

# MIND THE GAP: Policy Development and Research on Conflict Issues

Cheyenne Church

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## INTRODUCTION

Since the 1950's, a steadily increasing amount of research and scholarly attention has been paid to the resolution of violent conflict. Today this has become the foundation of a robust body of knowledge focusing on non-military approaches to preventing, managing and ending conflicts. Despite this, the public and political perception of force as the primary response to conflict remains.

This research project examines the relationship between the research and policy worlds, attempting to ascertain if and then how research informs policy development. It also provides a series of tactics that policy oriented researchers can adopt to increase their influence.

## FUNDAMENTAL RESEARCH QUESTION

The fundamental question addressed in this paper is: to what extent, if any, is research on conflict issues being used in the development of policy?

Conflict-focused research's primary use is one of a conceptual/enlightenment function for policymakers. The research influences the context within which policy is developed by illuminating new trends, offering different paradigms, improving the understanding of a problem or coining new and improved terms.

In a distant second place, research was found to perform a symbolic/legitimative role where it is used to confirm existing notions or to support a decision

that has already been made. Finally, in the rarest of cases, research is used in an instrumental/engineering way, informing decisions and actions that would not have been taken without this input.

Understanding what constitutes 'use' is still a highly problematic construct and for this study was defined in the broadest sense. Further it is important to acknowledge the methodological problems in proving or measuring cause and effect in research utilisation.

## FINDINGS

### Realities of the Policymakers World

- **Expectations:** By and large, the working culture in which civil servants function does not expect them to stay current with the latest research. One source indicated that 'staying current' is more about the ability to 'get somebody who can talk to the minister about it' than being knowledgeable about the latest thinking individually.
- **Catalysts:** Ironically one of the few catalysts indicated by policymakers to seeking out research is the need to develop policy. Research was seen to contribute in a few specific ways: through refining or furthering departmental thinking on an issue, by interpreting the relevancy and applicability of international approaches to local situations and by identifying relevant data and information. However, approximately half of the sources who indicated policy development as a



catalyst for using research, pointed out in the same breath that real strategic policy development through research was a rarity.

- **Research Sources:** A clear hierarchy is evident, in order of preference; sources tend to be personal contacts, journals, events, the Internet and finally books.
- **Reviewing Publications:** Where information is abundant, submissions are rarely read in full due to lack of time. A 'skim and dip' pattern emerged, where policymakers skim the executive summary looking for new stuff and then dip-in to the main report to find out more.
- **Credibility:** The majority of interviewees stated that the researcher's track record is the most important determinant of that researchers' credibility.
- **Neutrality:** Few researchers are deemed to be truly neutral and it would appear that assessments of neutrality are based on a mix of researcher reputation and the content of the research output.

#### The Impediments to Interaction and Influence

- **Differences:** There are a number of differences between the research and policy world that act as impediments to effective utilisation of research. Different concepts of acceptable timeframes, where the notion of short, medium and long term represent significantly shorter periods to the policy community, can minimise interaction. Contradictory values, differing approaches to conflict resolution and fear or perceptions of one's role also deter influence.
- **Inhibitors for Policymakers:** Policymakers have their own personal inhibitors that prevent them from initiating effective interactions with researchers. A sense of ownership of policies was deemed by a small proportion of the interviewees to cause a resistance to change. A lack of time further dictates policymakers' actions and limits willingness to cast a wide net in looking for relevant research.

- **Frustrations with Research:** Why is research not utilised once received? The four main complaints, in order of significance, as indicated by the frequency with which they were mentioned in the study, were lack of quality, poor presentation, timing problems and lack of contextual understanding.

#### Seven Tactics to Improve Research Utilisation

1. Select a strategy appropriate to the policy goal.
2. Design the research project with policy influence in mind.
3. Develop an understanding of the policymaker's working context.
4. Engage with potential users.
5. Develop an actionable option analysis.
6. Disseminate and present user-friendly research results.
7. Capitalize on windows of opportunity.

#### METHODS

A multi-pronged methodology was adopted for this project: a review of social science literature, a questionnaire to academic/researchers, and 21 interviews with policymakers in the United Kingdom, Republic of Ireland, European Union and Northern Ireland in fall of 2002. The majority of the analysis is based on the interview data due to the subjective nature of the topic, the importance of nuance in language and the paucity of literature specific to conflict issues.

#### CONCLUSION

The assumption that governments at all levels will improve their ability to handle situations of conflict in step with scholarly advancements may be far from the reality. Yet the onus does not lie entirely on the shoulders of the academic/research community, as no matter how policy-oriented a researcher may be they are still on the outside of the policy labyrinth. It is not only the responsibility of the researcher to insure that their findings appear on the right desk at the right time, but also for policymakers to look for the newest work to inform better decision making.

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#### INCORE

University of Ulster, Magee Campus, Aberfoyle House  
Northland Road, Londonderry, Northern Ireland, BT48 7JA

Tel: +44 (0) 28 7137 5500, Fax: +44 (0) 28 7137 5510, Email: [incore@incore.ulst.ac.uk](mailto:incore@incore.ulst.ac.uk)

