

POLICY INFLUENCE: LESSONS FROM A SYNTHESIS OF 2017 EVALUATIONS

The Office of Development Effectiveness (ODE) in Australia's Department of Foreign Affairs (DFAT) undertook a Review of 2017 Program Evaluations. Part of this review included a synthesis of the learnings from the 37 program evaluations completed by DFAT in 2017. This paper considers the five main learnings from the synthesis about policy influence. See accompanying methods paper for details of the methodology and a list of the evaluated programs reviewed.

Australia's aid policy (DFAT 2014) is clear about the catalytic purpose of aid: that aid alone cannot bring about development, which needs to happen through the policies and institutions of partner countries.

Policy formulation is never straightforward in any context (Stachowiak 2013; Weible and Cairney, 2018). Trying to influence policy is thus a complex undertaking, requiring an understanding of how policy change happens and how influencing approaches work in different contexts. The 37 evaluation reports implicitly demonstrate several approaches.

The most common approach (found in 22 of the 37 evaluation reports) can be described as *knowledge brokering*, a process with two distinct steps:

1. Generate evidence through pilot programs, in-country or global research or the implementation of an activity.
2. Share this evidence in ways that will explicitly influence policy.

A second approach is to support and strengthen *alliances or coalitions*, assuming that coordinated advocacy among groups that share the same policy beliefs can bring about policy change. In at least three evaluated activities, supporting advocacy coalitions was chosen (among other pathways) for policy influence. The Mekong Business Initiative supported and strengthened several coalitions, notably the Vietnam Public Sector Forum, as one of its multiple approaches to policy dialogue. This forum is providing a strong private sector voice in policy dialogue with the government that was previously absent.

The Pacific Leadership Program also used strengthening coalitions among its approaches. One successful example was support for the Tongan National Leadership Development Forum which led to the adoption of the Tonga National Leadership Code and continues to contribute to national dialogue on leadership and governance. Another successful example was modest support for the Women in Shared Decision-Making Coalition in Vanuatu. The coalition, led by the Vanuatu Department of Women Affairs, advocated for reserved seats for women in local government and helped 10 women to be elected to municipal councils in Luganville and Port Vila. Pacific Women has effectively supported the We Rise Coalition, a women's rights organisation in Fiji.

A third approach, *community organising*, is used to create power in community settings through collective action. Some initiatives—notably the Pakistan Challenging Gender-based Violence Program and aspects of the Pacific Leadership Program—used this approach. There was good evidence of success in changing social norms in these programs (Promoting Gender Equality Learnings Paper, ODE 2019).

LEARNING ONE: THE MOST SUCCESSFUL POLICY INFLUENCE CAME FROM POLICY PROBLEMS THAT WERE LOCALLY IDENTIFIED AND OWNED

The most successful policy influence came from policy problems that were locally identified and owned. The best-case scenarios from among the sample were those designed to respond to partner government policy needs (such as Governance for Growth in Vanuatu, Mekong Business Initiative and Integrated Coastal Management Program in Vietnam), or those driven by the partner government, as found in the Timor-Leste National Program for Village Development (PNDS):

The fact that PNDS was initiated and is clearly owned by the Government of Timor-Leste is a success factor. Government decrees, institutional arrangements and budgets for salaries ... reflect this ownership.

Importantly, most of these programs were implemented at least in part through partner systems. In Governance for Growth, for example, the evaluation noted:

The use of Government of Vanuatu systems gives agencies some control over implementation and choices—important aspects of ownership.

The degree of embeddedness in the partner system is an important feature of this ownership. The PNDS report found that:

... there is a risk that if PNDS is not embedded more fully within a Ministry, it will continue to be disrupted by administrative changes, and may also fail to gain the political support required for longer term sustainability ...

When ownership is not present at the beginning of an intervention, or not sufficiently so, several evaluation reports showed it can be built over time by investing in good relationships. For example, this was achieved through operational contact between DFAT program managers and counterpart staff in the Indonesia Infrastructure Initiative Phase 2 (IndII) and regular inclusion of central-level officials in local implementation in the Nepal Build Safer Schools for All Project.

IndII tried several other strategies to build ownership, such as establishing a facility board, but the board did not function effectively and so did not prove to be an effective tactic. Pilot projects that tested new policies with tangible results were more successful. The IndII evaluation noted that for reforms perceived as risky or undesirable, ownership can grow as evidence builds. Some interviewees suggested that:

Government of Indonesia ownership may in fact be actively withheld until a concept or reform is proven, and seems politically possible.

Ownership often needs to extend beyond government, beyond a single government department or to sub-regional levels in decentralised contexts. In the Indonesia Education Partnership, ownership by the non-government Al-Maarif Foundation for the Madrasah component was found to be important. The Pakistan Trade, Investment and Policy Reform Program achieved good ownership from the Ministry of Commerce, but the evaluation found it needed to broaden its engagement beyond that Ministry to gain wider ownership of the reform. In Vietnam's decentralised environment, a focus on provincial ownership, including capacity building, was important for the Vietnam Mekong Delta Transport Infrastructure Development Project.

LEARNING TWO: UNDERSTANDING OF THE CURRENT POLITICAL AND INSTITUTIONAL CONTEXT AND PROGRAM FLEXIBILITY ARE SUCCESS FACTORS

Context has a considerable bearing on the effectiveness of the policy influencing process. The evaluation reports were generally not strong in analysing the influence of context on program performance. Exceptions included some of the evaluations that were reporting on particularly effective policy influencing. These reports reflected on the ability of the initiative to ‘work politically’, which involved having a deep and ongoing understanding of the political and institutional context in which the program was operating and being able to respond flexibly and rapidly when political readiness for particular policy changes emerged.

Analyses of the context in Vanuatu through an extensive Drivers of Change study was a crucial element of Governance for Growth, which maintained some flexible, unallocated funds to respond quickly when opportunities arose. The flexibility of the Governance for Growth budget was reported to be one of the most powerful elements of the program.

Flexibility in design for the Mekong Business Initiative meant a framework for the overall program was developed but individual activities were demand-driven by partners. When the political circumstances were ready for change in the respective countries, three policy initiatives (in Laos, Myanmar and Vietnam) had traction.

Program flexibility was assessed as central to the approach of the Pacific Leadership Program, which was able to adapt its support to emerging opportunities and the evolving needs of its partners. The evaluation of Timor-Leste’s PNDS identified ‘the high degree of flexibility and responsiveness’ to contextual changes and lessons learned as a key strength of Australia’s contribution.

While program design was the main driver of flexible approaches, bureaucratic processes in DFAT proved a barrier to flexibility. As Governance for Growth gained more grant partners, there was more focus on grant management and other administrative requirements at a time when DFAT increased its demands for accountability and risk management. These factors limited the flexibility of Governance for Growth over time. For the Indonesia Infrastructure Initiative (Indii), the evaluation report found a consistent concern regarding a lengthy and onerous concept approval process.

LEARNING THREE: POLICY INFLUENCE NEEDS TO HAVE SOMETHING TO OFFER THAT IS RELEVANT, APPROPRIATE AND AFFORDABLE FOR THE CONTEXT

The evaluation reports illustrated four main ways in which knowledge was generated as input to the policy influencing process: global research; local research; pilot programs; and program implementation. The knowledge generated had to be relevant and affordable for the partner, and technically effective to work as a policy solution on a broader scale.

There were several such ‘fit-for-purpose’ examples. UNICEF’s hypothermia bracelet in Papua New Guinea (PNG), a simple bracelet attached to a baby’s wrist which detects the temperature of the newborn and alerts the mother or medical staff in the event of hypothermia, was found to be appropriate and affordable technology. In responding to the earthquake in Nepal in 2015, the program partnered with the National Society for Earthquake Technology, which was familiar with geographic and socio-economic conditions in project communities and used an appropriate hybrid model for earthquake-resistant schools. The Governance for Growth report notes that the program

generally resisted being driven by concerns to implement international best practice, instead pursuing a valid model of 'good enough governance'.

A significant concern was whether the intervention would be affordable on a broader scale. For example, in the Cambodia Agricultural Value Chain Program it was unclear whether sustainable, cement-lined canals were affordable for replication in the Cambodian context.

Another concern was around technical appropriateness. The Samoa Inclusive Education Demonstration Project intended to promote the inclusion of children with disabilities in regular schools. However, the assumption that the physical presence of children with disabilities in regular classrooms would lead to change meant that the project 'did not pursue a comprehensive approach to school capacity building for inclusion' and fell short of its ambition.

In other cases, questions were raised about suitability to the context. The Indonesia Education Partnership, for example:

... may have contributed to a proliferation of small schools, which could exacerbate inefficiencies in the allocation of teaching and management resources and the associated effects on the quality of services provided.

The evaluation also expressed concern that the very high quality of international best practice products (such as training modules) developed through the partnership may have been over-engineered for Indonesian needs or the capacity of Indonesia's systems. A similar concern was highlighted in the Strengthening Pre-Service Teacher Education in Myanmar Review regarding outputs not being fit to the Myanmar context.

LEARNING FOUR: HAVING A DELIBERATE STRATEGY FOR POLICY INFLUENCE IS MORE EFFECTIVE THAN SERENDIPITY

It is not enough to have something to offer by way of evidence or knowledge. Knowledge brokering requires a deliberate strategy for how this will be used to influence policy. Most evaluations described several different strategies for how this important step would be delivered, the main ones being policy dialogue, implementation support, capacity development and technical assistance. Policy dialogue was the most common form of policy influencing strategy and the main learning is around the importance of relationships (Learning Five).

Other reports noted that by not having a deliberate strategy there was limited effectiveness in policy influence.

Supporting policy implementation

Policy influence tends to focus heavily on policy change that will achieve a broader impact. A significant learning from the review of the evaluation reports was that this was most successful when support for policy implementation was also included. This was well noted in the evaluation of the PNG Health and HIV Multilateral Partnership:

The risk, of course, is that sound policies and international commitments remain unfunded mandates and do not get implemented in practice.

To help address nutrition policy in PNG, after supporting the development of a National Nutrition Strategy, UNICEF contracted the development of a Strategic Action Plan, including cost estimates. Many donors, including DFAT, have been involved in helping Timor-Leste develop its nutrition strategy, in what the evaluation (Nutrition Strategic Review) describes as a 'crowded policy area'. Even when various pieces of policy advice have been consolidated into a single coherent strategy,

the review points to the need to resource its implementation, including developing the capacity of implementing agencies.

The basis of Governance for Growth was to put financial and technical resources behind likely local-driven reforms and take them through to implementation, with DFAT entering into a Direct Funding Agreement with the relevant government department. This gave the local entity ownership of the policy reform and allowed for implementation through Vanuatu's own systems. The achievements are considerable given program resources:

While the flagship change has been the liberalisation of telecommunications, Governance for Growth support has also helped to increase VAT [Value-Added Tax], devolve financial responsibilities to provinces, establish school capitation grants, improve wharf management, increase access to banking services and strengthen the government's communications infrastructure and ICT management.

Capacity development and technical assistance to support policy influence

Evaluation reports described capacity development and the use of technical advisers being applied in several ways. Approaches that encouraged partner ownership were more likely to be successful. The Integrated Coastal Management Program in Vietnam used in-depth capacity needs assessments to design its capacity building approach, which included human resource, organisational, network and system development in the policy field. Many programs had a less sophisticated approach that focused on training alone and, in several instances, results were not sustained when trained staff left the institution (Pakistan Trade, Investment and Policy Reform Program) or standalone training had minimal follow-up, mentoring or support (PNG Bougainville Youth Initiative). An example of a more sustainable and locally owned way of training is the UNICEF focus on Early Essential Newborn Care, supported by the World Health Organization, which is now being integrated into the pre-service training for medical students at the University of Papua New Guinea.

Another method commonly used in capacity building was the provision of technical assistance. In PNG, for example, World Bank assistance helped the Department of Health to simplify and rationalise budget preparations from 45 separate templates to a single unified system. However, that same evaluation report (PNG Health and HIV Multilateral Partnership) also noted:

The extent to which technical assistance ... empowers or disenfranchises local officials ... has long been recognised internationally as a large and complex issue.

This tension was echoed in the IndII report which discussed the reliance on international technical assistance. Stakeholders wanted to see more development of local consulting capacity. Pacific Women found that the use of technical advisers was not always transferring skills into organisations but rather transferring tasks to consultants.

The risk of not having a deliberate strategy

It is not enough to assume that evidence will translate to policy without a clear and deliberate strategy. The Cambodia Agricultural Value Chain Program and Eastern Indonesia National Roads Improvement Project evaluations report relatively modest policy influence and mention 'accidental' policy change and 'serendipity rather than strategy' respectively. In the Vietnam Mekong Delta Transport Infrastructure Program, the evaluation notes a weak link between producing the evidence and influencing the policy.

LEARNING FIVE: GOOD RELATIONSHIPS ARE CRITICAL TO SUPPORT POLICY INFLUENCE

When policy dialogue was the main form of knowledge exchange, the relationships formed between key project staff and counterparts was central to the effectiveness of supporting policy change. Levels of trust were dependent on these relationships, often formed over long periods. The degree of local ownership of activities was also engendered through strong relationships.

The role of knowledge broker was sometimes performed by the project implementers and sometimes by DFAT. The qualities needed in the key policy advisers for effective relationships included subject-matter expertise, excellent inter-personal skills and good cultural understanding. These qualities were an essential factor for successful policy influence in the Asian Development Bank's and World Health Organization's work in PNG and Governance for Growth.

In several cases the key to successful relationships was the colocation of relevant staff within the relevant departments. This was found to be a factor in the effectiveness of ,IndII, Pakistan Trade, Investment and Policy Reform Program, Tropical Cyclone Winston Education Response and the World Health Organization, PNG.

The longevity, acumen, local understanding and networks of national staff was also an important factor for good relationships, noted in many evaluation reports, in particular the Australia-Indonesia Partnership for Rural Economic Development, the Mekong Business Initiative and the Timor-Leste National Program for Village Development.

When poor relationships were evident, they detracted from the success of influencing activities. Examples include between the United Nations Population Fund and the National Statistics Office in PNG (PNG Health and HIV Multilateral Partnership) and between the implementing agency and the Ministry of Education and Training in Vanuatu (Vanuatu Strengthening Early Childhood Care and Education)

REFERENCES AND FURTHER READING

This paper does not include an exhaustive list of the possible approaches to policy influence, but rather categories found across the evaluations reviewed. Fuller accounts of the pathways for policy engagement and influence can be found in Overseas Development Institute working papers (Jones 2011, Young et al. 2015).

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