Making International Economic Policy Research Influential

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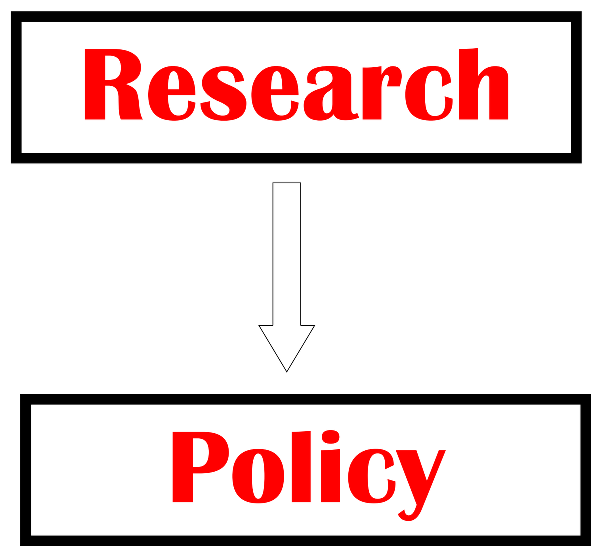
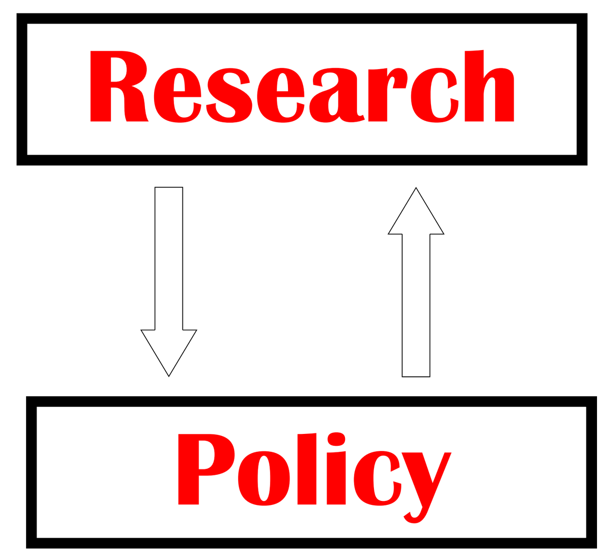
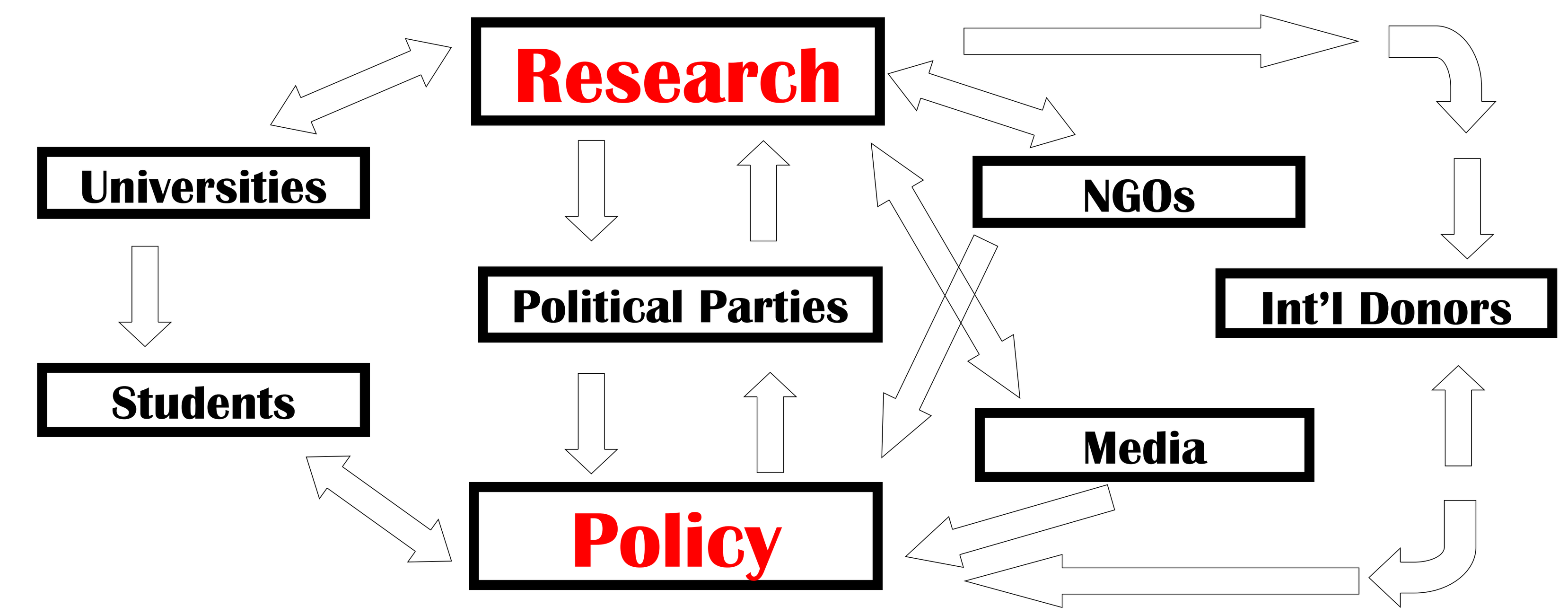
How does economic research influence policy?



1. Direct Transmission Model



2. Market Model



3. Intermediary Target Model

The question of how to make policy research more influential is usually approached through a model of interactions between the "community" of researchers and the "community" of policy makers. Thus, the simplest model asks how to strengthen the flow of information, portrayed in Figure 1, from the research community to the decision-maker community.

One deficiency in the path from research to policy may be the incentives facing researchers, who serve their immediate professional demands more than the ones from their government. This may result in less policy research being done as well as in generating research that is ill suited to policy makers perceived needs. Strengthening the incentives appropriate to policy research is largely an issue for the institutions that support research, rather than for individual researchers.

The deficiencies that researchers themselves are likely to control often derive from failure to account for the culture of the government and the personality of bureaucrats as they differ from academic institutions and individuals. For example, Weiss (1977) contrasts political process which typically seeks consensus or accommodation from academic goals of logic and truth. This difference follows directly from the need on the part of government to maintain state control. Similarly, government tends to accept short-term remedies for problems while researchers prefer to seek more elegant, ultimate solutions. A solution that brings results largely after the next election provides little personal incentive to elected officials.

Researchers recognize that the community of government officials has different goals from their community, but they may unfairly characterize themselves as being the more objective. Various conflicts of interest may originate with researchers due to their goals, such as

- promoting future funding by government,
- promoting future funding from non-government or foreign government sources,
- training of staff or students in the researchers' institution,
- building government analytical capacity, and
- reducing the cost of research effort.

The behavior of government officials also differs from researchers due to their different professional experience. Officials are accustomed to being lobbied and to teasing the underlying motivation and meaning out the words of their interlocutors. Researchers live in a community where sharing information is the essence of their *raison d'etre*. Thus, effective researchers must be reassuring to policy makers in ways that would not be useful or appropriate in academia, such as by displaying their credentials conspicuously, or focusing on the costs and benefits to key individuals.

Weiss, Carol. "Research for Policy's Sake: The Enlightenment Function of Social Science Research," *Policy Analysis*, 3 (4): 531-545, 1977.

A common variant of the research transmission model strengthens the prospect of adoption of research results by viewing the relationship between the two communities as that of suppliers and demanders, as represented in Figure 2.

This view suggests that the selection of research topics should be based on what decision makers want or could be made to want. It further suggests that appropriate freedoms to interact will result in a research community that provides effective research results, since ineffective researchers (as defined by decision makers) would not survive. Government staff and commercial research institutions often follow this model, essentially regarding government decision makers as their customers. Government officials tend to accept this view as well since it relies on their judgment as the ultimate test of research value. It is a familiar and comforting view to many economists who regard market mechanisms as efficient at allocating of resources. Furthermore, the model may be interpreted as ensuring that appropriate forms and qualities of research are undertaken.

Carden (2005) recognizes five alternative relationships between research and policy maker. The Market Model, in the simple form above, focuses on only the first of these: where there is clear demand from policy makers. The others represent varying degrees of support inherent from the government. They illustrate the need to accommodate research that is not in demand from government:

- where government has an interest, but has not shown leadership,
- where the research community has interest, and government recognizes the issue but gives it low priority,
- where the issue is new and the government is not aware of it, and
- where the government is hostile to the research effort.

Carden, Fred. "Making the Most of Research: The Influence of IDRC-supported Research on Policy Processes," presented to Conference on African Economic Research Institutions and Policy Development: Opportunities and Challenges, Dakar, Senegal, January 28-29, 2005.

In the Market Model, there is little room for policy research that is critical of the existing regime. However, it could be adapted to accommodate alternative customers for commercial researchers, if not for government researchers. The alternative customers would generally be potential beneficiaries of the policy research findings. Presumably those beneficiaries would accept responsibility for ensuring the research influences policy practice.

A model that includes intermediate targets for policy research might recognize that some targets are responsive to the needs expressed by decision makers while others serve as advocates of positions independent of the inclination of decision makers. For example, in Figure 3 several intermediate targets are represented. Political parties are shown as consumers of research and as accepting signals on research needs from decision makers. In contrast, the media and advocacy non-governmental organizations are shown as consumers of research whose interests do not depend on the view of decision makers. Although all of these intermediate targets have the ambition to affect policy, they do not all necessarily accept the same priorities as the decision makers.

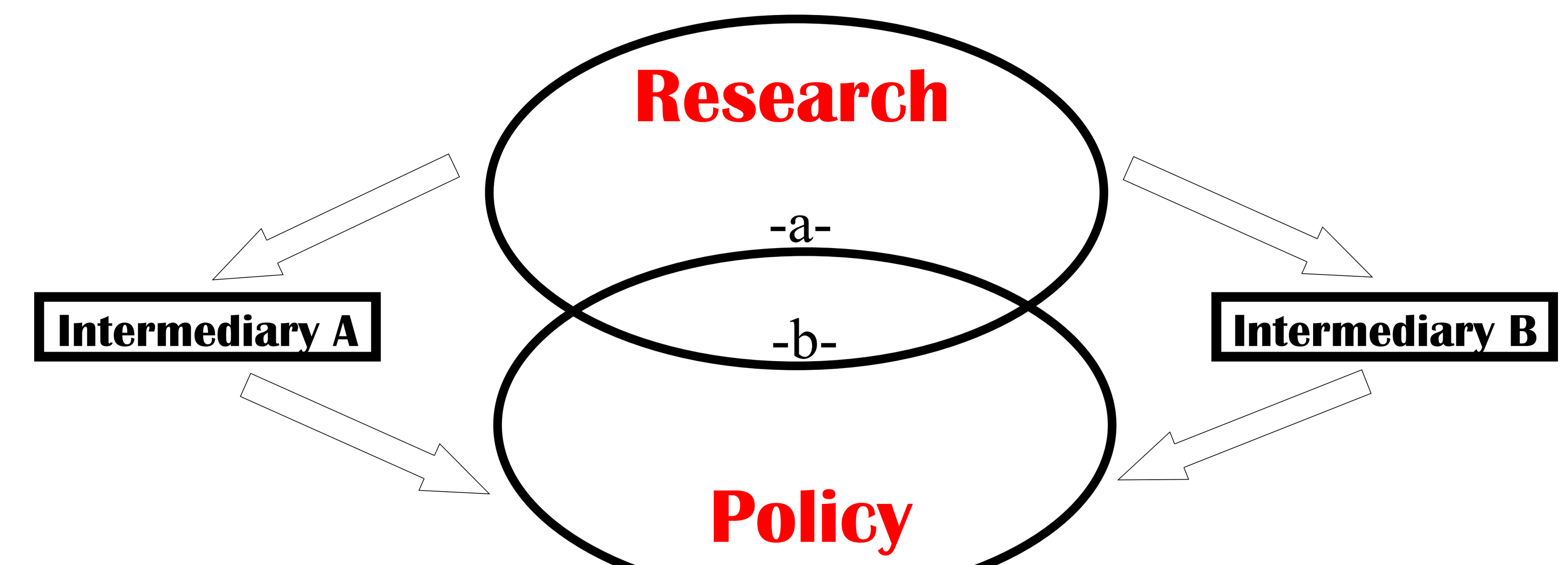
To have impact, policy researchers must identify and be responsive to some customer who can affect policy, whether directly with decision makers or though some form of public pressure. This obvious point tends to be lost in actual research institutions where "independence" is valued as essential to objective result results. However, economic policy is inherently political since it necessarily concerns the allocation of scarce resources. Economic policy research findings are easier to dismiss than findings in fields that are viewed as more technical, such as epidemiology or geology. The claimants to expertise on economic policy are far broader.
The potential alienation of the research community from government may be mitigated in part by effective use of intermediary consumers. Policy officials are inclined to be receptive to their political constituencies, who may be represented by or influenced by media, NGOs, teachers, etc. The credibility of the research itself may be abetted by serving, in the first instance, international donors or agencies with a favorable reputation or other form of policy leverage (Aryeetey).

The issue of how much independence the research community should have is partly addressed by its internal professional standards. Academic ethics allows "activism" in the form of selecting which questions to research or which customers to serve. It further accepts such factors as what issue is addressed, what range of policies will be considered, how long a time will be assessed for policy impacts, and what policy beneficiaries to consider. However, it is not acceptable to adjust the research process to generate outcomes in support of a predetermined position, nor is it acceptable to cull research findings and release only those that support a specified position. This professional standard applies even for researchers operating within the government, i.e., whose customer is predetermined. Consideration of this class requires a different model.

Aryeetey, Ernest. "The Problems of African Policy Research Institutions," presented to Conference on African Economic Research Institutions and Policy Development: Opportunities and Challenges, Dakar, Senegal, January 28-29, 2005.

To recognize the possibility of government researchers and to distinguish them from those outside the government requires overlapping the two communities, as in Figure 4. The boundary of the policy community where it reaches the research community (-a-) is notoriously vague, with researchers in universities often having no better access to decision makers than those formally in the private sector, especially in private universities. Those who are outside the government may not behave independently if they are dependent on government for funding or for credibility.

The vague boundary of the research community where it reaches the policy community (-b-) offers an opportunity to enhance research influence by reaching decision makers associated with research, such as, possibly, the leadership of government research institutions, or former researchers who appreciate the strength of professional research techniques. Some of the most influential research is undertaken with a government collaborator. Such a person is not necessarily experienced or capable to lead the effort technically, but has other essential contributions to make.



4. Joint Community Model

Just as policy officials may be skeptical of what policy research can provide, researchers are often dismissive of government collaborators because they do exhibit professional credentials equivalent to those who focus on research. An effective government collaborator should be capable of being a real participant in the design and execution of the research. This provides useful insights and invests the official in the results. The collaborator also should be capable of having policy influence, usually through access to decision makers rather than directly being a decision maker. Furthermore, an effective collaborator should have a position stable enough to remain beyond the research effort long enough to affect policy. Personal relationships between researchers and key policy makers matter, as built upon professional associations, academic reputation, and past interactions. They probably matter more in policy research than do personal relationships within academia, where the work is generally expected to stand on its own merit.

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Techniques for Impact

Researchers must respect the different culture and different responsibilities of policy decision makers. To facilitate having influence, the research results must be presented in a form that decision makers will accept. This may be done by intermediaries or government staff collaborators, but each additional step introduces opportunity for misunderstanding.

1. When interacting with decision makers, researchers should minimize reporting on procedure, even though this is essential to demonstrate validity for an academic audience. The general conclusions should be stated without promoting confusion from excessive warnings about their limitations. Of course, it is essential to serve warning of the conclusions, but these should not obscure the essential message. One approach to maintaining focus is to warn of their general nature and importance while offering to clarify the details with appropriate technical staff.

2. Although it is not appropriate within academic culture, accepting a mantle of prestige is effective with decision makers who are more prone to reliance on personal reputations to assess the quality of information. Furthermore, association with prestigious institutions or individuals has legitimacy to the extent that they continue to be concerned about protecting their reputation.

3. Many observers have offered their notions of what length is appropriate for a report directed to government decision makers. All agree there is an inverse relation between the power of the decision maker and the length of report he or she is willing to read. It is often more difficult to write a short paper than a long one for writers who are accustomed to providing background and to defending their point as required in academia, particularly when technical jargon is omitted. However, the exercise of shortening may help the researcher to decide what is most valuable in the results. Preparing multiple versions of research results may facilitate moving the results to higher levels of the government bureaucracy without any reinterpretation by government staff. In any country, two pages is probably the limit for Minister-level consideration and 12 pages the practical maximum for the lowest level in the bureaucracy, unless the potential reader is known personally.

4. The length of an oral presentation is also limited if it is to be effective and if the researcher is to obtain a reputation for efficient use of government time. Senior decision makers are often impatient to allow someone to control their time for more than, say, ten minutes. Although more time may be scheduled, it is a good strategy to say everything essential in ten minutes and save other points for a discussion whose pace and direction is led by the senior decision maker. At the most junior level of official (who is, however, senior enough to have influence), 20 minutes is a practical maximum for formal presentation. With technical staff, ample time should be retained for discussion.

5. High level decision makers will not appreciate technical analytical techniques so much as concrete illustrations of the research results. Seek illustration through familiar concrete examples or success or failure, e.g., pilot projects or, less convincingly, parallel efforts in similar countries.

6. Recommendations may be treated skeptically by decision makers who bring knowledge of factors beyond the idealized and simplified results driven by analytical models. While the research should be given relevance by reference to actual problems, the process of packaging results for brief presentations tends to lose the credibility the results deserve in a full exposition. A useful approach is to make reference to scenarios that offer choice within the set of recommendations. The researcher appears more modest and respectful of the decision maker. Objective policy analysis (to the extent such can exist) takes the form of: if Policy X is adopted, Y will result; rather than: Policy X should be adopted.

7. Lastly, the personal style of presentation should be honed to fit the audience it is attempting to influence. It is rarely useful to insist on full credit for good ideas. If the decision maker can be induced to recommend the policy adjustment as his or her own idea, or the idea of his or her staff, it is on the way to implementation. To become known as a researcher who helps decision makers think may be more effective than be known as one who knows what policy is best.