

## **Drylands: Bridging Research and Policy – some discussion points**

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Is there a gap between research and policy? We need to examine whether research actually contributes to the aims of policy and at the same time ask whether research can actually help to formulate and to change policy. Recent studies at the international NGO, the Overseas Development Institute, London, have examined many aspects of how research and policy interact with each and what is the place of both in the nation state and in the international field.

The following notes are based on some of these studies as well as on past experience. They are presented under headings to make discussion more focussed.

### **Democracy and research**

Democracy does not seem to be essential for research policy to work together. What is essential, however, is that the researchers, in presenting both their research plans and their research results, *must speak the language of the policy-maker*. This is not necessarily the language of the scientist, but it is the language of the intelligent lay-person

### **Political “Will” and the environment**

The environment is central to the future of dry lands and political support for environmental matters is essential. How to achieve this? Good Environmental Governance depends on willingness of leaders and people to agree – how can we make our research ideas support this good governance?

### **Time is not on our side**

Policy makers are notoriously short of time. They need short and clear expositions of knowledge and ideas – and they will often prefer the short briefing even when it is wrong. It is vital that we spend time making sure that our messages to the policy-makers are not only correct, clear and simple but that the knowledge we impart fits into the agenda-setting process.

### **What factors make policy makers receptive to our ideas?**

There is widespread agreement that if policy makers realise that policy change is needed, they will be more receptive to researcher’s ideas. If civil society wants a change of policy then the process is more complicated, but here there is a three-cornered discussion in which the researcher must talk sense to the other parties. That is a major part of the challenge.

### **Crisis**

In times of crisis policy is likely to change rapidly. Indeed, drylands are often in a crisis situation. In these situations the researcher must be flexible and develop lateral

thinking. There is often no time for “research” - what is needed is wisdom and reliable knowledge from experience and past research.

### **Sectoralism**

The major concern of rural people in dry lands is livestock. True or false? Are we following too sectoral a line? What vision of the future in dry lands does the policy maker have? Is it the same as ours? What role do animals play in it?

### **Role of NGOs**

Many NGOs, national and international, are in the forefront of trying to change government policies and international treaties. How can researchers link with them for the mutual benefit of dry lands and their people? Is this as wide a gap as it first appears to be?

### **Dangers of the “Ivory Tower”**

Researchers who seldom look outside their own subject area often contribute to the policy maker’s view that they are “the opposite of action”. Whereas the researcher hopes to be “the opposite of ignorance”. Here again, reliable knowledge is the research output that is most desired. And the researchers’ databases and experience are among their most valuable assets.

### **What is our influence?**

It is not always easy to influence policy-makers. They may not want our messages and other sectors and subjects may be grabbing the headlines. Sometimes we may achieve more by changing processes than by changing policies. For instance, developing participatory approaches to dryland management, especially where communal or government-owned land is concerned. Action-based research is one important way ahead in this regard.

Peter Wood

### Late addition

After the completion of this paper the following reference was released by CIFOR. It was presented at the UNFF-4 meeting in Brazzaville and gives valuable insights into the relationship between research and policy. It is in Microsoft Power Point format and is available from the Center for International Forestry Research:

Spilsbury, M and Nasi, R (2004) From Science to Policy: Getting Forestry Research into Policy and Practice. CIFOR. 34 page Microsoft Power Point presentation to UNFF-4 meeting, Brazzaville, 2004