



Poverty and Economic Policy
Research Network

How to influence policymakers

A policymaker is a person who is responsible for formulating policies in response to socioeconomic challenges. Accurate and timely input from the research community is needed in order to assess the issues and design effective strategies for tackling them. The demand and need for policy-relevant evidence is greater than ever before; while making research accessible to policymakers can be a challenge, it is no longer an option.

PEP strongly encourages researchers to communicate their research findings for evidence-based policymaking. In fact, from the very first stage of their involvement with the PEP Network, i.e. the design of their research project proposal, applicant researchers are instructed to elaborate a clear and detailed strategy on how they plan to both involve and inform all policy-relevant stakeholders of their initiatives, progress and findings.

DEFINING POLICY ISSUES

One of the first tasks for researchers is to ensure that the policy-relevant issues addressed by their research project have been clearly defined with careful reference to specific policies in place or under consideration. It is of paramount importance that policy dimensions be identified in the initial design of the proposal and further refined throughout the research process. Policymakers play a crucial role in ensuring that research results are as useful as possible and must be involved from the outset to better take into account their preoccupations and the valuable inputs they can provide. All members of the research team should be familiar with this policy profile and keep it in focus continuously.

The more clearly the policy issues are defined, the easier it will be to identify and establish communication links with potential users of the research.

IDENTIFYING AUDIENCES

As a second step, the research team must identify its audience by answering a simple but effective question: For whom does this research matter? Efforts must be directed to the people with decision-making power and, also, to the people who influence these decision-makers.

It is important to distinguish, in your policy influence strategy, the primary and the secondary audiences. The **primary audience** includes decision-makers with the authority to modify or introduce the policies that your project addresses. These are the primary targets of an advocacy strategy: Ministers, Prime Minister, Members of Parliaments etc...

The **secondary audiences** are individuals and groups that can influence the decision-makers (or primary audience). The opinions and actions of these “influentials” are important in that they affect the opinions and actions of the decision-makers. These could be key staff, advisors, speech writers, non-governmental organizations, human rights groups, trade unions, environment organizations, industry associations, foreign donors, newspapers, etc... Note that some members of a primary audience can also be a secondary audience if they can influence other decision-makers.

Researchers should list these potential interlocutors and then learn about them (what they know and think about the relevant policy issues, what influence/role they play in the policy process).

CONSULTATION ACTIVITIES

Communicating effectively with the policymaking community requires a clear strategy because opportunities to influence key audiences are often limited. A consultation and dissemination plan must be drawn up by researchers at the beginning of a project, with input from a local policy committee as well as from PEP staff, and regularly updated.

While we are often, understandably, eager to share our research results with policymakers, it is important to realize that communication should go both ways. Researchers should consult with potential research users for their inputs and advice just as actively as they seek to communicate their findings to them.

According to their importance, availability and interest for research, some policymakers may be directly integrated into a policy committee for regular face-to-face consultations throughout the project’s conception, execution and dissemination stages. Others may be involved less directly through periodic project updates – initial proposal, initial findings, draft final report – to solicit their feedback and to keep them informed as the project evolves. This establishes a sense of ownership that increases the likelihood that the findings will be considered seriously and eventually acted upon.

NATIONAL POLICY CONFERENCES

PEP strongly encourages all research teams to organize dissemination activities to communicate their findings to key stakeholders, policymakers, program implementers and other relevant audiences. In our experience, national policy conferences to present and discuss research findings, possibly in conjunction with findings from relevant outside research activities, with all potential research users constitute an excellent two-way dissemination tool.

Indeed, it is important to move beyond the one-way model of dissemination, in which researchers simply present their findings at the end of a project, to a more interactive and productive model. Decision-maker should be allocated time to talk in this kind of event in order to share their reactions to the research findings and identify areas

where further research is required. For example, the policy conference can feature a policy forum in which policymakers and researchers will confront their ideas and perspectives.

The participants, venue, date, format, audience and content of national policy conferences must be meticulously planned and discussed with the local policy committee and PEP staff. It is essential to have the participation of local radio, tv and newspaper journalists to ensure good coverage of the conference¹. This type of event also represents a good opportunity to distribute policy briefs and working papers to targeted interlocutors. You may also ask the PEP secretariat to send you supporting materials like brochures, annual reports, newsletters etc...

TALKING TO THE MEDIA

How the media deal with issues can influence both public opinion and the thinking of individual decision-makers. Media can be a powerful tool of influence, but it is not enough to attract media attention; it is also necessary to maintain it.

To attract media, researchers should try to relate their findings to current events. If your research theme is making headlines, that may be the right time to draw attention to your research by issuing a report or press release. Also bear in mind that media generally like to know how a situation affects individuals.

It is an asset to develop good relationships with a few selected journalists (find out which reporters cover your issues) and to keep them posted all along the project by sending them information regularly, whenever you are launching a new initiative, hosting an important official etc... It is also useful to make yourself well-known to journalists to ensure that you will be called upon for comment when an issue relevant to your project is in the news.

A powerful press release should be issued when organizing a national conference, and researchers should make themselves available for interviews. Some other ways of engaging media include organizing a press conference or media event, sending a press kit, or submitting a letter to the editor.

MAKING POLICY BRIEFS

A one-page PEP policy brief allows researchers to communicate the results of their research in the form of easy-to-understand, concise and persuasive recommendations. It is a good way to engage the interest of policymakers and, of all the publications a research project produces, the one that is most likely to be read in policymaking circles. Succeeding in capturing a policymaker's interest in this way increases the chances that your findings will enter the policy debate.

A policy brief's success depends on how results are presented. It should be aimed at a non-expert audience, succinct and accessible, and free of any technical jargon. PEP policy briefs are prepared by researchers themselves with support from PEP communication staff. The policy brief must not exceed one page and is generally more

¹ Please keep evidence (newspaper articles, photographs, recordings of radio/tv coverage, etc.) to share with PEP!

attractive if it includes a self-explanatory table or figure that helps communicate key messages.

A template is available at www.pep-net.org/funding/guide

BUILDING NETWORKS

As an African saying goes: “one bracelet can’t make noise”. This metaphor emphasizes the huge importance of building alliances in order to bring about change. Networks are difficult to develop, requiring time and energy, because they involve relationships of trust.

You will want to get to know people and organizations that are working towards the same objective as you are. You will also want to include people who can influence decision-makers in your network and, if possible, include the decision-makers themselves. To build an open and trusting relationship, you could collaborate on projects of mutual interest, help bring attention to their work, assist them with special projects, share information with them, attend their meetings and invite them to yours, discuss your ideas and objectives with them.

Then, when the relationship of trust is established, you can ask a member of your network to help you reach your objective. For example you can use your network to meet a Minister, a Director or somebody else influential. An extensive network can also contribute to much wider dissemination of your research findings.

The following link leads to another source of highly relevant information on evidence-based policymaking; a video recording of a conference held by the International Food Policy Research Institute (IFPRI) in Washington, on June 2, 2011. The presenters discuss the Challenges, Methods and Innovations in Assessing Policy Influence. The presentation given by the Director of the Evaluation Unit at the International Development Research Center (IDRC) of Canada, Fred Carden², is of particular interest in the context of building a policy influence plan.

Find it here: <http://www.ifpri.org/event/evidence-based-policymaking>

Through monitoring, reminders and ongoing guidance over the course of each supported project, PEP helps ensure that researchers never lose sight of the policy issues that their research seeks to address. Realistically, for communication initiatives to be effective and lead to actual policy influence, a very specific set of skills and a strong network of personal contacts are often required. While many of our researchers do already have good contacts in policymaking circles, notably among those who pursued their university degrees at the same time, they do not always have much experience in research communication. PEP thus provides resources and effective support in an array of activities³, at different stages of project execution. Further information on the Network’s activities and support can be found in the [PEP Research Communication Strategy](#).

² Immediately following introduction from IFPRI Director Peter Hazen

³ From providing contact resources to writing policy briefs, financing and assisting in the organization of national policy conferences, preparing PowerPoint presentations, etc.