



# Donor engagement in policy dialogue: navigating the interface between knowledge and power

A think piece by Harry Jones, ODI<sup>1</sup>

*Many aid agencies and international development organisations are increasingly engaging in policy dialogue in developing countries. Why is this, and what tools do they need to do this effectively? This think piece attempts to answer these questions. It provides some challenges to common ways of understanding this area, followed by some tools with which to grapple with the issues.*

## Engagement with policy holds great potential

Public policy in developing countries is a complex matter, involving a diverse collection of players, a large range of moving parts, and long-evolved spoken and unspoken cultural and political norms. It can seem prohibitively opaque for external individuals or organisations to engage with. However, policy can deliver social and economic changes on a scale not possible through self-contained projects, and has the promise of catalysing more sustainable shifts in a country's make-up and developmental progress. Because of this potential, development agencies are increasingly engaging with policy in developing countries. This engagement can take many forms, involving a number of channels and activities. Table 1 outlines three categories:

TABLE 1: TYPES AND CHANNELS OF INFLUENCING<sup>2</sup>

| Type of influencing           | Where? Through what channels?   | How? By what means?  |
|-------------------------------|---|--|
| Evidence and advice           | National and international policy discourses/debates<br>Formal and informal meetings  | Research and analysis, 'good practice'<br>Evidence-based argument<br>Providing advisory support<br>Developing and piloting new policy approaches |
| Public campaigns and advocacy | Public and political debates in developing countries<br>Public meetings, speeches, presentations<br>Television, newspapers, radio and other media | Public communications and campaigns<br>'Public education'<br>Messaging<br>Advocacy   |
| Lobbying and negotiation      | Formal meetings<br>Semi-formal and informal channels<br>Membership and participation in boards and committees                                     | Face-to-face meetings and discussions<br>Relationships and trust<br>Direct incentives and diplomacy  |

<sup>1</sup> This think piece has been commissioned by the Office of Development Effectiveness to inform the Evaluation of Policy Dialogue (see [www.ode.usaid.gov.au](http://www.ode.usaid.gov.au)). However, the views and opinions expressed in this paper are those of the author only.

<sup>2</sup> Jones, 2010.

There are many possible goals which donors might have in these engagements with processes of policy change, such as:

- encouraging the adoption of new ideas and programs by development partners and promoting the uptake of pro-poor measures by national governments,
- improving the effectiveness of key players and the relationships between them, or
- building public support for a policy or political commitment to deliver public goods.

What is clear is that this can be a highly cost-effective approach for delivering agency goals. A recent Overseas Development Institute (ODI) study assessed the value for money of policy influencing activities undertaken by staff from the UK Department for International Development (DfID) working in the health sector (Clarke et al 2010).

In a recent study assessing the value for money of policy influencing activities undertaken by DFID, staff indicated that for relatively modest costs it is possible to achieve real policy change.

DFID was attributed to considerable influence over important policy changes, and was seen to be decisive for some key steps in the policy change process. Stakeholders indicated that in the absence of the DFID effort, the policy changes would have taken longer to emerge and would have been less well formulated. For relatively modest costs varying between £300,000 - £600,000 per program it was possible to leverage very large amounts of financial aid being spent in the sector. This contributed to outcomes such as: increased utilisation of health facilities for deliveries, skilled birth attendants and safe abortion in Nepal (which is likely to have contributed to a proven reduction in maternal mortality), some improvements in post natal care in a few Indian states and an increase in health facility utilisation in rural areas of Zambia (ibid).<sup>3</sup> Taking another approach, a World Bank report has attempted to estimate the cost effectiveness of high-profile evaluations which were taken up in policy, with returns such as US\$127 million in benefits from a US\$146,000 evaluation of the Indian employment assurance scheme (World Bank, 2004).

These kinds of changes are not easy to achieve, and require a significant allocation of staff time and application of leadership. A recent ODI study reviewed the success of different models of deploying advisory staff in DFID (Mendizabal, Jones and Clarke 2010). Some stark differences emerged between 'sector specific' advisors, where one professional member of staff covers one of the health or education sectors and engages in policy dialogue and influencing sector program design, and 'delegated cooperation' or 'silent partnership', where DFID contributes financial assistance to government policy in an area but is represented by a member of staff of another donor.

Sector-specific advisers were found in many contexts to have allowed DFID to have a substantial influence on policy and programming and on the wider donor community. They added value to sector programs by bringing new ideas and evidence based policy and good practice from elsewhere, and effectively pursued DFID priorities and addressed fiduciary issues at the sector level. Moreover, they were frequently seen to respond to the demands of government partners, and had a strong influence on the promotion of donor coordination and aid effectiveness.

A second study for DFID showed that DFID's own sector-specific advisers had a substantial effect on policy and programming in the wider donor community, more so than 'silent partnerships' where DFID is represented in policy discussions by another donor.

---

<sup>3</sup> It is important to add the caveat that this study was completed in a limited budget and timeframe, so as well as the fact that outcomes cannot be attributed solely to DFID influencing, evidence of outcomes was in some areas incomplete at time of publishing.

On the other hand, while delegated partnerships could have worked better with improved planning and foresight, the diminished ambition and leadership led to a correlated decrease in effectiveness. In many instances anticipated economies were not achieved and DFID's needs were not met. In some of the cases examined, in operating at arm's length DFID had no influence on policy or the direction of sectoral programs and some staff were not sure if DFID spending was achieving full value for money.

## Recognising the role of power

Policy engagement and dialogue often brings with it certain precepts, mindsets and assumptions which can prove troublesome. Policy engagement and dialogue is sometimes presumed to be apolitical, involving technical discussions and inputs which can be assumed to be seen as relatively 'neutral'. In other cases, there can be an underlying hope that bureaucrats and politicians might be keen to seize on donor advice as a solution to the problems they are facing, to help improve the effectiveness of policy they're making. Sometimes this stems from the background of staff, such as technical advisors who come from a more academic world; at other times it may be more an internalisation of the need for agencies to project an image of neutrality within the country they are operating in.

Possibly the biggest issue, however, is that these kinds of ideas can be embedded within agencies themselves, in the structures and processes which shape how they operate.

- Missions, purposes and goals in logical frameworks and other planning tools rarely mention the politics involved in reaching them or the nuance of how the goals were developed.
- Systems of approval for funding often require predominantly technical assessments (of economic benefits, etc.), rather than assessments of political feasibility.
- Performance frameworks judge success in idealised cycles, in terms of aggregated socio-economic indicators.

These stem from the 'rational model' of the policy process, which has been influential in the study of policy making and in public sector management for decades. This works around the idea of policy processes progressing through a sequence of stages—first setting the agenda by identifying key issues to address, then formulating policies which can address those problems, implementing those policies, and then evaluating the implementation to see if the policies have been effective. Knowledge is seen as providing instrumentally useful and apolitical inputs that improve policy, and policy-making works in a 'problem-solving' mode, according to reason and logic.

This can frequently cause concrete problems with efforts at policy engagement. Focusing on technical discussions can lead to 'technocratic' policy making, where key decisions are made in consultation only within small policy elite, while a large number of political actors and public groups are unaware of, or unable to engage in processes. This kind of phenomenon can lead to policies which have disregarded or gone against the preferences of smaller or larger portions of the population, and sometimes directly against

The rational, linear 'policy cycle' approach has given rise to the idea that policy engagement and dialogue can somehow be relatively neutral. There is increasing evidence to suggest that this is not the case, and understanding power dynamics helps give a far more nuanced picture of what is really happening in policy processes.

democratically expressed wishes. In other cases, the exclusion from the policy debate of certain key players leads to a lack of ownership over measures put in policies or legislation—which then, unsurprisingly, leads to a lack of implementation and very little real impact of the 'policy' which is meant to be on the statute book.

The issue of lack of implementation occurs only when dialogue achieves some kind of success in changing policy—more often, government representatives seem strangely unresponsive to advice which seems self-evidently valuable from the perspective of donor staff. Individuals based in a country for a while often become cynical as to the potential for change, having seen very little ‘rational problem solving’ from the government representatives they work with.

The rational model of the policy process has a good deal to do with these issues. Our understanding has gone through a number of evolutions and revolutions since the study of the policy process began in the middle of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Since the rational model emerged in the 1950s, the next generation of models challenged and built on it, recognising first that real-world processes were significantly messier. Policy does not result from a well-structured problem-solving enterprise, but a series of overlapping and inter-related sites and spaces where a wide variety of actors must make pragmatic decisions based on a number of factors and in the face of many uncertainties. In aggregate, then, this becomes a process that can be erratic, discontinuous and nonlinear.

Most importantly, the more recent raft of theories has overlaid these messy interactions with the operations of power: so the process involves reproductions of and challenges to existing power balances, and a number of episodes of contest, negotiation, legitimisation and marginalisation.

Although there is now a bewildering array of frameworks for understanding and working with policy, we can focus on three interlocking dimensions which characterise the main themes of different stories about what drives the process, and how power operates (Sumner and Jones 2008).

**Agency:** Agency focuses on how policy processes are shaped by the decisions, actions and interactions of the actors involved. To understand cause and effect we need to look to how individuals, groups, organisations and networks set about achieving their goals and go about performing certain functions.

**Structure:** It is also crucial to recognise the way in which contextual factors, historical experiences, and institutions shape and determine the ways in which actors behave and interact. Formal and informal ‘rules of the game’ pattern and constrain processes at every stage, shaping both the opportunities for change and the imperatives actors must work to.

**Discourse:** The third key force lies in the concepts, ideas and information relevant for policy. Policy is driven in part by the interaction and intertwining of knowledge and power, and shaped through interactive processes of communication, discussion, analysis and judgement.

## Moving beyond dichotomy of knowledge and power

All this is not to say that individuals in donor organisations are somehow blind to the operations of power—it is more like a perceived dichotomy between knowledge and power. For example, frameworks such as political economy analysis are designed to give agency staff an understanding of the political nature of making and implementing policy, but they ignore the role of knowledge and dialogue in change. As such, when engaging in discussions and dialogue with government partners there seems to be a choice between cynicism, from political economy analysis which tends to suggest that people will mostly be moved into action through material incentives and little else, and optimism, whereby a few ‘good eggs’ are presumed to be operating in an altruistic, problem-solving mould. Donors’ friends and ‘champions’ inside policy are often seen to somehow be operating outside the normal systems and rules, and moments of positive policy change are somehow a result of a momentary rationality bounded by hard-nosed politicking.

The reality is not such an either-or situation. Policy debates in developing countries, and dialogue between development partners and country governments, involve both knowledge and rationality, as well as politics and power. In fact, the real nub of what transpires in policy processes is often found at the interaction *between* knowledge and power—where a crucial part of what happens in the games of power and politics is the negotiation of perspectives, the flows of information, and the deployment of arguments and knowledge.<sup>4</sup> The relevance and status afforded to an idea, a ‘fact’ or a perspective has as much to do with the coalitions supporting it, how it ‘fits’ with prevailing institutions, and so on.

A forthcoming book by ODI examines what happens at the interfaces between knowledge, policy and power. Policy debates around the world involve both knowledge and rational approaches, as well as politics and power relations. The four axes used to understand these relationships are: the political context; the values, beliefs and credibility of the actors involved, the types of knowledge and the actions of knowledge intermediaries.

Moving beyond the dichotomy of knowledge and power is a movement which has gripped political theory and political philosophy for decades, with the discussion of ‘deliberative democracy’, whereby democratic accountability and the justification of government authority relates to processes of fair communication and inclusive, reasoned decision-making (for example see Habermas, 1984). However, it is also the focus of a good deal of empirically-grounded and practically-focused work and it is to this which this piece now turns.

## Making sense of the knowledge-policy interface

A three year ODI project titled ‘Knowledge, Policy and Power’ (KPP) has pulled together the research available on this issue. From this emerge four key areas which shape the way knowledge and power interact. Policy processes vary widely, from country to country, issue to issue, even from one time to another, but this does not make things entirely context-specific. There are some common dimensions which shape the process and the interactions between knowledge and policy. This section provides some of the headline messages, and then the frameworks developed in the forthcoming KPP book (Jones et al 2012) are briefly introduced in order to give AusAID staff some tools and concepts for engaging in the messy interactions at the interface between knowledge and policy.

### Political context

The first message is that a nuanced understanding of the political context is necessary to improve the success of policy dialogue. Adopting the position that ‘it’s all down to political will’ is not only inaccurate but also counterproductive to effective action: the term often arises in discussions about critical decision-makers in policy processes. Defined generally only by its absence, the notion of ‘political will’ is based on the idea that policy decisions are ultimately dependent on and driven by abstract or isolated political decrees. This has the effect of simplifying the range of influences at play in policy decisions while foreclosing further analytical possibilities. Indeed, one of the flagships of the increased emphasis on political context analysis in development practice, the Drivers of Change approach, has itself often included an undefined notion of ‘political will’ in its methodology, which has contributed to inconsistent quality in its application and outputs (Leftwich, 2006).

Adopting the position that ‘it’s all down to political will’ can be counterproductive. Instead, it is crucial to recognise that ‘political will’ emerges from a context, the result of multiple push and pull factors affecting individuals’ choices.

---

<sup>4</sup> Understood broadly, see ‘Types of Knowledge’ on page 8.

‘Political will’ emerges from a context: rather than policy processes functioning with a linear unidirectional flow of momentum, the ‘political will’ of any actor—and how it affects the policy development process—depends on the multiple push and pull factors playing on their individual choice horizons. This means it is crucial to disentangle the underlying dynamics. The KPP book sets out a framework with five key variables which are applicable to a broad range of state types, and which should help move readers beyond starting assumptions. The five variables are separation of powers, regulation and competitiveness of political participation, informal politics, external forces and capacity to absorb change.

The **separations of power**, including the triangulation and separations of authority between legislative, executive and judicial functions, are an important part of the political context which helps outsiders to understand policy dialogue. For example, in more autocratic regimes it can be easier for dialogue efforts to secure the initial impetus for reform (due to strong leadership and unchecked executive) while consolidating policy changes can be more complex given the need for inputs from the legislature and citizenry.

The **regulation and competitiveness of political participation** is also important—for example, consolidated democracies can lead to a high demand for new knowledge and perspectives, and hence offers the possibility of multiple entry points for dialogue on an issue, but also the need to locate high-impact policy windows. In fragile and post-conflict context the weak lateral accountability and frequent mistrust of civil society can mean that technical knowledge, especially when brokered by independent (and potentially external) actors can have greater influence.

It is also important to consider both formal and informal political dynamics. **Informal politics**, whether personality politics, patronage or other phenomena, can differ greatly from country to country and where it is strong it can override established procedures. Working with the grain of these networks and norms, and directly engaging with key individuals may be what is required to achieve influence in the short-term.

The relationship to **external forces** can be an important factor, with autocratic contexts more liable to be protective and closed while fragile states can sometimes be susceptible to multiple outside influences and trends sweeping over them.

Finally, it is important to look at whether the policymaking context has **capacity to absorb change**, particularly regime change. The kinds of changes achievable if the political context is one of command-hierarchy will be very different from that needed in an influence-network context. And fragile states can lead to unstable incentive structures for working with government partners.

By drawing on these factors, agencies engaging in policy dialogue should be able to take a more strategic view of the political context in which they are working. This involves:

- being aware of power dynamics,
- identifying veto players and developing strategies to work with them effectively, and
- identifying and weighing up potential entry points.

## Actors

Political context is a good starting point, but not enough on its own to equip AusAID staff with the perspectives and understanding necessary for engaging with policy dialogue. It is also important to

analyse the role and behaviour of actors. As discussed above, it is dangerous to approach policy dialogue with the hope that government or other actors are likely to work in a fully altruistic ‘problem-solving’ mode (or even that some subset of those groups might miraculously do so). But it is also not quite as simple as imputing self-interest. Instead, readers need to consider the often messy interplay of a variety of factors, in particular, actor interests, their values and beliefs, and credibility and knowledge networks.

Looking at the role of **interests** is an important starting point—stakeholders in policy dialogue are more likely to take on board suggestions and advice which fit with or reinforce their interests, and conversely issues which go directly against the interests of key political players are unlikely to make it on the agenda. Arguments and evidence deployed can often be used in dialogue as ammunition to

It is dangerous to presume that any set of actors will approach policy dialogue in an altruistic ‘problem-solving’ mode, but it is also not quite as simple as imputing self-interest. Motivations and behaviour emerge from a combination of interests, values and beliefs, and credibility.

help achieving or reinforcing interests. Sometimes communication can serve as a strategy to mobilise coalitions of groups who are affected by a problem or proposed change, but equally decision-making elites may try to conceal information from the broader public and conduct decisions behind closed doors in order to maintain their grip. It is also important to understand the incentives driving organisations purported to represent certain groups (for example, some civil society organisations), and those which shape the behaviour of researchers and other knowledge-producers, as continued funding or career progression can pull in the opposite direction to genuine assessments.

Assessing the balance of interests on an issue that is the focus of policy dialogue is a good starting point for understanding the opportunities and constraints in promoting or implementing particular reforms. Where the interests of key decision-making groups or other powerful actors who have a strong hold over decision-makers do not align with proposed changes, it is likely to decrease the chance of securing change through dialogue, whereas seemingly ‘win-win’ issues are likely to garner broad support.

Even if an actor does attempt to estimate rationally the costs and benefits of different options for any key decision, this calculation is based on certain assumptions about how the world works, about the important factors in understanding change and about what is of value. As such, there is growing recognition of the critical role that **beliefs and values** play in shaping policy decision making.<sup>5</sup> Certain policies will fit in with the values, ideologies or beliefs of key decision-makers, political parties, or government bodies, and may be taken up even in if they go against their (perceived) direct self-interest—as the example of white males voting for affirmative action policies demonstrates. Some topics may be effectively ‘taboo’, while other ideas are appealed to a broad range of actors in order to try to build constituencies and mobilise action. Framing arguments and inputs to policy dialogue with relation to these values will be a way to enhance the likely success of engagement, whereas often even in the face of (what many consider as) strong evidence, actors may refuse to accept arguments and suggestions put forwards which counter their values.

**Credibility** is the set of the beliefs and/or knowledge that are more persuasive to particular groups, and it can help explain the weight different people give to different pieces of information. It is often built within knowledge networks, such as ‘epistemic communities’ (Haas 1992), loose networks (formal or informal, usually transnational) which specialise on developing and applying technical knowledge on specific issues, clarifying particular problems or common sets of practices for example. Being a member of this network grants a certain level of credibility, greater than an actor who is perceived to be a ‘lone

---

<sup>5</sup> A belief is an idea an actor has about the world—an explicit or implicit proposition they hold to be true. A value is a normative idea, which might entail seeing certain actions but not others as appropriate and permissible, holding a certain kind of outcome as of primary importance (for example welfare and wellbeing), or valuing a certain way of life.

voice' on an issue. Actors engaging in policy dialogue may look to bolster their own credibility and standing within networks by either co-opting them to suit their personal preferences or pushing particular pieces of evidence in order to strengthen the network to have more influence on policy. More generally, relying on a small group for policy inputs is often unlikely to produce all the knowledge needed, and engaging in dialogue and discussion with more actors is likely to bring about a greater understanding. This means that development agency staff will also need to think clearly about who else is in their knowledge network—who is currently deemed to be credible, whether this can be changed and how to leverage different types of expertise.

Engaging in policy dialogue will give development agencies key insights into how to improve the content and implementation of policy, but will also make it clear that they are an integral part of the power dynamics surrounding knowledge and policy. It will need a greater self-awareness of the political nature of their actions. Inputs to policy dialogues do not speak for themselves; interests, values, beliefs and registers of credibility will affect how inputs are framed.

### Types of knowledge

While research continues to play a dominant role in policy making, it needs to be complemented by other forms of knowledge, and the term 'knowledge' itself should not be conceived only as research and formal analysis. Influenced by the progress of empirical science, early studies of the policy process were based on the positivist approach to knowledge, conceiving of it in terms of 'high-quality' analysis providing apolitical inputs to improve policy in a neutral way. However, the positivist conception of knowledge as 'true, justified belief, systematically examined', has been comprehensively overhauled in theoretical debates. Further, there is a much more practical reason why the positivist approach has less traction: it is nearly universally acknowledged that policy makers draw on much more than strictly 'scientific' knowledge.

Lomas et al (2005, p1) argue that policy decisions are based not just on 'scientific evidence' or knowledge gained through formal research, but also on colloquial evidence, or 'anything that establishes a fact or gives reason to believe in something'. Important sources of knowledge to guide policy include values, political judgement, habits and tradition, and professional experience and expertise. Sometimes, policy makers will draw heavily on scientific knowledge for a specific purpose; at other times their use of knowledge will be opportunistic or reflect explicit efforts by other actors to promote its uptake.

'Knowledge' should not be conceived of as only formal research and analysis. What counts as 'legitimate knowledge' is itself politically determined, and there are different types of knowledge which are relevant for policy – each of which has its own strengths and weaknesses as well as unique power dynamics in linking with policy.

Even when scientific knowledge does inform policy, it is as one among many inputs. The definition of what counts as 'legitimate knowledge' is itself politically determined (and different from context to context), and so another motivation for broadening our lens to include different types of knowledge is in order to capture and begin to probe the power dynamics involved in linking knowledge to policy. To provide a handle on this, KPP have developed a three-way categorisation of 'types of knowledge' which are relevant for policy, each of which has their own characteristics, strengths and weaknesses, and unique power dynamics when brokered into policy (Jones 2009, Jones et al 2012).

**Research-based knowledge** is knowledge sourced according to the best protocols of research and the requirements of individual specialisations. Produced by scientists, academics and professional groups, its foundations are based on empirical observation, independence and objectivity, learning about issues through theorising, validation and teaching. It is often produced



according to career incentives for academics, which tend to put the advancement of knowledge ahead of practical usage; alternatively, policy-focused research is frequently produced in the mode of consultancies. While it has the potential to be extremely valuable resource for policy dialogue, research-based knowledge does also have potential downsides. When debates are couched in highly technical terms and concepts this serves (intentionally or not) to exclude large groups of stakeholders from the process. This has been deployed, for example, in environmental assessments which gloss over highly political choices about winners and losers by painting them as purely scientific or technical. In addition, when actors 'translate' research-based knowledge for non-expert audiences they wield significant power to frame messages and steer debates.

**Practice-informed knowledge** is knowledge from experience of implementing policy and practice, or gained more generally through hands-on action. Often highly tacit in nature, it tends to be held by individuals and organisations with long histories of operating in an area or with tackling an issue, and has its roots in 'know-how', built-up work experience and understanding of what works and does not in specific contexts. Where it is made explicit and formalised, this is often with relation to quite specific organisational processes (for example, approval or evaluation processes), and as such can be framed around or built on values and principles contained in organisations goals and mandates or accountability processes (and hence will not attempt to question them). While practical knowledge should be a strong input to policy dialogues, it can also become troublesome and have certain downsides such as where strong policy 'narratives' are built up around certain areas of work and organisations. This can mean (due to organisational imperatives and career incentives) that knowledge is produced to confirm pre-existing preferences, and policy models can survive even in the face of considerable evidence of major downsides.

**Citizen knowledge** is held by citizens, both individually and collectively, drawing on their daily lives; it is knowledge of a place, a culture, a people, and their problems, gained through direct experience. This tends to be highly tacit in nature, rarely formalised, and as such can be difficult for outsiders to access without considerable sensitivity. It is often brokered into policy dialogues through representatives such as civil society organisations or indigenous groups, and democratic elections and participatory processes represent attempts to bridge citizen perspectives into policy. However, all too often the actual influence of peoples' expressed voice is minimal or tokenistic, as certain actors hold the power to frame and marginalise it. Another issue is that sometimes commonly held beliefs and preferences can reflect and sustain inequalities and power imbalances, or can lead to 'populist' policies which satisfy popular sentiment but may be unsustainable.

Complementing these three is a supporting role played by **data**. For any type of knowledge there are always reasons to collect facts, statistics and observations, which can provide a very valuable 'stock' to draw on for policy dialogue. However, it is crucial to understand that they do not emerge of their own accord—decisions must be made in advance of what data to collect and how, so it will still have certain normative ideas and methodological assumptions embedded in it.

### **Knowledge interaction processes**

The final element to consider is the processes and channels through which knowledge and policy interact. In policy dialogue, a variety of actors broker, translate and communicate knowledge from a variety of sources. Different spaces and windows used for policy dialogue activities construct various opportunities and channels for drawing on information, assessments, and expertise. Information which policy makers, donors and others draw upon is mediated in a number of ways by a variety of actors and processes.

Therefore, one headline message needs to be spelt out: it is not necessary to be badged a 'knowledge intermediary' in order to play an important intermediary and brokering role. There is no particular requirement for intermediaries to work solely as knowledge producers or as knowledge users, or in the space between the two. Instead individuals, teams or organisations need to consider how they act as knowledge intermediaries at different times for different issues, and the ways in which they do this is not politically neutral. What knowledge is brokered, and the ways in which messages and frames are translated, is infused with power; there are many challenges entailed in maintaining legitimacy and objectivity and, by taking the role of filtering and framing information, there are opportunities to introduce cognitive or political biases or preferences for change. Intentionally or not, donors have considerable potential to reconfigure the social and organisational relationships (such as understandings, rules and agreements) that underpin the use of knowledge in support of innovation and change.

It is not necessary to be labelled a 'knowledge intermediary' in order to play an important role brokering knowledge. Information is channelled through its use by policy makers, donors and others, in the different spaces used for policy dialogue. These processes construct and mediate various opportunities for using information,

KPP's forthcoming book, building on the work of Michaels (2009), sets out a framework which explores these processes through functional categories. We lay out six functions which help to clarify how actors can add value when performing intermediary roles: how they contribute, the incentives that influence their behaviour and potential ways of measuring their impact. In addition, this functions approach also helps shed light on the power relationships with which knowledge intermediaries must deal.

**Informing** is the process of disseminating content to targeted decision-makers and decision-influencers, making information easily accessible and digestible. Examples include factsheets, research synopses, and end-of-project seminars. The strength of this approach is the wide reach, as disseminating content through the internet allows a very large number of stakeholders to have access to the knowledge. On the other hand, since information is presented 'pre-digested', what is also disseminated is a certain frame or approach to an issue, and it assumes that the communicator has correctly understood the problem in the first place. There is also limited exchange between the producers and users of the knowledge, with decision-makers left to take or leave the messages.

**Linking** with the expertise needed for a particular policy area or within a particular discipline, helps policy makers address a specific policy issue by structured inputs from specific experts. Examples include commissioned research consultancies, programme advisory committees, focus groups. This can be a relatively cheap and quick way of channeling necessary knowledge into set points of a policy process. It is important to recognise, however, that the 'users' of the knowledge tend to remain in control of this, setting the parameters by which experts are consulted, how to frame questions and how much budget to allocate. Decisions can still be made behind closed doors, and this kind of consulting has been criticised in participatory processes for sourcing citizen knowledge as functioning simply to pacify stakeholders through token participation.

**Matchmaking** is active networking and facilitation to match expertise to need across issues and disciplines, or finding experts with relevant knowledge from another discipline and helping them take a strategic overview to address the fullness of the issue. Examples include departmental expert advisory committees, general conferences, mapping the evidence base for an issue. This has the benefits of recognising the need for reciprocity, interactions and relationships between decision-makers and those who hold important knowledge or perspectives. There can be some difficulties as matchmakers must command the trust of all those involved and, in some situations,

without careful supervision relationships can fall into pre-established social grooves and structures.

**Engaging** is the inclusive framing of issues to bring a common understanding to the decision-making process, contracting people or organisations to provide knowledge on an as-needed basis. Examples include contracted research programmes, working groups, and citizen juries. It has great benefits through opening the decision-making process to encourage genuine participation and ownership, and allowing transparency for experts, observers and citizens to see where knowledge is being used. Potential downsides are barriers to engagement such as technical framings of issues or questions, or logistical and financial barriers which can exclude those such as poor people or people in remote areas from providing proper inputs.

**Collaborating** involves helping both sides of the discussion jointly frame the process and negotiate the substance of the issue to address a particular problem. Examples include agreements where there is equality in the relationships between actors, such as memoranda of understanding, joint agreements, or communities of practice. This lengthens and deepens the collaborative process, strengthening relationships and offering the chance to transform understandings of and approaches to an issue, as well as the relationship between different stakeholders. The main downside are the large investments required in terms of time and money, although there can also be challenges to overcome in order to create the equitable relationship from an unbalanced starting point.

**Building capacity** involves stewarding long-term relationships, fostering organisational learning, and co-producing knowledge. The focus is on co-production of knowledge and joint learning from doing; the arrangements are self-sustaining in terms of both funding and function, with all sides contributing resources. Examples include co-management arrangements, local enterprise partnerships, and self-sustaining consortia. It has the benefit of improving the ability of key stakeholders to react to multiple and emerging issues, and to maintain the institutions they need to respond to their needs. The challenges again are largely about time and money, as well as overcoming power imbalances in capacity building relationships.

Building an understanding of these functions should help individuals and teams engaging in policy dialogue. First, it allows them to interpret how links between knowledge and policy are structured in their particular context, and how this affects the quality of communication, and the chance of messages being taken on board. Second, it provides a toolbox of approaches to help them influence the process through brokering knowledge, and strategically altering decision-processes by embedding knowledge interaction processes.

## Conclusion

This think piece has highlighted the importance of policy dialogue, and emphasised that engaging in policy processes requires recognising the role of power, and the multiple and diverse ways in which understanding and action are linked and interact.

The concepts and ideas in this paper should give AusAID staff the tools that will help them consider a broader range of approaches for their policy dialogue activities, and to make more strategic decisions about which approach to take—whether this involves carefully selecting between entry points within the political context, choosing carefully from a broader range of actors to engage with, interpreting and drawing on a wider variety of knowledge sources or being more purposeful in brokering knowledge. Such clear, reasoned intent is crucial for successful dialogue activities.

As well as providing tools for understanding policy dialogue, this should also foster the application of more diverse goals for these activities. It will be important to have more intermediary, process-focused goals as well as looking at outcomes in terms of impact on wellbeing triggered by changes in policy. Changes in the quality and inclusiveness of policy processes are also important for the ownership, sustainability and impact of policy outcomes.

## The author

**Harry Jones** is a Research Fellow in the Overseas Development Institute RAPID (Research and Policy in Development) group, currently based in Nepal. He has worked for ODI since 2006, focusing on the role of knowledge in Southern policy processes, with fieldwork experience including: Nepal, Tanzania, Philippines and Indonesia. He has expertise in the policy process and political economy analysis, in particular on the interaction between knowledge and power in policy making and implementation. Harry was principal researcher and lead author on a 3-year ODI research project on 'Knowledge, Policy and Power', soon to be published by the Policy Press, and has experience carrying out studies on the political economy of research uptake in a number of countries. He also has extensively experience on the topic of evaluation, complexity and results.

## References

- J Clarke & E Mendizabal et al, *DFID influencing in the health sector: A preliminary assessment of cost effectiveness*, ODI Report, ODI, London, 2009.
- H Jones, N Jones, L Shaxson & D Walker, *Knowledge, policy and power in international development: a practical guide*, Bristol: Policy Press, (2012 forthcoming).
- H Jones, *Policy-making as discourse: a review of recent knowledge-to-policy literature*, joint ODI-IKM emergent working paper. Bonn: EADI, 2009.
- H Jones, *A guide to monitoring and evaluating policy influence*, ODI Background note, ODI, London 2011.
- A Leftwich, *From drivers of change to the politics of development: Refining the analytical framework to understand the politics of the places where we work Part 3: Final Report*, Department of Politics, University of York, York, 2006.
- E Mendizabal, H Jones, & J Clarke, *Review of emerging models of sharing advisory capacity in Health and Education sectors*, ODI, London, 2010.
- S Michaels, 'Matching knowledge brokering strategies to environmental policy problems and settings', *Environmental Science & Policy*, vol. 12, no 7, 2009, 2009, pp. 994-1011.
- A Sumner & N Jones, 'The politics of poverty policy: are pro-poor policy processes expert led or citizen-led?', *International Development Planning Review*, vol. 30, issue 4, 2008.
- World Bank, *Influential Evaluations: Evaluations that improved performance and impacts of development programmes*, Washington, 2004.