Shedding light on complex ideas

Goran Buldioski

Communicating complex ideas has never been easy. Nor will it ever be, since evidence-based research most of the time yields complex findings. This volume documented five different ways on how to go about disentangling the complexity of policymaking. CIPPEC plunged knee-deep into the muddy waters of Argentinian politics. FITRA enticed, educated and emboldened journalists to peel back the opacity of Indonesia's national budget. Researchers at the American University in Cairo were wary about cultural patterns, and explored how they affect education research and changes in education policy. Grupo FARO researchers adapting to activism took on harmful pesticides and agricultural practices in Ecuador. South African researchers took the activist role one step further by engaging in the social marketing and rebranding of breastmilk in Africa. In this concluding chapter, we explore the commonalities and differences between these approaches in an attempt to draw more universal lessons to assist other researchers exploring the developing world.

Untangling the web of assumptions about communicating policy relevant research

All five cases, to some degree, expose several (often wrong) assumptions about the communication of policy relevant research. First, they demonstrate that communication is not just a layer to be added to a predetermined research design. Second, they describe that possessing knowledge and confidently marching through with evidence are insufficient sources of legitimacy when trying to change policies or practices. Third, the communication strategy each employs was conditioned, if not shaped, by the purpose of the overall intervention. Fourth, each case looks at the overall barriers for social change before identifying the specific impediments to research uptake. Finally, a comparison between the cases leads us to differentiate between efforts addressing more technocratic challenges and those that put the improvement of governance and democratization at their core.

Analysing the advent of pesticide technology and its ramifications in Ecuador, Grupo FARO's case study digs the deepest in identifying the position of communication (or research uptake). Defining communication as a co-constituent process, they not only ascribe meaning to communication, but also expect communication to add

meaning to the research findings. For these researchers communication is not a film of 'messaging' added to a base of research findings and compelling evidence gathered about the effects of pesticide poisoning. Communication efforts are embedded in the *inter*action with all affected stakeholders, but also are at the heart of the *trans*action. In this context *trans*action signifies how – through processes of communication – those involved can undergo cognitive, behavioral, cultural and social transformation. Communication design has to be an integral part of all policy relevant research projects. As such, the communication approaches continuously engaged in a delicate dance with the evidence gathered. They continuously shaped each other and equally contributed to the ultimate goal: diminishing the negative effects of pesticide technology as a model for agricultural modernisation in Ecuador.

It is necessary to view research communication as evolving *practice*, not static *theory*. Embedding oneself fully in one's time and space seems to be the call in every of these cases – and, in the Group FARO case particularly, it is to *join the movement* of people, rather than to stand aloof. At the same time, there seems to be a lesson about the value of learning/trying out different approaches, i.e. without trialing Development 1.0, there is no Development 2.0 or 3.0.

Possessing knowledge and confidently marching through, armed with data and evidence are insufficient sources of legitimacy in today's world (irrespective of the many academics who continue to hope for and teach the opposite). When the individuals or organisations tried to change policies or practices in the five cases in this collection, they all had to add other sources of legitimacy in the mix to complement or amplify their knowledge-based arguments. Coupling its efforts to change the Argentinian electoral laws with those of a political party, CIPPEC went the farthest in adding a new source of legitimacy. Clearly, bringing politics directly into the policy world is not for the faint-hearted and is beset by a lot of controversy. But, enlisting a political party in the case of CIPPEC it added a necessary layer of political legitimacy to the initial policy effort spearheaded by the think tank. Similarly, the South African researchers added an emotional spin to the compelling evidence for the healthy practice of breastfeeding. Demonstrating empathy and sympathy with the mothers affected by those practices complemented their policy solution. Both South African researchers and FARO enlisted many citizens' associations and other groups to bank on the legitimacy stemming from member-based organisations. FITRA used 'normative' argumentation on what does it mean being transparent in a democratic society. Political power, emotional appeal, membership-based organisation and value-based standpoints complemented knowledge in all of these successful communication efforts. Assuming that knowledge alone will do the job is becoming a fallacy in an increasingly populist world.

At the onset of every project or when devising overall organisational strategy each think tank usually makes a principal decision about the limits of its communication. The specific goals that individuals or organisations would like to achieve shape the chosen communication strategies. But, this is an iterative process following the evolution of policy and changes within the context and environment. FITRA's

work on budget transparency and accountability in Indonesia best illustrates the incremental and iterative changes of research and communication efforts. At first, they provided information about the budget – without directly criticising. Their intervention was premised on the normative authority of democracy and the power of laid-bare facts – of rampant budget abuse – to influence MPs. Once their communication strategy of approaching the MPs failed, they readjusted their goals and communication methods. Adopting a much more confrontational approach, FITRA positioned mass media as the key intermediary to convey and communicate their findings. While managing to put the issue on the public agenda, media was never meant to be an unbiased channel for getting evidence-based messages across to the political class. FITRA was being used by the media and by their interest for newsworthy, provocative data (usually reporting on corruption scandals), which sidelined the policy-worthy analysis, so they had to perfect the timing of their press releases. This is only one example to illustrate how the specific goal of the intervention and its underlying 'theory of change' have shaped the choice of communication tools and channels; but also to show how adaptive communications must be to operative successfully.

The individuals and organisation involved in the five described cases acknowledge the overall barriers for social change before identifying the specific impediments to research uptake. While one could argue that policy-minded researchers and think tanks alike often look carefully at the former and neglect the latter, the Egyptian case study, for example, captures the interplay between the two types of obstacles. As they point out '… implementation of the revised curricula has been fraught with socioorganisational challenges'. The culture of memorisation has been at the heart of the problem: one which was once a policy problem now transformed into a ubiquitous social obstacle. In spite of the democratisation wave that engulfed Egypt at the time of writing, as well as the related increase in political participation, a cultural transition was what was really missing.

A change of cultural values related to education was the key for the desired transition. Clearly, the researchers understood the challenges: that they and the policymakers stood a slim chance of implementing the changes they identified. On one hand, borrowing successful models from developed countries did not work; on the other, it was not the policymakers who needed to change first. Therefore, to address the social barriers, the project first addressed the parents and the teachers. The conceptual changes notwithstanding, this adjustment entailed a need to change the style and language of communicating. There was a need to employ language that that parents and teachers would easily understand – which heralds an imminent departure from the technical analyses tailored by experts and policymakers. Perhaps it is not surprising that the researchers failed in this endeavor. Often this is not what they have been trained at in academia. Yet this case study found researchers to be an improper conduit of reform messages to a general population; perhaps the local sense of disaccord with the nature of the intended reforms (promoting science education) was relevant to this conclusion. However, this volume brings together varied examples of how researcher practices have flexibly adapted to their

circumstances. Researchers are certainly experts at identifying and describing problems in a scientific manner, but many of them could be better trained as good general communicators. Or in, the case of think tanks, success can be about involving different sets of skills from the beginning of the project in order to produce a comprehensive message to a lay audience through teamwork. Irrespectively of what an organization or team of researchers chooses, either way should lead to integrated research-communications products, where communications and research strategies are not so easily divorced. Communication is therefore engaged from the beginning in a central role and not in supporting role to research.

Finally, we should not oversimplify complexity. It will be there even with the most brilliantly executed communication efforts that have put a complex message across in very simple terms. This compilation's intention and mandate is not to engage in developing taxonomies for complexity. Yet, it is good to differentiate between efforts addressing development challenges and those that put the improvement of governance or democratisation at their core.[1] The former focuses on evolution of dominant sociotechnical solutions, technical transfer and the spread of coherent practices. Communication efforts, such as promotion of breast milk in Africa and pesticide control in Ecuador, were dealt within the paradigm of development work. The projects in Indonesia, Argentina and, to some extent, the one in Egypt engage within the preexisting governance and democratisation framework. Therefore, in addition to the efforts listed above, these projects had to deal with party politics, continuously assessing the preferences by dominant political forces to calibrate their own communication and not overstep the political boundaries.

One for all, all for one: what roles for think tanks, researchers and communication specialists?

Some of the case studies in this volume touch upon – though do not explicitly focus on – the roles that the organisations and individual researchers undertake in their communication efforts. The five cases identified several roles for the organisations involved (i.e., teams of researchers and communicators) that fall in a spectrum of possibilities:

Thinking (analysis only) > thinking and advocacy > thinking and demonstration > thinking and doing.

For example, researchers at the American University in Cairo took the role of policy analysts. A priori, they did not assume that sustainable development is a function of providing only good information. Yet, when confronted with the failure of their communication efforts to reach out to teachers and parents effectively, they distanced themselves from taking action to complete the next step. Moreover, they declared researchers inept for communication to the public at large. This is an attitude indeed practiced by many academically oriented research institutes. While there is nothing

1 A succinct and relevant discussion on the perils of linking policy and politics can be found in Donovan, C. and Larkin P., 'The Problem of Political Science and Practical Politics.' *Politics* 26(1), 11–17.

bad in only providing information or knowledge, by distancing themselves from the complex and complicated ways of bringing the information closer to the people, these researchers inevitably risked failing to make an impact.

FITRA's work is undoubtedly based on advocacy. Their analysis is mainly designed to feed in the media that, in turn, will pressure the government to adopt more transparent policy around the national budget. The organisation suggested standards on how to make the budget more transparent, but never planned to engage in direct assistance with any of the government units in improving their transparency. Thinking and demonstrating the recommended policy solution in practice is the CIPPEC's case study offering in the spectrum covered in this volume. They first carried out the analysis and acted as an advocate for an alternative electoral system. Once such an approach proved insufficient, they partnered with one political party in a specific district and demonstrated the benefits of the policies they had previously suggested. Faced with increased risks of politicisation, this is where they stopped and decided not go on and multiply their effort in another federal state or nationwide.

FARO's efforts are a borderline case between demonstration and implementing the recommended policy alternative. The sheer size and ambition of their implementation effort surpassed the boundaries of a demonstration project. Researchers not only communicated research results but also their own belief system and values. Under the given circumstances, the institutional change is not simply a matter of communicating knowledge but also about conveying and legitimately demonstrating attitudes and coherent practice. Perhaps, the South African researchers went the furthest in their efforts to implement the policy they advocated for. After the initial years, the time spent in promoting and using the breastmilk outstrips the effort put into research. At the end of the effort, they were evidence-informed activists, but certainly as much activists as scientists.

It is obvious that moving from left to right on this spectrum, organisations (and teams of researchers and communicators) evolve from providers of knowledge and development initiatives to participants in a social movement. Those who limit themselves to be only researchers will never be scrutinised about what they do. The consequences for the organisations or teams that transformed themselves into embedded local actors and contributors to social movements have to bear much more challenging consequences, e.g. they will be scrutinised, not only about the knowledge they are sharing, but also about the way they communicate it through their practices. For those organisations and individual researchers at this stage, it is no longer sufficient to say the right things, but also to practice those things in their own lives. FARO Ecuador and the Southern African researchers offer the best examples of living those consequences in this volume. To maintain their credibility, simply, FARO researchers have to eat products without pesticides and the South African researchers (if applicable) have to breastfeed.

The Grupo FARO case perfectly pinpoints the operational and ethical challenges posed by their choices:

> '... in the case of researchers who study public health services but use private services for their own health needs, or promote changes in public education but send their children to private schools: do they have the legitimacy to participate in these systems? But if, on the other hand, they were embedded in the system, how could they maintain their claim of objectivity?'

Clearly, the depth of engagement and consequently the communication approach raise much more fundamental questions about the objectivity of analysis as well as the legitimacy of the organisations involved. Hereby, while vital to point out these deeper and profound dilemmas, it is also fair to acknowledge that their analysis goes beyond the goal of this collection of case studies.

Hereby, it is worth exploring how different organisational choices determine the roles of the individual researchers within. Using a slightly revised version of the taxonomy offered by the FARO case study, the roles could be also ordered in a continuum.[2]

Analyst (expert) only > expert + advocate > entrepreneur (demonstration projects) > activist (implementation).

Moving from left to right, the researchers are expected to add more tasks to their list. Illustrating this complex point briefly, the following paragraph looks at two dimensions a) various knowledge the person has to possess as s/he moves from left to right on the continuum (Nutley 2003) and b) the percentage of time s/he spends on research and other non-research tasks. The experts would be able to define the problems and identify policies that work. In ideal scenario they would know how to put the policy into practice. With regard to time, it is normally expected that researchers and experts would spend most of their time in research and considerably less time in communicating the results of that research. If an expert is also an advocate, s/he will have to know whom to involve. But more importantly, experts-advocates would spend considerable portion of their time delivering many presentations, attending conferences and briefing decision makers with their opinion. Advocates turn into policy entrepreneurs when they have the ability to put some or all of their policy recommendations in practice (in a limited setting or environment). A simplistic definition of an activist is a policy entrepreneur who lives by a set of values shaped by the policy solutions s/he recommends.

Reading through all these high expectations from the researchers, one should ask if the policy researchers 'have been turned into supermen and superwomen'. The case studies in this collection only implicitly invoke this question. Notwithstanding CIPPEC and Grupo FARO hinting at team work and division of tasks throughout their respective efforts, all cases fail to depict how the teams of researchers and communicators worked out. The Egyptian case relied more heavily on the perspective of the researchers. The public campaign in the South African case was mounted

2 The interplay that we missed to a great extent in these articles is the role of the communication specialist.

directly onto the research findings and the value set of the researcher–activists and later executed by external collaborators. Grupo FARO, FITRA and CIPPEC have all got communication specialists on their staff. In the case of CIPPEC, it is worth observing that the key messaging was neither provided by their researchers nor by their communication department. Instead, it was a member of their advisory board. This is a good example on how think tanks could often tap into outsider advice and demonstrate the added value of the organisational brand, as opposed to a team of researchers. It is also good advice for research organisations and teams that they need to design a set of competences for a team rather than cram everything on the shoulders of researchers. Those teams would include communication specialists, part time or full time, or researchers with accented communication responsibilities on top of regular research tasks. It is the team, not every individual on it that has to possess both research and communication competences.

Communicating complexity for policy change

Communication is an integral part of all research projects that aim to impact policy. The communication efforts have to be built into the research design and thought through at its very outset. By no means does this imply that there will not be adjustments in the communication strategy at later stage. But, when planned properly from the beginning, communication efforts tend to be well-organised. This last point is often a key deficiency in research-based efforts. If we assume that successful communication efforts are about making sense, having meaning, and being organised, most research efforts – the five documented cases in this collection included – fulfill the first two criteria. Once these two are fulfilled and researchers have done their 'core work' well, the art of making the policy impact will depend on the design and management (orderliness). Good management (organisation) of communication will lead to proactive action, instead of an ongoing reaction to political and policy changes. CIPPEC demonstrated this proactivity by taking the initiative to implement their recommendations in one of the Argentinian federal states. Good planning and the ability to gauge their audience properly will allow organisations to utilise the right analytical formats. For example, FITRA arrived at the right formats by trial and error. Once they removed the jargon and shortened the length of their analysis, the research uptake increased. But it was only when they trained several journalists and timed their press releases better, that the coverage of their issue improved in mass media.

These five case studies depict a host of ways that complex ideas are communicated. With no exception, all have moved away from the simplistic paradigms of 'bridging the gap between knowledge and policy' (McGann with Johnson 2005). In fact, this volume offers a radically nuanced range of examples of knowledge–policy interfaces, in previously uncovered detail. While none was necessarily inspired directly by the work of Nicola Jones et al. (2009), the areas in the latter's assessment framework (types of knowledge; political context; sectoral dynamics; actors; innovative frameworks; and knowledge translation) could provide further, productive lenses through which to analyse the complex knowledge that was generated in these case

studies. In embracing or discussing the complex nature of many policy problems, and by eschewing reductive conclusions, all cases present research as part of the solution: but none declares it a panacea. Communicating complexity for policy change, in sum, has been shown to go beyond mere interaction. It is a process of transaction, by which – if we, as researchers and communicators, continue to cross predefined borders and journey beyond them – we will transform ourselves and our societies.

References

Nutley, Sandra, Isabel Walter and Huw T. O. Davies (2003) 'From Knowing to Doing: A Framework for Understanding the Evidence-Into-Practice Agenda'. *Evaluation* 9: 125.

James G. McGann (with Erik C. Johnson) (2005) *Comparative Think Tanks, Politics and Public Policy*. Cheltenham: Edward Elgar Publishing.

Jones, Nicola, Ajoy Datta and Harry Jones (2009) *Knowledge, policy and power: Six dimensions of the knowledge–development policy interface*. London: Overseas Development Institute.