

From Research to Policy: The Missing Links

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ABSTRACT Social sciences operate at two distinct but interrelated levels – the conceptual-theoretical and observational-empirical. The utilization of these levels is to traverse the array of social, political, economic and environmental problems confronting the human society. The essence of which is to help in problem solving especially through policy formulation to address the problems. Policies are usually based on theoretical and empirical evidence. There is reciprocal relationship between policy and research. Policy formulation is not an end in the continuum process but a means to an end as researches are needed to evaluate, modify or change the policy. The paper further submits that there is little influence of social sciences on policy formulation in Nigeria. The paper identifies several factors responsible for this inefficiency of research results in influencing policy formulation which include inadequate research funds, minimal reconstructive stance, 'promotion-driven' research and so on. The paper suggests a massive re-engineering of the field of the social sciences in Nigeria with the establishment of 'House of Science' which will facilitate research communication and dissemination to policy makers.

INTRODUCTION

Policies do not just evolve, they are based on available precedence and evidence. Such evidence usually emanates from various research findings which inform the policy makers about the direction of events. This signifies that part of the function of the body discipline of (social sciences) is to unfold social milieu about problems confronting the society. This will definitely influence policy formation to address societal problems.

The goal of social sciences is to traverse the array of social, political, economic and environmental problems facing the human race. Without reversing the trend in the array of these problems, the human society will be anarchical and inhuman for human survival. It is in this light that social sciences dabble into the mainstream of vigorous systematic investigation of the etiologies, patterns and consequences of these socio-political, economic and environmental problems so that appropriate strategies will be developed to curtail them. As regards this investigation, social sciences operate at two distinct but interrelated

levels the conceptual- theoretical and observational -empirical (Nachimias and Nachmias 1991). These two interrelated levels are necessary to traverse the problems in order to develop appropriate solution. One of the major ways in evolving appropriate solution is through policy formulation which is directed to effect succession of alteration in human activities.

However, there is contestable influence of social sciences in policy formulation in Nigeria. This is as a result of some contending problems within and outside the discipline. This without doubt is not as a result of lack of expertise in the body discipline but due to some contextual impediments within and outside the discipline. This paper aims at examining the reciprocal relationship between research and policy formulation, relevance of social sciences in policy development, and single out some of the problems in transforming research to policy in Nigeria.

RESEARCH AND POLICY: A RECIPROCAL NEXUS

The central polemic here is that research informs policy and policy informs research. And there could also be 'policy research'. Policy has been defined as a general principle by which a government or organization is guided in its management. This term refers to a law, regulation

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or rule, denotes a general purpose to direct the welfare of the community, a group or citizens. It is a plan of action adopted by a government in order to influence the trends of social, political and economic events in order to achieve a set of objectives. There have been series of such policy like population policy, health insurance policy, pension policy and so on. Most of this could be broadly termed as social policy which aims to influence the general behaviour and social situations of the citizens in the country.

On the other hand, research has been defined as a systematic enquiry. Osuala (2001: 1) defining research asserts that:

Research is the process of arriving at dependable solution to problems through a planned and systematic collection, analysis and interpretation of data. Research is a most important tool for advancing knowledge, for promoting progress, and for enabling man to relate more effectively to his environment, to accomplish his purpose, and to resolve his conflict.

Generally, social sciences engage in social research which is a systematic inquiry into social events/phenomena or processes. Fadeyi and Adedokun (2004: 1) averred that social research includes:

Any research which has as its subject of investigation or inquiry, human groups, human nature, human relationships, human organization and human institutions...In broad

sense social research is concerned with systematic gathering of data that can help us answer questions about various aspects of society and these can help us to understand society.

The essence of social research is to contribute to the store of knowledge about human society in order to solve certain confronting problems. Such investigation needs to influence formulation of programs that are meant to address those problems.

Policy research on the other hand is basically a form of applied research to acquire deeper understanding of social technical issues in order to bring about better solutions. In order word, this facilitates public policy process that will address societal problems. If social policies are not reflection of vital findings about human society then such policies will be grossly ineffective. Oronsaye (1995) observed that the importance of basing policy on knowledge has been recognized in every civilization.

Figure 1 shows the cyclic nexus of research and policy. The figure depicts that research provides cesspool of knowledge required to formulate, modify and evaluate any policy. Even in monitoring the implementation of the policy, systematic investigations are needed. This signifies a reciprocal relationship between research and policy as policy formulation is not an end in the continuum process but a means to an end as researches are needed to evaluate, modify, monitor and (even) change the policy.

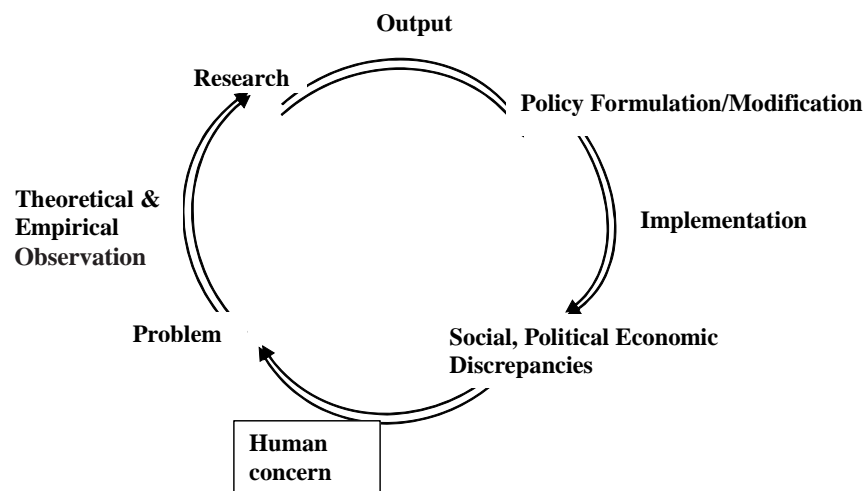


Fig. 1. Research-policy nexus

This also stipulates that a policy could be archaic. The human society is dynamic, so also all social remedies need to respond to the dynamics. Social research exposes such dynamics, patterns and dimensions. This thereby sets direction and adequate knowledge-base for the formulation of a new policy or modification of existing ones.

Apart from the foregoing, the local context need to be understood for proper social remedies to be enacted. Mabogunje (1978) argues that unless our social situations are considered we would have succeeded in achieving a flurry of seemingly growth including activities which would eventually end in stagnation and the collapse of orderly society. He opined that such strategies should address themselves to the people directly and take account of socio-spatial context in which they live and find their being. This also stipulates the relevance of social scientists in social re-engineering

TRANSFORMING RESEARCH TO POLICY: MISSING LINKS

Kirst (2000) observed that While the social scientist's task is not to write policy, social science research intended for policymakers can identify and elaborate policy alternatives, stress their relative advantages, and point to positive courses of action or state context obstacles. Research is supposed to be the bedrock in policy formulation. Research should inform policy, and in turn policy can also inform research. This is however important to assert that there have been shortfall in the influence of research on policy formulation in Nigeria. The assertion is premised on the fact that most policies implemented in Nigeria are not custom-made as they are mostly handed down from international institutions. And most of the time, attempt to implement such handed-down policies is confronted with certain implementation problems. What then are the intervening factors responsible for minimal influence of research on policy in Nigeria. A host of factors can be identified. Such factors are contextual impediments: some within academia while some are outside the academia (see Fig. 2).

It is assumed that data from Africa usually produce socially structured misunderstandings (Russell and Mugenyi 1997). This is basically because social science research in Africa is often described as armchair empiricism. The originality in most data is usually in doubt mainly because



Fig. 2. Research to policy

the virtues and values of good research setting are not usually put in place. Data collection (most of the time) is not painstaking. Some times due to socio-cultural setting, or economic factors. Amplification and manipulation of data also reflect in armchair empiricism. The legitimacy of empirical pursuit is contestable and this accounts for little promise of such empiricism in originating and modifying policies. The emerging discourse also involves research process through community participation especially with the use of Participation Rapid Appraisal tools. Unfortunately, such democratization is usually downplayed thereby making the research outcome not an authentic reflection of community values. Russell and Mugenyi (1997) further observed that in most researches, the common strategy to minimize the expense in research is to compromise on the sample. This is apart from the premise that the sampling procedure is not usually vigorous as probability sampling may be replaced with quota or convenience sampling methods. The problem is also compounded by the use of unskilled research assistants. All this reflects armchair empiricism which does not hold promise for policy formulation.

More so, it is important to note the words of Russell and Mugenyi (1997: 17) that:

The direction of [most] researches in [Africa] is frequently and increasingly dictated not by intellectual issues within the related social sciences, nor yet by local problems but by a multitude of ill-coordinated and overlapping national and international programs, and the need to have these programmes promoted, evaluated, serviced and legitimated.

This alleges that most social researchers do not seek to generate original and new information that will facilitate the formulation of policies but serve to rubber stamp governmental programs. In this light, most policies, other than being locally brewed, are imported. Hence, the local social, political and economic spatial are not considered.

International agencies hand down policies at the expense of the local populace. And social scientists, due to economic reasons legitimize such policies through series of evaluative researches, or merely criticize after the futility of the goals of such policies. Hence, when direction of researches are not dictated by local context within the discourse, it is then evidently discrete to assume the minimal influence of such researches in emerging new policies. Hence, social scientists compete for international research contracts, that often produce 'expected' results by the sponsoring agencies. Sycophancy is also pervasive within the academic environment.

On another note, social scientists in Nigeria have been charged for excessive criticisms. Such criticisms while healthy for reconstruction of policies, the inability to provide practical or functional alternative is out-rightly detrimental. Hence, deconstruction without reconstruction is inimical to policy formulation and modification. Social researchers stand in constant opposition to various governmental policies (mostly handed down) but with unparalleled attempt to establish a reference research alternative for the general populace to advocate. Since, most researches do not stimulate or create adequate premise for formulation of policies, government mostly engage in borrowing policies that 'might' work or that have worked else where. Deconstruction of constructs without reconstruction has not helped to justify the relevance of the social science discourse in Nigeria. It can further be posited that most Africans or Nigerians have not really perceived the functional relevance of social science in human development. Affecting human life or addressing socio-political, economic and environmental problems should not be a matter of word-war, but practical demonstration of access to potent constructs that are attainable and sustainable.

In addition, the practice of 'promotion-driven' research in academia is also an impeding factor in transforming research to policy. Academic researches, mostly rigorous, are not met to actualize the ultimate goal of the discipline, but for personal professional promotion. Most academic papers are met to add to the publication list but not to address contextual policy discourse. Hence, such papers are usually in the archive, and presented in due course for promotional exercise. Publication may also be sent for international consideration where neither local

policy makers, nor the researchers (if not sent a copy) would access the findings. Most findings do not stimulate any concern that may inform policy as such findings have been destined to travel unread. Apart from this, theses accumulate dust in Nigerian Universities' libraries. Therefore vital findings are not utilized in policy development. Kirst (2000: 379) further observed that:

These analyses of research-policy ties find major communication problems between policymakers and researchers. Some of these problems are inevitable, they say, because policymakers and researchers live in different worlds with differing languages, values and professional rewards. For example, researchers are promoted for publications in referred journals that stress theory and technical advances. Predictably, the products from this world would have less immediate value for legislators who need information that is applicable to a specific set of circumstances.

Effective dissemination requires that these materials be jargon-free, brief and provide concrete illustrations (Cohen and Lindblom 1979). The information-producing firms identified poor presentation of information as the primary reason that their information is not used by potential clients. Material that is too long, complicated or written too technically will not be widely read. Apart from clarity of research results, it is also important to recommend practicable actions. It is in this vein that Kirst (2000: 385) further submitted that:

... Effective dissemination is a function of the extent to which information recommends action that is compatible with the institution's values, structure, capacity and resources. Typically, social science conclusions, such as 'more-research is needed', or 'few significant differences were found', fall far short of the clear sense and positive direction required by policymakers.

Following from the foregoing polemics, is the fact that result dissemination is poor. Publication, a channel through scholars collectively share, criticize and evaluate new information and ideas, might not be appropriate to get findings to policy makers as they are mostly unlikely to read volumes. Results are better set at the door-step of the policy-makers other than 'faraway'. This suggests that copies of such findings should be made available to policy makers (even when published overseas).

In Nigeria, there have not been established forums where policy makers 'interact' with social scientists. For results dissemination to be effective, the researchers, policy makers, implementers and the general populace must be carried along. So that the results will not be so alien to the stakeholders. Provision of result dissemination avenue should also restrain flamboyancy that would lure participants into various forms of frivolities (nights in hotels, cocktail parties etc.) are perpetrated. This may undermine consolidation of knowledge and fundamentalism of the results.

Furthermore, inadequate funding for research is also a missing link. It is as if there is unparalleled desperation on the part of the government (especially) to unfold social milieu that will inform new policies through researches. Even Demographic and Health Survey (DHS) in Nigeria has to be aided by external agents. At the state and local levels, DHS is not usually available and there is indifference at that level to uphold the vital role of research in forming and modifying social policies. High costing social research prevents most social researchers from adequate participation in research activities. The government has not played the funder-role adequately. Where research activities are constrained, the crisis of relevance is endemic within the social sciences. While minimal research grants are available, researchers have also been charged for using such grants for personal aggrandizements. This may affect the outcome of the research as methodology may contravene scientific rigorosity.

Lack of political will on the part of the government to liaise with higher education institutions and research institutes for vital information and policy briefs also compound the problem. Such institutions are apart and information generated are abandoned. Part of the duties of a responsive government is to challenge research institute to generate information that will be used in policy formulation. This will provide adequate direction for the government and other concerned agencies in the country. This will also legitimize such policies as they are internally generated based on available information.

On the other hand, policy-makers are usually too conscious of research outcomes. Hence, they put forward nonchalant and non-cooperative attitude towards research. They are usually afraid of being evaluated and assessed due to non-performance. This explains why it is difficult (not

only in terms of bureaucracy) to obtain data from different organizations. Hence, there is dearth of data for research that may inform new policies or modify the existing ones.

Unethical research practice is pervasive in social research. Ethical issues have not been strongly considered in many social research activities. Seeking for legitimate community entry, informed consent, community participation are critical ethical issues usually violated. For instance, legitimate community entry and informing the community about the research results may precipitate community mobilization in resolving or reinforcing certain social phenomena or raise alarm to the government if incapable of addressing the event. Most social scientists 'cater away' the results without giving any feedback to the community. This also impedes in transforming research to policy.

The society also contributes. The high level of illiteracy in the country also impedes vital researches that could modify or change policy. Many do not cooperate with researchers due to ignorance and socio-cultural factors. All these impede in transforming research to policy in Nigeria.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATION

Foregoing discussion has evidently demonstrated the paucity in transforming research to policy discussing several factors which include unethical research practice, poor dissemination of results, armchair empiricism, 'promotional' research, inadequate funding for research and so on. Most of these factors are within and others are outside the academia. This has promoted imposition of alien policies which often confront implementation problems. It has been widely acknowledged that policy formulation needs to consider the socio-cultural and political context. Negation of this fact, amounts to poor policies which will not enhance any socio-economic and political progress. It is in line with all this that this paper examines the aforementioned factors as detrimental in transforming research to policy. Hence, this trend needs to be reversed so that the crisis of relevance of social sciences in formulation of social policies will be redressed.

Social scientists need to adopt rigorous methodological stance in policy-oriented research. This scientific rigorosity must not be compromised irrespective of any other cons-

traits. Providing alternative framework is paramount in ensuring relevance in policy formulation, and so that social scientists will not be perceived as part of 'opposition'.

The efforts of Nigeria government in aiding better policy formulation need to be acknowledged. This led to the establishment of various institutions such as National Institute for Policy and Strategic Studies (NIPPS), Nigerian Institute for Social and Economic Research (NISER), National Center for Economic Management and Administration (NCEMA) and host of others. The major observable is that the agents have not been (adequately) playing the 'brokering role' as depot of various research findings within and outside their domain. Social scientists need to ensure 'brokering' by establishing 'House of Science' where all policy oriented and other vital social science research outputs will be gathered for eventual dissemination to the concerned policy makers. This could cross across all states of the federation. Be it quarterly, or yearly, concerned policy makers should be invited to update them with appropriate issues within the socio-economic and political terrain that need to be addressed. Hence, social scientists should also contribute

meaningfully to the body of policy science and create retail store that policy-makers and policy analysts could access in order to derive new ideas for the betterment of all. A massive reengineering of the field of social sciences will facilitate the practical relevance of the field in policy formulation, implementation and administration.

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