



**Issam Fares Institute for Public Policy  
and International Affairs**



**Faculty of Health Sciences**  
Center on Knowledge-to-Policy for Health

## **Knowledge Translation: Bridging the Gap between Research and Policy II**

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*Summary of the Workshop organized by the*

**Issam Fares Institute for Public Policy and International Affairs, AUB**

*In collaboration with the*

**Center on Knowledge-to-Policy for Health, AUB**

*And the*

**Center for International and Regional Studies, Georgetown University School of Foreign Service**

*September 12, 2013, Doha*

### **Overview**

The Issam Fares Institute for Public Policy and International Affairs' (IFI) project on the Consortium of Arab Policy Research Institutes (CAPRI) organized its fourth technical workshop "Knowledge Translation: Bridging the Gap between Research and Policy II", which was held on September 12, 2013 at the Center for International and Regional Studies, Georgetown University School of Foreign Service in Qatar. Participants joined the workshop from Qatar, Bahrain, Saudi Arabia, Oman, and the United Arab Emirates (UAE). This event was also the second in a series of workshops specifically on Knowledge Translation, with the first having been conducted at the American University of Beirut (AUB) in February 2013.

This workshop aimed at discussing the current situation of Knowledge Translation in the Arab World, sharing successful and unsuccessful experiences, and exploring Knowledge Translation models and strategies that best fit the Arab world context.

Speakers presented both the perspective of the researcher as well as that of the practitioner and the Policy Research Institutes (PRIs) in the knowledge translation process. Case studies were presented to illustrate how research produced in academic settings is transformed into knowledge which informs policy decisions and is relevant to policy-makers and other key actors in civil society.

### **CAPRI Project**

Dr. Hana El-Ghali, Senior Program Coordinator at IFI, presented an overview of the CAPRI project, which is part of the Research, Advocacy and Public Policy-making program aiming to fill the gap in understanding the specific link between PRIs and policy-making in the Arab world. The objectives of the CAPRI project are to study the role and map the landscape of PRIs in the Arab World, enhance PRI's

role and impact on policy-making and facilitate networking and collaboration among Arab PRIs. CAPRI has gleaned and compiled a significant amount of data regarding the state of PRIs in the Arab World over the past three years through conducting a variety of activities, together with establishing a regional PRI database, convening regional strategic and technical workshops and seminars, and developing a series of working papers.

Dr. El-Ghali introduced the preliminary findings of CAPRI's work since 2010. Two-hundred and forty institutes have been classified within the regional PRI database. Given the sample in the PRI database, it was found that Lebanon, Palestine and Morocco had the largest number of PRIs in the MENA region, and Bahrain, Kuwait, United Arab Emirates and Libya had the least. Funding was also found to be one of the significant variables between the PRIs classified within the database, as twenty-six percent of the PRIs reported that they receive government funds, fourteen percent reported to receive funding from United Nations agencies and other non-profit organization and nineteen percent refused to disclose their source of funding. As for the affiliation of PRIs, forty-five percent of the classified PRIs reported having no affiliation (being independent) in their research and functions. Some of these findings have a number of limitations, particularly that the methodology followed to compile the database depended on local researchers in every country, the availability of data on PRI websites and the willingness of surveyed institutes to disclose information. Common challenges identified by the CAPRI project include the lack of sustainable long term funding for PRIs, the lack of research capacity within the institutes, the interference of government and donors in their research agendas and the lack of transparency in the policy-making processes in the Arab world.

### **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 the establishment of successful legislation to ban smoking in public places in Lebanon. The series of advocacy events began with a petition against indoor smoking while she was working at a local television channel. This petition received support from a number of stakeholders and ended up in legislation that was effective in September 2011.

Baroud highlighted the role of scientific evidence essential in forging public support around the cause as well as the role AUB played in providing the needed supporting scientific evidence and thus giving more credibility to the campaign. For example, information on the dangers of smoking on individual's health was available in Lebanon before the advocacy campaign began. However, this information 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 society, using information which appealed to each group. For example, information about the poisonous chemical elements in cigarettes were presented in the study in a simplified language by comparing them to chemical elements found in everyday cleaning products. Therefore, the *"know-how"* of communicating with stakeholders was essential and proved very effective.

Furthermore, collaboration with scientific researchers has 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 restaurant 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. In response, 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 been successful 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 policy-makers.

## Knowledge Translation Tools

Dr. Fadi El-Jardali, Director of the Center on Knowledge-to-Policy for Health and Associate Professor at the Faculty of Health Sciences, presented an overview of Knowledge Translation tools and strategies that can be used in policy-making. He started by describing the public policy cycle and providing an overview of the different theories that govern policy-making. The main processes for policy development may seem structured and straightforward (defining the problem and course of action (laws & programs needed to be addressed), selecting the policy instrument, mobilizing support, implementation and evaluation), however in reality this is not the case. Three key challenges have been found in the link between research and policy:

- Irrelevant research
- Devaluation of research in the policy-making process: policy-makers do not see research as instrumental to making policy
- 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 countries in the Arab Region<sup>1</sup>. The study looked at the use of health systems and policy research evidence in the health policy-making in Eastern Mediterranean countries. Findings showed that only 16 percent of the participants interacted with policy-makers and stakeholders in priority settings, and 19.8 percent involved policy-makers 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 policy-makers (40.5 percent). The timing of the release of any research is also significant as illustrated by Dr. El-Jardali, whereby according to the study 37% of respondents stated that evidence was not presented to policy-makers and stakeholders in a timely manner and a comprehensible format.

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

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<sup>1</sup> El-Jardali, F., Lavis, J.N., Ataya, N. & Jamal, D. (2012). Use of health system and policy research evidence in the health policy-making in eastern Mediterranean countries: views and practices of researchers. *Implementation Science*, 7(1), 2.

- *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 the policy-making process. Policy briefs cannot be done using a single study; they should synthesize global and local evidence.
- *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. Stakeholder mapping is needed before conducting a policy dialogue because having the wrong people around the table may backfire.

Capacity building of PRIs and civil society organizations was also strongly recommended in order to facilitate their capability to influence policy-making. Furthermore, enhancing human and financial resources of parliamentary committees may facilitate the policy-makers' access to evidence.

## Current Views on and Practices of Knowledge Translation in the Gulf Context

A number of participants shared their experiences on Knowledge Translation in the Gulf. The importance of the following issues was highlighted:

- **Communication:** Policy-makers in the Arab world tend to listen to large consultancy firms rather than academic research centers, and that is partly because these firms know how to communicate knowledge, i.e. they know "how to say it and how to sell it". Therefore, having strong communication teams within PRIs is critical. PRIs need to repackage research so that it is accessible by Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs) or intermediary institutes who can then take it to policy-makers.
- **Creating champions and engaging key stakeholders:** The presence of champions within the different sectors engaged in the policy-making process is essential. For example in the Tobacco Control Law case in Lebanon, Dr. Rima Nakkach was the champion within AUB, Member of Parliament Dr. Atef Majdalani within the Lebanese Parliament and Mrs. Rania Baroud within the advocacy group. The importance of having access to the policy-makers or diplomats close to them cannot be overestimated (and it is important to know which diplomats have good relations with the minister you are trying to reach). Engaging the different stakeholders eventually increases their receptivity, reduces resistance and increases the credibility and accuracy of the research.
- **Timeliness of the research:** It is crucial to realize the importance of time especially in the Arab world; an example was given of a study conducted in Qatar about child protection over the internet. By the time the policy-makers became interested in collaborating, the knowledge gained from that study had become outdated since the internet world had significantly changed over the previous four years, especially with the proliferation of smart devices, and children used the internet differently at that time than they did four years earlier. Consequently, the knowledge was no longer applicable and the effort put into the research was not effective.

- **PRI's credibility:** A key to credibility is expertise that is developed over many years of work, which leads the government to consult the PRI as an expert on providing relevant evidence for decision-making on a specific topic. Credibility is usually accumulated through the research that is produced by a PRI and the relationships and role it plays within policy-making processes. For example, AUB is viewed as a credible source of information as it has a history in the validity and realibility of the research it produces that is in many cases considered world class. This was a key factor in influencing decision makers in Lebanon when deliberating the Tobacco Control Law as AUB was seen as a trustworthy source of information and evidence.
- **Entry points:** Two strategies were debated, the confrontational and engaging strategies. There is evidence that starting with a confrontational approach might risk losing trust or chances at building long term relationships with policy-makers; it was advised to start by engaging them and then utilizing a confrontational approach once necessary. One of the participants described the example of how the issue of violence against women was introduced in Qatar. At first, the issue of violence against women was taboo in Qatari society. So the entry point for the policy negotiations was to actually rename the concept of violence against women and label it as "domestic violence" which was more acceptable. The target was to introduce the term in a government document because it would become easier to begin discussing it. The term was successfully introduced into the Population Policy. Dr. El-Jardali suggested that, "we need to be problem makers", in order for an issue to become a national priority.
- **The evolving role of universities:** With the increasing number of universities in the Arab world, competition is intensifying among universities making it crucial for them to carve out a competitive advantage to survive in the market. One competitive advantage would be to change the role of the university from being merely an education and research provider to becoming an active contributor to Knowledge Translation and policy-making. It was highlighted that university programs must change to provide incentives for professors to try to reach policy-makers. For example, promotion rules need to be modified so that they are not based on the number of the researcher's annual publications only, but rather on whether any of his/her publications had public policy influence. Introducing the role and importance of evidence informed policy is a first step to encourage universities to think about their role in Knowledge Translation. It is also critical to question what social impact is the work of researchers having on decision making. Giving researchers the capacity to engage in Knowledge Translation through training is also needed. This can be done by having a unit within the university that trains academicians on Knowledge Translation, which was implemented in Saudi Arabia where one university has recently approved integrating an evidence based health policy center into the university.
- **Challenges in Qatar:**
  - The government tends to perceive research centers as challenging opponents, finding it threatening when research centers do the work they are supposed to be doing. This can particularly be due to the fact that that knowledge is power. A strategy to cope with this resistance is to engage the policy-makers and let them take the credit for advancing a certain policy.

- Local researchers in Arab countries, whether individual scholars or research centers, have no credibility with their own government, partly because they do not know how to transfer their knowledge in a user-friendly format.
- There is a lack of necessary administrative structures for supporting evidence based policy-making (such as rapid response units or policy analysis units to supply evidence to policy-makers). There is a lack of explicit budgets for evidence informed decision-making as well.
- **Other specificities to the Qatari context:**
  - Participants reported that there is a growing trend to discuss issues that were previously seen as taboos in Qatar.
  - It was reported that when it comes to policy-making in the Gulf, things tend to work quietly “without making a fuss about a particular policy issue”. Participants explained that pressuring too much through the media in Qatar can have a reverse effect of what is intended and is likely to push advocacy efforts backwards. This indicates that policy-making and advocacy are context based (*what works in one country in the Arab World may not work in another*).
  - Another reflection was on the approach to decision-making which was described as generally being top-down, therefore challenging. Participants had concerns, however, whether a bottom-up approach in a conservative society like Qatar might actually result in less progressive policies.
- **Next steps needed:**
  - More clarification is needed to what windows of opportunity the Arab Spring has brought forth for policy-making in the Arab world.
  - Studying the traditional structures of public policy-making can be a good starting point to introduce concepts of public policy research. Such a study has been conducted in Kuwait on the influence of “diwaniyyas” and “local majlises”<sup>2</sup>.
  - It was suggested that AUB should take a lead in raising the awareness of fellow universities on how they can be more involved in Knowledge Translation activities and processes.

## Concluding Remarks

The workshop addressed the utilization of scientific evidence in public policy-making in the Arab world and highlighted the gap between research and policy formulation. Characteristics of Knowledge Translation pertaining to the Gulf context were discussed by participants. It was agreed that the way in which research findings are communicated is as important as the content, given the availability of various institutions and/or channels for such research to pave its way to the public. PRIs need to address policy-makers in a targeted approach. The right approach along with timing, efficiency, accuracy and credibility of research, contributes to better formulation of public policies.

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<sup>2</sup> Alhajeri, A. M. (2010). The development of political interaction in Kuwait through the “Dīwānīyas” from their beginnings until the year 1999. *Journal of Islamic Law and Culture*, 12(1), 24-44.