Communicating Complex Ideas

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Background

Researchers (and the organisations they work for) are, by their very nature, more likely to be influenced by findings emerging from research itself than by the recommendations and advice of consultants – who do not often work alongside researchers or have limited experience of academic life. Moreover, researchers are also more likely to be influenced by studies undertaken by themselves or their peers than by those carried out by researchers in contexts and with tools different to those that they are used to. These ideas guide the studies in this book.

With this in mind, I have worked to encourage (first while at the Overseas Development Institute and now independently via On Think Tanks and with the help of other initiatives such as the Global Development Network's GDNet programme) researchers in developing countries, many working within think tanks, to take on the challenge of studying the complex relationship between ideas and politics in their own disciplines and policy contexts. In books like Thinking Politics (2009) edited with Kristen Sample, and Links between Knowledge and Politics (2011) edited with Norma Correa, we have provided a space for a growing community of researchers and practitioners to explore and better understand their contexts and the manner in which this affects their work.

Frances Cleaver's and Tom Frank's 2009 paper 'Distilling or Diluting? Negotiating the Water Research-Policy Interface' provides the inspiration for this particular effort. In their paper, Cleaver and Franks outline the struggle they and other researchers faced when attempting to communicate complex ideas to policymakers. The authors offer a candid description and reflection of the dialogue between researchers and policymakers and the possible consequences of different communication approaches. Their conclusions are insightful, and are grounded on a solid understanding of the capacity challenges and limitations of working in a complex context – something that they, as researchers, need.

This volume builds on these and other efforts to encourage researchers and communicators in developing countries to embark on a similar journey. Each

chapter offers a critical analysis of the opportunities and challenges that researchers face in attempting to communicate complex ideas to different policy audiences.

The approach: research and dialogue

There are two components to the approach used in this study: research and dialogue.

The research process proposed to the authors offered ample opportunities to develop a new capacity for critical thinking in an area that is indispensable for think tanks or policy research institutes about to make choices about how they will communicate their research. Choosing the right publics to engage with, the most appropriate approaches to plan this engagement, the channels and tools that will be more effective, and the competencies and skills that may be necessary, requires more than a few guidelines, workshops and toolkits; these are skills forged in practice.

Some of the choices made by these organisations (e.g. working with the media or hiring communications experts) can have dramatic effects on their institutional make up and their relations with their stakeholders and key publics. None of these choices should be taken lightly – or swiftly. And to ensure sound and grounded choices, research centres' best option is to make use of one capacity they already master: research and analysis.

Unfortunately, the study of think tanks and of the complex relations between research and policy or of the nature of research and communication is not as popular as might be desirable if we consider what is at stake. Few research organisations in developing countries dedicate any time to reflect on their own strategies or on the nature of the research and policy communities they belong to.

But even when they do so, they face another challenge more familiar to those with spare capacity to reflect on such things: the effective communication of complex ideas is not an exact science. No amount of research will provide a set of rules that must be followed in all circumstances. The art of effective communication needs to be practiced and incorporated into an on-going dialogue , in order to learn and improve.

Therefore, the approach we took in these studies sought to encourage a dialogue between researchers and communication practitioners (ideally within the same organisation or country). It is through this dialogue (and through the dialogue with other authors, as well as with a wider audience, for instance, through blog posts) that the nuances of the opportunities and challenges that exist in communicating complex arguments to policymakers, the media, and the general public can emerge and be better understood.

In addition, by pairing up researchers and communicators, both were able to learn more about each other's work and perspectives. Therefore, the research and writing processes themselves, offered an opportunity for the authors to develop their own knowledge and capacity to work with their peers and across disciplines.

Why is this important?

Funding directed at organisations and researchers to encourage and help them to communicate their research rose between 2000 and the time of writing, 2013. A whole mini-industry of consultants has emerged in the international development sector to provide researchers and research centres in developing countries with communication and research uptake services. This impetus has been driven in part by the pressure that aid budgets across the world have been under: research funding, as well as other types of interventions, must be seen to have direct and measurable effects.

It is possible to identify the outlines of a consensus among funders, a number of consultants, international development think tanks and NGOs supporting funders in this effort . This unlikely consensus suggests that researchers and research centres need to become much better at communicating their work. This means, among other things, that they must employ savvy communication strategies, including developing more appropriate messages and employing new communication channels and tools.

These messages, the consensus suggests, need to be 'sticky', 'SMART', 'targeted', among other things. These demands are influenced by marketing literature and practice that champions clear, convincing and prioritised messages:

It is clear from the frequency with which bullet points and lists are used in water policy making and practice that they provide a popular and accessible mechanism for communicating ideas. However, the simplicity which makes them accessible is also a weakness, since they do not require the users to make the linkages and relationships between the different concepts. (Cleaver and Franks, date: 17)

This 'bullet point' approach leads to some resistance among researchers who consider that their work deals with matters that are too complicated, and often too complex, to be distilled in a few key statements, facts or tables. They claim that those who demand this are dumbing down their work – or simply do not understand it or the research process itself.

Others, like Cleaver and Franks, and the authors of the chapters in this volume, while recognising that this may only be a way of attracting the attention of their audiences, including their funders, worry that it could nonetheless make things worse in the long term. By creating the impression that these are problems that can be simplified or explained with a few statements and facts, even if only for the purpose of

communicating to new audiences or attracting the attention of key decision makers, they may be inadvertently encouraging those audiences to dumb down their thinking – or, at the very least, developing in them a false sense of understanding and power.

In the account of their experience, Cleaver and Franks suggest that it is not possible to reduce water governance to a few key messages because good decisions demand that decision makers understand that this is a complex issue. In other words, policymakers (and anyone participating in a political process) need to accept that some issues are complex and that hence it may not be possible to ever know all there is to know about the problems and the solutions under consideration. Still, they must be able to act and be ready to face new challenges and present new information as they emerge.

The cases

When choosing the cases we looked for opportunities for dialogue between the research teams and between the authors and their context. They deal with different aspects of public policy as well as different levels of public engagement. The cases in this volume include:

From Argentina: Julia Pomares from a local think tank, Centro de Implementación de Políticas Públicas para la Equidad y el Crecimiento (CIPPEC), and Laura Zommer, its former Director of Communications, critically document the experience and the challenges they faced attempting to reform electoral policy and practice in Argentina. Their case is inherently political because it deals with the manner in which democratic power is gained. They present the piloting of their ideas as a way of communicating them in practical and tangible terms.

From Indonesia: Muhammad Maulana, a Research Coordinator at Seknas FITRA and Bagus BT Saragih, a journalist at The Jakarta Post addressed an equally political challenge: budget transparency. Their case, however, presents opportunities for the use of research and communication tools not available for the Argentinean team. They pay particular attention to the role of the media as an effective medium for communicating their arguments to the general public. The media presents an opportunity to link technical arguments about the need for more budget transparency with the values of the public.

From the Middle East and the Gulf States: Ted Purinton and Amir ElSawy at the American University in Cairo focused on education reform in the Middle East and how researchers deal with different and changing local narratives about education. Their case interestingly combines national level imperatives for educational reform as well as family level values and considerations. More so than in the Indonesian case, in the Gulf, policy reform appears to be less about what policymaking bodies can do and more about what the public wants and expects.

From South Africa: Shannon Kenny and Patrick Kenny, independent

communications consultants, and Professor Anna Coutsoudis, at the Department of Paediatrics and Child Health, University of KwaZulu-Natal, focused on a deeply personal and yet publicly contested issue: breastfeeding. Their case study is a reflective account of a campaign in which all three authors have been involved: The People, The Planet, The Can, which involved the social marketing and re-branding of breastmilk in South Africa. This case introduces the challenges involved in dealing with an issue that incorporates deeply seated personal views and opinions. It confirms the lessons emerging from Purinton's and ElSaway's analysis that policy can be as much about the beliefs and behaviours of citizens as it is about the decisions of policymakers.

From Ecuador: Stephen Sherwood, Lecturer and Research Fellow at Wageningen University, Andrea Ordóñez, former Research Director at Grupo FARO, and Myriam Paredes, Assistant Professor, at FLACSO, developed a case that somewhat mirrors the South African experience, this time centred on a rural environment. Their case focuses on the challenges scientists have faced in combating the harmful consequences of using pesticides in Ecuador. As in the South African case they deal with deeply rooted social and personal views and behaviours. It prompts the authors to explore how different discourses, global and local, experiential and scientific, theoretical and practical, have developed and play themselves out in the decisions of Ecuadorian farmers.

The cases were produced over a period of about a year – some taking longer than others. During that period, some saw several iterations influenced by a dialogue between the authors and myself, as well as, and most significantly, by changes and updates in the processes that they were writing about. When possible, these where incorporated to the final cases in this volume.

The chapters were originally presented to the broader public via posts on the blog 'On Think Tanks'. These posts outlined the main research questions that the authors would attempt to address in each chapter and shared some of their initial expectations and progress.

As the research process progressed, the authors shared draft versions and discussed their chapters with me over Skype as well as face to face with one of the Ecuadorian case authors at an international event in South Africa and during visits to Argentina and Indonesia over the course of 2012. These interactions and conversations presented opportunities to probe certain assumptions and focus the cases on issues and lessons that were emerging across the studies.

What do the cases tell us?

The cases address very different contexts and circumstances; it is difficult to compare like with like. However, they offer important common lessons that could be further presented to inform others elsewhere. Underpinning this effort were the following set of questions:

1. *Is it possible to communicate complex ideas in a manner that does not compromise their own complex nature?*
2. *What kinds of strategies are most effective?*
3. *What competencies and skills are needed?*
4. *How important is the context?*
5. *How can researchers and communicators best work together?*

The cases present a number of interesting answers to these questions. Some will not surprise, while others offer interesting new insights into this field.

1. *Is it possible to communicate a complex idea in a manner that does not compromise its own complex nature?*

Across the board, the answer is a resounding yes. However, at the core of any successful strategy and any ensuing effort, there has to be an unavoidable focus on understanding and reaching a consensus on the problem. Communicating a complicated solution is much easier when all parties understand the problem that is being tackled. This certainly works when all parties understand that a problem is complex and therefore it is impossible to know all there is about it. For example, if a policymaker does not quite understand the complex problems that fertilisers have caused (and the complex causes of those problems) then the necessary long list of interrelated actions to solve them will be difficult to grasp and politically impossible to support.

But without a good grasp on the problem, a shorter list will not do, either. Not only will it be unable to address all the challenges that need to be solved to be successful but it will also convey the false impression that the problem may not be as complex as research has found it to be. The more politically charged challenges faced by the cases, such as the Argentinean electoral reform, highlight the dangers that a poor understanding of the problem, by all parties involved, could present for them and their organisations.

Once the problem has been addressed it is easier to move on to the solution (or solutions). All the cases suggest that it is possible to communicate these effectively but the researchers and their organisations may have to consider the following:

- adopting new strategies and practices that they are not normally used to;
- ensuring that communicators are better engaged and involved in the process to ensure that they properly understand the ideas, as well as the assumptions and methods employed to develop them; and
- acknowledging that the nature of the challenge demands far more realistic timeframes and patience about their possible influence.

2. What kinds of strategies are more effective?

Since the early 2000s I have worked to develop processes, frameworks, and tools to help researchers to maximise the impact of their influencing efforts. These frameworks are intended to guide researchers through a number of steps for planning, monitoring and evaluating policy influencing. Over the same time period , new jargon has emerged, for instance, 'theories of change', 'value for money', 'impact assessments'. They all, in their own ways, assume that it is possible to plan, before the event, how, what and when change should happen.

Interestingly, none of the strategies described in the cases were implemented as planned. In fact, there were hardly any strategies to talk about at the time when the initiatives began. The cases from Argentina and South Africa, for example, show that there was an objective, an intention, and improvised or opportunistic action before there was any sense of a strategy – or even the attempt to develop one. The organisations and the people involved adapted their actions to changes in their environment and to new information that became available as they engaged in the process.

At each step of this process they incorporated new team members or adopted new tactics. They even changed the roles they were playing and corrected their objectives. At each step, too, new partnerships were formed, and with them, again, came new objectives, resources, plans and ideas. Each step also presented new challenges that demanded new knowledge, and therefore new disciplines and experiences to be incorporated into the research effort, the teams, and their partnerships. The case of electoral reform in Argentina is illustrative of this point. As new doors opened for the think tank to affect change, new and more significant risks emerged as well. In other words, with greater influence came greater risk.

Could they have predicted what would happen and plan accordingly? It would have been impossible for the researchers and communicators to predict what would happen at the beginning of their work. Nor how long it would take to achieve the desired change. Even now, the cases present a number of unknowns and do not offer sure or certain recommendations for future action.

Overall then, the most appropriate strategies appear to be ones that are flexible and opportunistic, dynamic and open-ended. Rather than a list of good practices, the cases support a focus on the right people and the right skills to deal with uncertainty.

3. What competencies and skills are needed for these types of strategies?

The cases suggest that to be successful, or to be at least capable of success, researchers must rely on others. Across the experiences, it is teams rather than

individuals who take the central role. These teams, however, demand a number of skills and expertise that are not always found in individual research centres. Based on the findings from the cases, teams need to be:

- Multi-skilled. Good researchers have to work with good communicators and managers. As the process unfolds, teams should also be able to accommodate new members with the necessary skills to deal with the new opportunities and challenges that emerge.

- Multi-disciplinary. Complex problems are better explained using different disciplines at once – and their different methods and tools. Education reform in the Middle East, for example, demands an understanding of economic, social (including religious and kinship), and political factors. Most complex problems, too, have a long history that could be better explored by historians. The case of Ecuador on the use of fertilisers also illustrates the importance of employing several disciplinary lenses to understand and describe the challenge at hand.

  The solutions for these problems are equally dependent on a multi-disciplinary approach. The technical aspects of the solution, as well as the manner in which the solution is communicated both demand methods and tools from different disciplines.

- Multi-partner. Teams made up of individuals with different backgrounds and teams from different organisations may be, at the very least, equally suited for dealing with complex problems as a team from the same organisation. In none of the cases studied was a single actor solely responsible for the desired change. Seeking reform across a range of unrelated players is something that a single organisation would be unlikely to deliver, as it would have to be equally influential across a range of policy spaces and actors, which is unrealistic.

  Working with others is a more appropriate approach. This, however, demands organisational competencies and individual skills that not many people and centres posses. Finding the right partners and managing the relationships is also a challenge by itself.

- Common skills. The cases also suggest that all the parties involved must have some common skills that facilitate communication between them. To collaborate across backgrounds, disciplines and organisations there have to be elements in common shared by all. These may be shared objectives, a common interest or understanding of the policy issue or idea, or, at least, a working understanding of each other's professions.   But the most promising teams are those that engage with each others' skills and experience and take full advantage of their coming together.

- Common knowledge. Certainly, all members must understand the ideas being communicated. They must also understand the context in which they are communicating or, more importantly, they need to be able to improve their understanding as they communicate their ideas.

4. How important is the context? Is it external?

Unsurprisingly, the context emerges as a key factor in these studies of the effort to communicate complex ideas. Not only does it shape the authors' practice, but can also go a long way in helping to understand their position. In Ecuador, South Africa, and the Middle East, contextual factors such as local culture and values, are central to the authors' analytical frameworks. In fact, this is the principal focus of the chapter on education reform in the Middle East and the Gulf States.

A key implication emerges from the cases: context, often presented as external or exogenous to the organisations and to their communicating or influencing efforts, can be just as easily seen as an internal or endogenous factor.

The 'context', best exemplified by the rules, culture, and values of the population in Ecuador, the Middle East, and in South Africa, was precisely what the initiatives were attempting to affect. At the same time, those leading the initiatives belong and, in varying degrees, participate in that same context – its rules, culture, and values.

As a consequence, we should rethink how we treat contextual factors, reassessing how they affect both the interventions, and change itself. If the context is not external and separate to the organisations and individuals involved then it should not be taken as a constant to be studied separately or in isolation to the initiative. Neither can those involved in an initiative be considered independent of their context. Their motivations, the choices they make in relation to the definition of the problem and the objectives, the strategies, and tactics pursued, their choice of partners and collaborators, and their broader interactions with others, need to be incorporated into the study of the context.

The literature from developed countries about the links between research and policy in developing countries has emphasised, by the manner in which it has sought to study the relationship, a separation between politics and research and between politics and policy. Taken as a whole, it argues that policy is better informed by research when the communities of researchers, policymakers and politicians are brought together by a metaphorical bridge and connected by specialised professionals and mechanisms – sometimes called knowledge managers or brokers. Proponents of this view argue that these communities inhabit different spaces, are governed by entirely different institutions, and that they have fundamental differences that make it difficult for both to collaborate with each other without external help or the adoption of new ways of working.

The practice and interventions that this literature informs become, therefore , equally compartmentalised. Some of the following terms and concepts are common in this sector and illustrate this view of separate communities and spaces: supply, demand and intermediaries; bridging research and policy; research to action; research to practice; evidence based policy in development; research uptake; research into use.

A consequence of this compartmentalisation is that policy minded researchers, think tanks, and other civil society organisations are often singled out as the force for change; the protagonists in their own stories of change.

They become, at least for the purpose of these accounts of policy change, somehow more enlightened than their peers working in policymaking bodies, the media or the private sector. They, and not the others, are the agents of change. In fact, we know that they share the same economic, social and economic space as these other actors: there are strong familiar, social and professional relationships between researchers, policymakers, journalists, activists, and business people. And we also know that these are not passive agents. They, too, have agendas and missions of change.
The cases show conclusively that researchers and communicators are active members and participants of the very same context they are attempting to affect. They also suggest that to be successful they must make further efforts to engage with it and with its other participants. The differences between them, for instance, between those supporting and those opposing a different approach to breast milk in South Africa – or to fertilisers in Ecuador – should not be taken to mean that they belong to different communities. Instead, they are common differences within the same groups.

The South African case, for example, provides a good illustration of this. The authors describe how several friends and family members of the team often disagreed with their views regarding breast milk. Similarly, a large part of the South African story refers to the transformation that the researchers and the communicators went through themselves. Without this change, the effort that ensued would not have been possible.

The context, then, is central to the stories and ever present within the organisations and teams involved. It is, at the same time, the objective of the interventions: the very same thing they attempt to change.

5. *How best can researchers and communicators work together?*

Another aspect of the compartmentalisation of the communities for ideas and politics is the separation of research and communication practice. This separation has a clear implication for the manner in which research projects and research organisations are set up. Researchers and communicators rarely work together as a matter of course. Instead, the latter are brought in to communicate final research outputs or to support with specific tasks related to publication design or formatting, or the organisation of events.

This assumes that the tasks involved in both sets of activities are entirely separate and can be carried out in isolation with or, at the very least, with limited interaction with each other. The cases show that this is not necessarily so. Research and communication are deeply connected in a number of ways that demand a re-think of the way that organisations and teams are set up:

- Personal skills. At the individual level, all researchers have to communicate. While they may not be in charge of packaging their studies or shooting a video they must still communicate their ideas to fellow researchers, organise teams, interpret and share their findings, write reports and papers, etc. The entire research process is a communicative one. And something similar can be said of communicators. To develop the right communication strategy they need to study their context and audiences, the issue they are addressing, the research they are using, etc. A good communications strategy, like a policy recommendation, has a strong 'research' base.

- Feedback. The research process is full of opportunities for feedback – and learning. All research projects involve a number of phases or steps that present several opportunities for others to get involved, for researchers to incorporate their views, and for communicators (and others) to affect the research process.

  These feedback moments bring researchers face to face with communications challenges and with communicators.

- Outputs. When researchers talk of the 'outputs' of their research they are in fact referring to the channels and tools that communicators use. The academic paper is a communication tool – it is a type of publication. A press release is no less a research output than a paper, albeit one that is more likely to be put together by a communicator than by a researcher. And there lies the crux of the matter: some types of research outputs are more commonly employed by researchers and others by communicators, but they are no less communication tools.

Again, it is not always possible to separate communication outputs from the research process. When a researcher decides to undertake a literature review it is also defining a communication output, namely, the written summary of their review of different literature. Case studies, briefing papers, and background notes have their own structures and writing styles that respond to both communication and research requirements. An econometric study can be presented in a number of ways, all of which are communication tools: tables, diagrams, academic papers, to name a few. Even the design of survey questionnaires and the wording of specific questions demand careful attention to communication concerns.

These deep connections point towards a necessary integration of both practices across an organisation – and in the design and execution of research projects.

Conclusions

The cases present a new take on the 'stories of change' approach often used to show or illustrate how research has been used to influence policy. Instead, they offer an opportunity to reflect on the manner in which different elements of an effort to inform policy change come together and how two key participants, researchers and communicators, can support each other.

The book as a whole presents an approach to encourage further reflection within and across research organisations, which could support their own learning efforts. This kind of critical analysis of an experience or a policy challenge has the potential to unravel the complex nature of the relationship between researchers and communicators as well as to offer useful insights to improve it.

The research and writing process itself presents an opportunity for researchers and communicators to explore each other's roles and learn how to work together in the future. Therefore, the approach used here – dialogue, critical thinking and adaptive responses – will also be useful for any other organisations wanting to increase their capacity for research communications.