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Knowledge Translation: Bridging the gap between research and policy

Workshop Summary Report¹

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The Issam Fares Institute for Public Policy and International Affairs (IFI) organized the third technical workshop of the Consortium for Arab Policy Research Institutes (CAPRI) project at the American University of Beirut (AUB) on February 28th 2013.

The purpose of the CAPRI project is to bring together Arab think tanks or Policy Research Institutes (PRIs) to collectively study the role of these institutes and explore how to enhance their impact in Arab policy-making vis-à-vis the Middle East and North Africa. The project was launched in 2010 with the main aim of studying the role of PRIs or think tanks in policy-making in the Arab World. Activities conducted under this project included: establishing a regional PRI database, convening regional strategic and technical workshops and seminars, and developing working papers.

The workshop aimed at providing a platform for sharing successful experiences on knowledge translation as part of the policy-making process. Previous workshops addressed technical issues of communication and funding among PRIs. This workshop is timely as it highlights the existing gap between research and public policies and the critical need to make research more relevant to policy-making. Participants joined the workshop from Iraq, Egypt, Qatar and Lebanon.

Facilitators presented both the perspective of the researcher as well as that of the civil society organizations and PRIs in the knowledge translation process. Case studies were presented to illustrate how research produced in academic settings is transformed into knowledge that informs policy decisions and is relevant to policymakers and other key actors in the civil society.

Case Study: The Tobacco Law Case in Lebanon

Mrs. Rania Baroud, Board Member of the Tobacco Free Initiative, described the development of events which culminated in a successful legislation to ban smoking in public places in Lebanon. The series of

¹ The Workshop summary report was prepared by Mr. Atallah al-Salim, Research Assistant at the Issam Fares Institute for Public Policy and International Affairs.

advocacy events began with a petition against smoking indoors while she was working at a local television channel. This petition received support from a number of stakeholders and ended up in a legislation that was effective in September 2011.

The role of scientific evidence:

Baroud highlighted the role of scientific evidence which was essential in forging public support around the cause and the role that the AUB played in providing the needed data and thus bringing more credibility to the campaign. For example, data on the dangers of smoking on individual's health was available in Lebanon before the advocacy campaign began. However, this data was never communicated to the public until a partnership was established between civil society organizations and AUB's Faculty of Health Sciences. The evidence-informed research complemented the collective advocacy efforts. The scientific evidence provided by researchers at AUB was used to target the different stakeholder groups in the society, using the information that appealed to each group. For example, poisonous chemical elements in cigarettes were presented in simplified language by comparing them to the chemical elements found in everyday cleaning products. Therefore, the "*know-how*" of communicating with the stakeholders was essential and proved very effective.

Furthermore, the collaboration with scientific researchers provided the campaign with specific scientific evidence in a **timely manner**. For example, the advocacy campaign was ready to respond to the hard data provided by the restaurants owners who protested against the law claiming that it would have a negative impact on their businesses. They supported their claims with scientific data from a study conducted by one of the leading international consulting firms. Faculty members at AUB developed a study to further support the proposed law and refute the claims of restaurant owners.

Therefore, the advocacy campaign would not have succeeded without the **availability of relevant and timely scientific evidence** provided by researchers at AUB, nor would it have succeeded without the efforts of the PRIs in **making the evidence accessible** to the policymakers.

Knowledge Translation Tools

Dr. Fadi El-Jardali, Associate Professor at the Faculty of Health Sciences, presented an overview of knowledge translation tools and strategies that can be used in policy-making.

Key Challenges to the Link between Research and Policy:

Three key challenges present the link between research and policy:

- *Irrelevant research*
- *Devaluation of research in the policy-making process*
- *Difficulty to use research "as-is"*

Although data and scientific evidence may sometimes be available, there exist a number of problems with the dissemination and effective utilization of this data. A recent study surveyed 238 researchers from 12 counties in the Arab Region. The study looked at the use of health systems and policy research

evidence in the health policy-making in eastern Mediterranean countries². Findings showed that only 16 percent of the participants interacted with policymakers and stakeholders in priority settings, and 19.8 percent involved policymakers in the process of developing their research.

As for research dissemination, it was found that researchers are more likely to transfer their research findings to other researchers (67.2 percent) rather than to policymakers (40.5 percent).

The timing of releasing any research is also significant as illustrated by Dr. El-Jardali. However, this was not evident in the survey as 40.1 percent of the research was reported not to be delivered at the right time.

A number of strategies were identified as tools to overcome these challenges and bridge the gap between research and policy:

- *Policy briefs*: The policy brief includes the characterization of the problem, description of three viable policy options, benefits and harms in adopting any of the listed policy options, and description of barriers to implementation. Policy briefs can be used to inform, consult, and involve stakeholders at different stages of policy making
- *Policy Dialogues*: Policy dialogues include grouping together different stakeholders in order to discuss policy briefs. Conducting such dialogues can help in clarifying the problem and solutions and contribute to effective implementation of public policies.

Capacity building of PRIs and civil society organizations was also strongly recommended in order facilitate their capability to influence policies. It was also added that enhancing human and financial resources of parliamentary committees may facilitate the policymakers' access to evidence.

Current Views and Practices on Knowledge Translation in the Arab World

A number of participants shared their experiences on knowledge translation particularly highlighting how research contributed to public policy-making. Among the issues presented were:

- *The timing of the research*: The timing when the research was released to the public was very critical as it coincided with a national event that was expected to have a significant political impact. The research provided a national and international debate which would potentially influence the national event.
- *The key informants*: Researchers interviewed key stakeholders such as ministers, policymakers, civil society actors, and tribal leaders (where applicable) in the process of developing the research. Engaging the different stakeholders eventually increased the credibility and accuracy of the research.

² The findings cited are taken from the research study: Use of health system and policy research evidence in the health policymaking in eastern Mediterranean countries: views and practices of researchers. Fadi el-Jardali, John N. Levis, Nour Ataya, Diana Jamal. *Implementation Science* 2012; 7:2

- *The PRI's credibility*: One of the participating institutes gained credibility and recognition for it had established a history in conducting policy relevant research in the country it operates. As a result, the local government began to consult this PRI as an expert on providing relevant evidence for decision making on a number of pressing local issues, such as electoral reforms and natural gas policies.

Conclusion

The workshop addressed the utilization of scientific evidence in public policy-making and highlighted the gap between research and policy formulation. It was agreed that communicating research findings is as important as its content given the availability of various institutions and/or channels for such research to pave its way to the public. Traditional outreach methods include mass media and civil society groups. More sophisticated methods which are usually designed to influence public policies include policy briefs and policy dialogues. In this context, PRIs need to address policymakers in a targeted approach. The right approach along with timing, efficiency, accuracy, and credibility of a research contribute to a better formulation of public policies.