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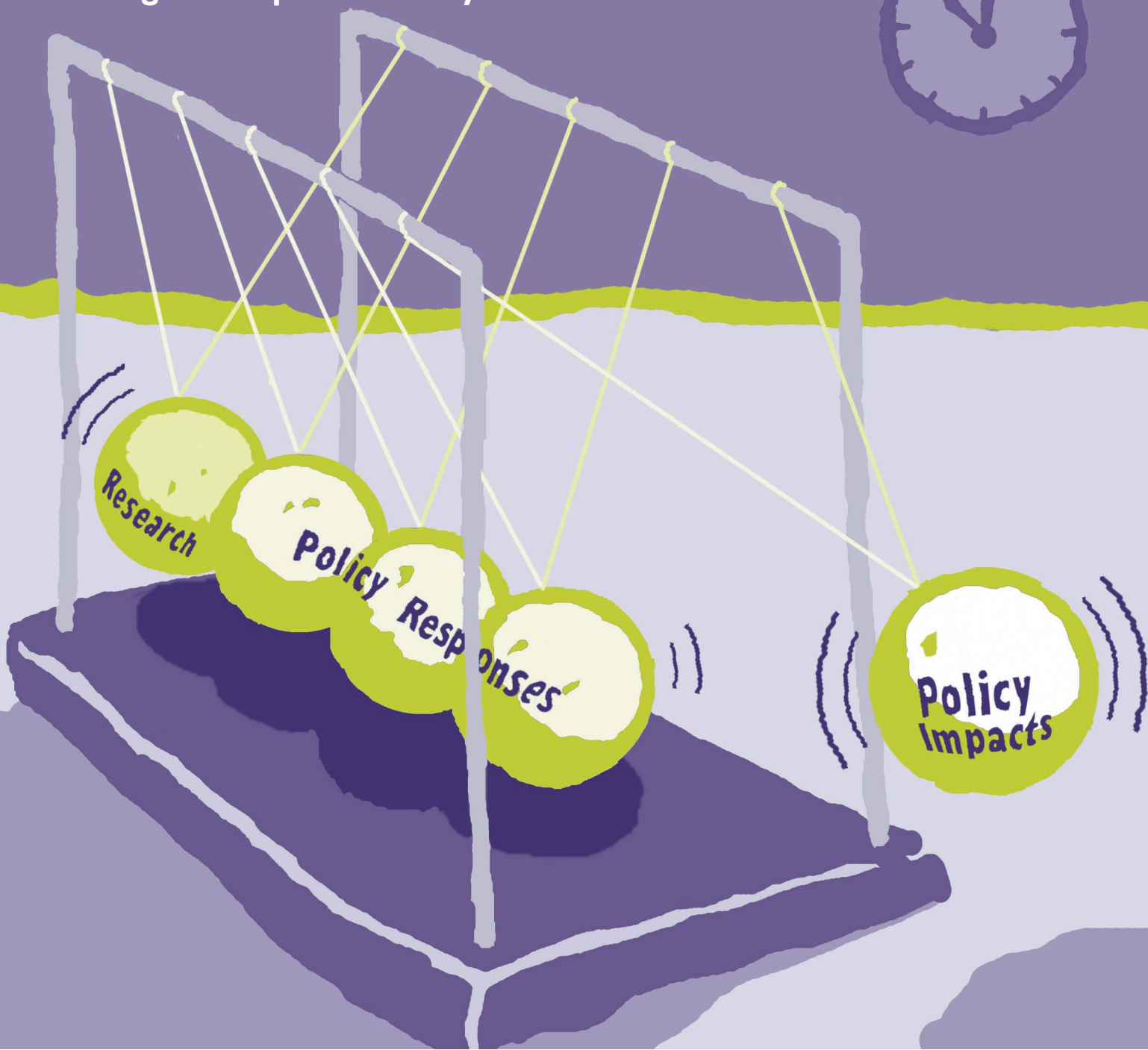


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IMPACT EVALUATION

Assessing the Impact of Policy-Oriented Social Science Research



ASSESSING THE IMPACT OF POLICY-ORIENTED SOCIAL SCIENCE RESEARCH

Economists have engaged for some time in developing methodologies for assessing the economic impact of agricultural research and in undertaking empirical studies to measure this impact.¹ In recent years they have documented more than 1,800 estimates of rates of return to agricultural research. Economists have paid little attention, however, to how to evaluate the impact of social science research. A symposium conducted by the International Food Policy Research Institute (IFPRI®) in 1997 was one of the first attempts to address this knowledge gap.

In November 2001 the Netherlands Ministry of Foreign Affairs and IFPRI brought together a group of researchers to follow up on the earlier symposium. Their conclusions fall into two broad categories: how to measure or value the economic impact of policy-oriented social science research and how to enhance the effectiveness of such research in policymaking environments.

MEASURING IMPACT

Measuring the impact of social science research on policy is complex and challenging. Workshop participants identified many areas where attention is warranted as researchers move ahead in this field.

Scale, attribution, and time horizon. Researchers can assess the impact of policy-oriented social science on various levels, examining a project, program, institution, or whole body of knowledge. To date, most case studies have been at the project level. As one moves up the scale, it becomes more difficult to attribute policy responses to individual actors or pieces of research.

One major rationale for the increased attention to impact assessment is the need for greater accountability of research institutions. This need for accountability can encourage researchers to focus on attributing impacts at the project level. But in an era of increasing emphasis on research partnerships, attempts to attribute impacts to individual actors can be counterproductive for future collaboration. Such attempts can also require daring assumptions that are subject to considerable doubt.

The focus on the project level also implies that short-term impacts receive more attention than longer-run impacts, which are a feature of strategic policy research. Studies of short-term impact will overlook these important impacts.

Supply- versus demand-side approaches. Ideally, one would prefer to start an impact assessment from the point at which a

major policy initiative or decision occurs. Researchers would then work backward from this demand-side outcome toward the supply side and assess what research played a significant role in informing or influencing the policy change. Instead, because of the need for attribution, most impact case studies have started at the level of an individual project in an institution and tracked how the research outputs from the supply side have been used. This approach may cause researchers to lose useful information on how to improve the impact of policy-oriented social science research.

Importance of surprise. Research that offers surprising results can have enhanced value. Indeed, this is the essence of Bayesian approaches to measuring impact—a new set of methodological approaches now being employed.² However, policy-oriented social science research that reinforces current understanding and policy settings (that is, confirmatory research) also has obvious value, so surprise is not necessarily a *sine qua non* to generating impact. Anticipatory research that alerts policymakers to possible future scenarios and surprises also can be extremely valuable in reducing the time lag before welfare-enhancing policy changes are made.

Choice of indicators. There are various indicators of impact. Change in economic welfare is an obvious one and is not necessarily equivalent to the welfare of politicians. Changes in distributional outcomes are another. Generally the consensus is that portrayal of distributional outcomes in policy-oriented social science research is more influential in effecting policy changes than portrayal of deadweight economic losses from

¹ “Impact” here refers to the effect on food security, nutrition, poverty, the environment, and capacity strengthening in developing countries.

² Bayesian decision theory provides a framework for placing value on research information that is used by policymakers to update their beliefs concerning various states of the world and the impacts of their policy choices.

current or alternative policies. Often research depicting national, regional, or more local consequences of policy alternatives is more influential in changing policies than global estimates.

Bibliometric indexes offer one measure of science and knowledge impacts. Other indicators are an improvement in data quality as a result of social science research and evidence of increasing demand for research by policymakers, supplemented by additional resources.

It is difficult to derive appropriate indicators when policy research has reinforced the wisdom of the status quo or resulted in inappropriate policies or “poisoned wells.” Bayesian approaches cannot handle such outcomes. These approaches are useful, however, in evaluating positive payoffs and well-defined policy changes by single decisionmakers. Alternatives to the Bayesian approaches are clearly needed.

Assessing the economic value of the time saved in effecting policy changes as a result of policy research is a valid measure of its impact when interviews with policymakers offer clear evidence of this. Historical retrospective narrative is also a valuable technique for more qualitative insights, which are especially useful when the assessment starts with a demand-side approach.

Case studies. Case studies raise a number of methodological research issues. For example, should researchers make use of random sampling or purposive sampling (“cherry-picking”) in selecting among projects and programs to evaluate? Each approach has its pros and cons, and no clear consensus seems to have emerged.

Interviewing and elicitation techniques also remain a concern, especially when the selection of interviewees depends largely on the researcher who undertook the original policy research. To be meaningful, interviewees should have some familiarity with the research being evaluated. By definition, therefore, they

will constitute a biased sample. It is useful to differentiate among audience types in constructing survey instruments and samples to ensure that an adequate cross-section of respondents provides feedback.

Impact assessments by independent professional peers offer the advantage of objectivity and credibility, although the costs often limit the number of projects and programs that can be subjected to this type of evaluation. In such instances “cherry-picking” of successful stories is more likely to be used.



Time lags. Gaps or time lags in the policy process occur between the time when research generates information and the time when policies are formulated, from then to when policy changes are announced, and again from then to when the policies are implemented. The factors that influence these lags are good candidates for further research.

As mentioned, anticipatory research can be especially valuable in reducing time lags in policy adoption. Research that misses key policy decisionmaking events is much less useful than that which is available as an input into them, especially if the research results are not confirmatory in nature. When anticipatory research is not done, the cost in terms of wrong policy decisions can be high.

Ex ante and ex post assessments. Measuring the impact of research requires attention to assessments both before policy change (*ex ante*) and after (*ex post*). Researchers can use *ex ante* assessments to help gauge the success of policy research in achieving its objectives as a part of monitoring and evaluation. Even though all projects in a portfolio may not undergo formal independent *ex post* assessment, it is still valuable for researchers to document impact as a way of deriving their own lessons and hence enhancing their own effectiveness. There is no substitute, however, for impact evaluation by independent professional peers to ensure the credibility and accountability of institutions.

ENHANCING IMPACT

Workshop participants identified a number of ways for social scientists to increase the chances of having policy impact and the size of that impact.

Communications. Enhancing impact requires addressing various audiences, and a communications strategy is needed at the outset to help identify and target these groups. Researchers must not only present their findings in peer-reviewed publications, but also convey their messages to a largely economically illiterate public via effective oral communication. To fill this new role, economists will require training and new incentive systems.

Advocacy is a powerful influence, but researchers must walk a fine line between advocating specific policies and retaining credibility as objective analysts. Here policy champions in the policy arena may be especially helpful. There is also a need to

identify and cultivate epistemic or knowledge communities and coalitions around desirable policy changes.

Understanding policy processes. Understanding the process is an important ingredient in ensuring that research outputs and outcomes result in appropriate policy responses. Political scientists and sociologists may be able to assist in this. It may be possible to help create a conducive policy environment, favorable to the use of policy advice arising from policy research, through a well-thought-out communications strategy.

For international policy research institutions, posting researchers in developing countries for an extended period allows them to build up an understanding of the policy processes and position the research to have maximum effect. It also allows them to be in a position to respond to emergent

policy issues and to be present when major policy decisions are being made and hence exert appropriate influence.

Policy research capacity. To achieve sustainable impacts from policy-oriented social science research in developing countries, strengthening the capacity of national institutions is vital and should be a feature of all collaboration between international and national research agencies. Indeed policy research, capacity strengthening, and effective communications are in effect joint products. Choosing to work in countries where policy research capacity is strong and data are readily available may offer greater immediate impacts than in countries with weak capacity and data. On equity grounds, however, there may be a stronger case for focusing on the latter group of countries. An implicit trade-off may have to be made in such instances.

Research outputs. The most influential policy-oriented social science research appears to be research that presents the distributional consequences of alternative policy options—who gains and who loses—rather than research that only reveals the size of the efficiency gains. Of special significance are the impacts on poverty and food security. More research is needed on how best to assess and convey such information. Here the sustainable livelihoods approach has promise as a supplement to the more common measures.

Another valuable output is primary data, especially at the household level, together with simple statistical analyses that set the stage for later, more sophisticated research, including modeling. Simple statistics can often surprise policymakers and whet their appetite for more detailed research, leading to new policy options. The result can be a more conducive environment and greater potential for impact. This primary data collection may be especially important in transitional economies with poor databases and little exposure to market and household economics.

Objectivity and quality. Policymakers seem to respond better to research that emanates from institutions that have a reputation for quality, credibility, and objectivity. In an environment where interest groups bring their own research to bear on major policy questions, having independent research information from an institution of standing can help create a consensus. This “honest broker” image can help policy research institutions greatly enhance the impact of their work.

Research priorities. Correctly anticipating the major policy issues of the future is one of the primary ingredients in establishing priorities for policy-oriented social science research. Although change in a long-standing policy (such as crop insurance) may offer large societal benefits, this fact alone may not justify more research. Payoffs may be higher from research on changing components of the program (for instance, not adding specialty crops to the crop insurance program) than from research on the bigger question for which success is more valuable but less likely.

Implications for the Future

A number of lessons have emerged for donors, governments, and researchers about how to enhance the effectiveness of policy-oriented social science research.

Donors and governments should:

- encourage the development of independent, well-managed, high-quality policy research institutions;
- improve the linkages between research and policy formulation; and
- invest in studying the policy processes, training, and promoting economic literacy.

Research institutions should:

- know what impacts donors value;
- ensure that the impacts of value to donors coincide with those of the people and their governments;
- make *ex ante* and *ex post* impact evaluation a part of their core business;
- create incentive and reward systems consistent with the policy objectives of the agencies that commission or make use of research outputs;
- undertake more multidisciplinary research on evaluating and enhancing impact, including policy processes;
- build policy epistemic communities involving all stakeholders; and
- never compromise on quality and objectivity in the quest for impact.

Because much remains to be learned about evaluating the impact of policy-oriented social science research, the workshop participants concluded that IFPRI should take the lead in developing a consortium to help improve interdisciplinary methods of assessing impact. The consortium would consist of institutions, donors, and individuals and would work in partnership with developing countries. Institutions could learn from each other about best practices and in the process exploit synergies, thereby increasing effectiveness and reducing the costs of what is an expensive undertaking.

A more detailed report on the workshop described here is available as *Synthesis Report of Workshop on Assessing the Impact of Policy-Oriented Social Science Research*, by Jim Ryan, Impact Assessment Discussion Paper 15 (Washington, D.C.: IFPRI, 2002).



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