and practice, which are shared here.

Barrier 1: Awareness of policymaking contexts

Much of the literature on the relationship between research and policy points out that policymaking is a non-linear process, more often shaped by political circumstances than research evidence, and that research producers need to become better aware of policy contexts and processes (Porter 2010; ODI 2009). Preferred use of trusted sources and of personal contacts is a key feature of this (AudienceScapes 2012). In our consultation, participants in India criticised researchers for producing 'technically correct research' but failing to engage with political complexities and important socio-economic contextual factors. Some research areas are politically sensitive, particularly those that challenge rather than affirm dominant paradigms and political agendas. This is frequently the case in the field of child protection where notions of what is 'good' and 'bad' for children are powerfully shaped by cultural and ideological perspectives.

Awareness of policymaking contexts: key learning points

- In producing and communicating their work, researchers need to engage with contextual factors, including changing political and socio-economic circumstances.
- Contextualising research findings helps realise their potential meaning and relevance for policy and practice.

- An evidence-based approach is a questioning approach. Research needs the freedom to challenge paradigms and political agendas.

Barrier 2: Negotiating research agendas

Who decides what should be researched and how does this link with policy and practice priorities? Dialogue between researchers, policymakers and practitioners is only one part of the picture. One of the recurrent messages emerging from the consultations in both India and Ethiopia was that research agendas tend to be internationally generated and donor led. In Ethiopia, for example, there are limited local funds for research and consequently international donors and agencies tend to set the agenda, potentially obscuring local realities and concerns. Meanwhile academic research is seldom designed to respond to the changing priorities of policy and practice and rarely follows the same timeframes. Researchers may be under pressure from their institutions to publish in academic formats and journals which may not be appropriate or accessible for policymakers and practitioners in developing country contexts. Intellectual freedom is fundamental for producing credible evidence, but it was felt that too often research findings reflect the commissioning organisation's views. Some participants reported difficulties in seeing the 'relevance' of research studies when formulating or implementing policies and programmes, particularly in urgent circumstances like emergencies or disasters. Even where research is directed at policy and practice, there may still be problems of appreciating 'relevance' due to a lack of consultation and negotiation, particularly in the early design stages of the research.

Negotiating research agendas: key learning points

- Too often, research communication is overly focused on the 'end product'. There is a need for greater communication between researchers and other stakeholders in the early stages of research design, as well as in the communication of findings later in the process (not just at the end when 'results' need to be disseminated).
- Development research tends to be shaped by global development paradigms and international donor agendas, which can obscure local realities and concerns. Contextually rooted approaches should be prioritised over generic approaches.
- The research process can be slow and careful. Early and ongoing consultation, discussion of 'relevance' of research, and realistic planning can keep policymakers and practitioners engaged throughout the process.

Barrier 3: Missing perspectives of children and young people

It is often assumed that parents or caregivers know everything there is to know about their children and can therefore speak on their behalf – even when research is about children's lives and well-being. Young people are often assumed to be less knowledgeable and less capable of articulating their views than adults, and within the child protection discourse, they are often

represented as ‘victims’ of abuse and exploitation. Protecting vulnerable children may become a priority over involving them in research and policy processes, and where children’s views are included, there is a danger that they can become tokenistic.

In this study, participants discussed barriers to involving children’s perspectives in their own work, as well as how children’s accounts can be used to improve policy and practice. It was agreed that the field studies would place young people’s perspectives at the centre of the research, with some interesting results. In Ethiopia, it was found that the daily concerns of young people whose mother or father had died often centred around the grinding effects of poverty and associated everyday risks, rather than their status as ‘orphans’ (Crivello and Chuta 2012). In Andhra Pradesh, children who worked in agriculture were aware of many of the hazards, as well as ways for protecting themselves against them. They described a range of benefits of working, as well as the risks of not working, posing important questions in a policy environment intent on removing children from work (Morrow and Vennam 2012). Children were involved in the fieldwork as key respondents and sources of data. This showed that their experiences of poverty and vulnerability differed from adults and they often provided evidence that challenged some of the prevailing assumptions around child vulnerability in these contexts. Their perspectives were therefore vital to the wider consultation process.

Missing perspectives of children and young people: key learning points

- Children are vital sources of information about their lives, families and communities, and should be in any study of child poverty and child vulnerability, not least because they may experience poverty and vulnerability differently from older groups of people.
- Increasingly, the perspectives of children and young people are included in social research, but young people’s participation in wider policy processes remains limited.
- Sharing learning is essential. This requires reflecting on experiences of involving children in research, and documenting concrete examples of ‘what worked’ (or didn’t work) in practice, including children’s own assessments.

Barrier 4: Breaking silos

There is a considerable amount of research on orphans and vulnerable children (Ethiopia) and on child labour (India) generated by academics, civil society organisations and think tanks. However, this research often remains underused in terms of policy and practice. A simple exercise where participants ticked studies they had heard of and used in their work showed that despite a perception of inadequate research in their areas of interest, the evidence already available is often unknown.

Participants spoke about ‘working in silos’ to reflect the sense that researchers, practitioners and policy actors tend to work in their separate spheres ‘in isolation’, and that interaction between them is limited. In addition, policy approaches

to children tend to be sectoral – for example, separating out health from education from child protection – and may reinforce this sense of not being joined up to focus on related aspects of children’s well-being. One of the benefits of research that starts from the point of view of children is that it can see how different aspects of children’s lives fit together and influence their development. In doing so, research can highlight the interlinkages between ‘silos’ and can see how policy approaches in one area could be support activities in another. However, the divide between research and policy can be overemphasised, and participants found they had more common interests and concerns than anticipated.

Breaking open the silos: key learning points

- ‘Evidence-based policy’ is a process, not an outcome, and building relationships of trust and credibility is fundamental. Informal contacts between researchers, policymakers and practitioners can be just as important as formal meetings for strengthening these linkages.
- Differences in priorities, timeframes, work practices, and language can make it difficult for researchers, practitioners and policymakers to collaborate on common terms. Equally such differences are often over-emphasised: effective interaction is built on shared interests, concerns and synergies.
- Strengthening the linkages between research, policy and practice within a particular sector (in this case child poverty and protection) requires dedicated spaces, resources and funding to make it happen.

Case study: Setting up a Child Research and Practice Forum

An outcome of the consultation process in Ethiopia was the commitment of the participants to establish a Child Research and Practice Forum (CRPF). The aims of the CRPF are to bring together researchers, practitioners and policymakers working in the area of child poverty on a regular basis to share current research and learning, build local capacity for using and engaging with research, and to shape future research agendas. Involving both local and international organisations, the CRPF has strong support from the Ministry of Women, Children and Youth Affairs, as well as regular participation by staff from the Ministries of Labour, Education and Health, local NGOs, universities, international agencies and donors. Activities include monthly meetings, special seminars, published summaries of presentations and a regular newsletter. Representatives from government ministries have participated as both speakers and audience members. The CRPF is also hosting wider events and consultations to facilitate evidence-based debate on topics such as ‘harmful traditional practices’, ‘child migration’ and ‘child work’. The success so far of the CRPF indicates how much people valued the process and space it created to exchange ideas. It speaks to a clear need and interest in breaking down the barriers between research, policy and practice.

Barrier 5: Resources and capacity for using research

It was clear from the consultation in both Ethiopia and India that even where research is relevant to the policy environment and is well communicated, it is not a foregone conclusion that it will be used. One practical reason for this is a lack of resources and skills for using research. While the NGO participants in Ethiopia reported that they carried out assessments prior to implementing projects, they also felt that in general many projects are not based on research. Critical learning from NGO experience and from project evaluation tends to stay within an organisation, and institutional memory can be lost due to staff turnover. Accessing and sharing research is further hampered in resource-poor environments where slow internet access, power cuts and libraries or resource centres with limited budgets for books and journals are common challenges. Building research capacity is a long-term objective, but participants highlighted that partnerships with local research institutions are often bypassed in favour of recruiting individual research consultants (in some cases flown in from distant locations), which can further undermine local capacity and relationships.

Resources and capacity for using research: key learning points

- Researchers aiming to influence policymakers or practitioners need to share their findings ‘face-to-face’ through interactive meetings, as well as producing publications in appropriate formats and different channels for a variety of users.
- Donor organisations need to support local research capacity, for example, building skills through training and nurturing partnerships with local research institutions. Where international consultants are used, it is important to work alongside local partners (which has mutual benefits).

- Learning from project evaluations or assessment reports can be just as informative as academic studies (if not more so). Organisations should be encouraged to share this type of research through regular communication as well as informal blogs and presentations.

Conclusions: How can better research to practice benefit children?

If we accept that research, policy and practice are part of a shared process, then the production of ‘good’ research on its own is not sufficient. Research designed and produced without regard for gaps, policy priorities and an awareness of the political environment may result in limited resonance and uptake, and consequently limited benefits for children. This is not to deny the crucial role of research in challenging dominant paradigms and discourses. What it does suggest is that research aimed at influencing policy and practice needs to be consultative from the early stages of design, rather than solely at a later point of dissemination.

Our study reiterated the importance of contextualised understandings of vulnerability for policy and practice aimed at protecting children. It highlighted that global research agendas in the field of child protection do not necessarily speak to local realities and priorities, and can even inhibit a contextually rooted and evidence-based approach. Missing perspectives of children and young people is a further barrier to ensuring evidence-based policy and practice in this area; child-focused research is not solely about involving children, but it does mean putting children at the centre of the research agenda. Collectively, we need to be more innovative in including young people as vital links along the research, policy and practice chain.

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS AND CREDITS

This Policy Brief was written by Gina Crivello and Helen Murray. Findings from the sub-study on risk and resilience described here were published in articles by Gina Crivello and Nardos Chuta and by Virginia Morrow and Uma Vennam in a special issue of *Development in Practice* (vol. 22, no. 4). We extend our gratitude to the children, families, fieldworkers and consultation group members, including Young Lives team members in Ethiopia and India, who were vital to this study. Virginia Morrow managed the consultation process in India, and Gita Anand and Spurthi Reddy were policy consultants. Marlijn Lelieveld coordinated the consultation process in Ethiopia, and Lishan Medihn coordinates the CRPF in Addis Ababa. Kirrily Pells and Caroline Knowles provided useful comments on an earlier draft.

Young Lives is funded by UK aid from the Department for International Development (DFID), and co-funded by the Netherlands Ministry of Foreign Affairs from 2010 to 2014. This work was funded by the Oak Foundation as part of a sub-study on the role of research in improving policy and practice in the area of child protection and poverty (www.oakfnd.org).