

Our research must eventually become irrelevant: this is how to prove we had an impact on policymaking

by Blog Admin

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Researchers must take time to listen to what politicians want. To have an impact on policymaking, we must try to marry our research interests with political agendas and manifestos, writes [Herryman Moono](#).



In my introduction to the International Growth Centre, I was asked with fellow economists what I hoped to see in my future, say, where would I be after ten years of growth oriented research. I stated that if we are to be relevant in the ten years of our operation, we should be irrelevant in our 11th year, for if after ten years we are still facing the same problem and claiming to be guiding policy aimed at solving that problem, then we have been irrelevant for ten years!

The relevance of any development oriented research at any particular time aimed at addressing a particular problem lies in it becoming irrelevant after policy has been implemented. As absurd as it might sound, I strongly feel this is the way to think: The relevance of our work in development research must dissipate with time, this would be the only signal that we have delivered and are moving on.

Developing countries have provided great opportunities for research in all spheres of academia: From the natural sciences to the social and behavioural sciences. But after decades of immense studies on African growth and development, most African countries' growth remains subdued, and research continues.

With all the documented advice from 'expats' in respective fields of growth and development, from consultancies, national and international think tanks and indeed local resource personnel, we seem to have failed to solve the puzzle of growth and development for most parts of the developing world. My experience so far suggests that perhaps we have not taken time to listen to what the politicians want. Perhaps we have not persuaded them enough to buy into our policy agenda, which, unfortunately we may have formulated without even taking a glimpse into their political agenda or indeed party manifestos, through which they reign.

A classic case of the need to get closer to policy makers came during a meeting with the Vice-President of Zambia, Dr. Guy Scot, a Cambridge trained Economist. After our brief of our growth research work in Zambia, the vice president wondered why we have not ventured into research looking at employment creation. Jokingly he stated that even Keynes's classic work was on the general theory of employment, so why were we not helping the government create more jobs for the people given on country constraints by researching in that area? Valid question indeed!

That encounter could perhaps explain why academics and researchers feel that their works and advice are not adhered to: Perhaps they do not answer the questions the policy makers are asking. Sifting through government departments, one will be amazed at the amount of literature and briefs addressing diverse development concerns, accumulated over the years, yet still facing the same questions. In my view, I may naively claim that most of developing countries' problems may have already been solved on paper; operationalisation of those proposed solutions should be the next ideal step in development policy research.

However, we cannot move into implementation and operational guidance if our works are not aligned to the thinking of policy makers. We need to get as close as possible, our policy must be sold in such a way that while maintaining the research rigour, it provides clear directions with tradeoffs clearly marked. We must, however, guard against inclining to strict academic research for policy for most policy recommendations or

indeed papers that have influenced policy in my country have never made it to a high profile journal.

So therefore, what is our relevance now if later we will still be faced with the same challenges we ought to have had solved earlier? For once, we should aim for and accept an irrelevance phase in our development research work, unless of course, we are merely doing academic exercises disguised as development policy.

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