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Policy Forum 2016

Conclusions and recommendations

Keynote address

What should researchers do to maximize the likelihood of research uptake?

By Dr. Mustapha K. Nabli

While taking part in a recent panel discussion on pension reform in Tunisia, where pension fund managers presented their views and researchers presented their findings, a high-level pension fund manager said to Mustapha Nabli: “We are working and collaborating with the researchers but what they are telling us is not practical and it is not helpful.”

As Chair of the PEP Board of Directors, Nabli was understandably concerned by this admission. An international consultant and researcher, Dr. Mustapha K. Nabli is also the Director of the North Africa Bureau of Economic Studies. His professional background brings together research and high-level policy making with roles including Professor of Economics, Minister of Economic Development of Tunisia, Minister of Planning and Regional Development of Tunisia, Senior Adviser to the World Bank Chief Economist, and Governor of the Central Bank of Tunisia.

At the PEP Policy Forum during the 2016 PEP Annual Meeting in Manila, the Philippines, Dr. Nabli provided the keynote address, sharing his insights and offering advice to researchers to improve policy uptake. His recommendations are outlined below:

While designing research projects, researchers should...

- Avoid research driven by methods and technical capabilities
 - This is the least valuable type of research for policy influence as it does not aim to answer a specific question
- Be forward thinking in choice of policy/research issue
 - Remember that “hot topics” at the start of a research project are unlikely to be so important once the study has been completed
 - Research needs to be available when a policy problem arises if policy is going to be evidence-based



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- Be wary of issues raised by current policymakers who are looking to make short-term changes (i.e. during their mandate)
- Ask clear policy questions
 - When a study aims to provide specific policy recommendations researchers are able to avoid vague and unhelpful suggestions
- Build on existing evidence around the issue to fill knowledge gaps
 - Be aware that a single study will rarely influence policy on its own
- Put policy recommendations at the heart of the research
 - When a study aims to provide specific policy recommendations the researchers are able to avoid vague and unhelpful suggestions

When communicating research findings researchers should...

- Provide clear and contextualized policy messages, but do not “oversell”
 - Recognize the limitation of your findings
 - For example, a review of research assessing the possible impact of Brexit (Britain “exiting” the European Union) on welfare in the UK, found that depending on the study net impact ranged from -11.5% to +20% of GDP
- Include concrete recommendations on how to implement the changes suggested
 - Often the biggest challenge policymakers face is being able to implement policy changes; specific suggestions and solutions are more likely to be heeded
- Remember that public and policy audiences are not interested in methods and techniques, but rather in issues and solutions
 - A policy brief should not be structured like a research paper, instead, start with the policy message, followed by the argument for these recommendations and end with how to implement the proposed changes



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- Understand who are the relevant policy actors and adapt your message and arguments to their perspective
 - This should not be limited to the current ministers or government officials
 - Policy actors also include: members of the opposition, trade unions, business owners, and NGOs etc.
 - One-size-fits-all” recommendations are not helpful, they lead to misunderstandings and diminish the impact of the research
 - Consider a pension reform policy: pension fund managers are interested in restoring the financial sustainability of the funds, the Minister of Finance will be more concerned by the macroeconomic effects of the reforms on savings, investment, growth and employment, and labor unions are more interested in the effect on workers.



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