ASSESSING THE POLICY IMPACT OF RESEARCH

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Assessing the policy impact of research activities often equates to demonstrating value for money from research outputs. Although assessing monetary impact is important, so are the more complex issues that influence decision making, such as relationships, access to knowledge and the context in which research findings can be applied.

Due to the political and often messy nature of policy, assessing the impact of research in policy cannot just follow just the linear and formulaic approach characteristic of economic tools use, for example cost benefit analysis. Despite the contributions value for money tools make towards assessing impact, a parallel and complementary suite of tools is needed to capture the impact from social and relationship based nature of decision-making and knowledge uptake.

In early 2016, the International Food Policy Research Institute (IFPRI) published an impact assessment of a selection of work from the past 40 years. Overall, the authors found that IFPRI made significant contributions towards knowledge that has facilitated policy change, that have progressed rural development in a range of countries (see summary note). The authors note that the lack of data available to assess impact often makes the task difficult. There is also the complex task of assessing impact on non-quantifiable items, such as identifying the counterfactual and the influence on networks and knowledge flows. The lack of strong monitoring and evaluation frameworks from the inception of projects further adds to the difficulty of assessing impact.

Using publication output, citation counts and external reviews, the authors found that IFPRI's research output is comparable to that of global multilaterals (such as the World Bank), and top UK and US universities undertaking development research (excluding Ivy league universities). Testimonies from those dealing with IFPRI's research provide a narrative of the extent of impact, noting that impact on policy is notoriously difficult to measure (p11).

The IFPRI report provides an excellent summary box (p15) that outlines three challenges for assessing the impact of policy-oriented research. These challenges are: attributing influence to research outcomes, identifying what would have occurred in the absence of research, and estimating the developmental impacts of policy change. Addressing these challenges requires an exploration of a diversity of tools, beyond traditional cost benefit approaches, to impact assessment and to understand policy change in developmental contexts.

Sustineo has done work in this area, seeking to assess the link between research activities and developmental outcomes, primarily in our evaluations and impact assessments. Most recently, we developed a methodology for capturing non-quantifiable impact of research activities in a development context. We applied this in the context of agricultural research investments in Indonesia. To fully understand the impact of research on policy, we connected two critical areas in development.

The first area includes the networks, relationships and incentives that exist to facilitate knowledge flows. Flow of knowledge emerging from research centres can have greater policy relevance if there are adequate networks in place and positive links between societal groups to disseminate and absorb knowledge (Cash *et al.*, 2003). The second area relates to studying how a specific developmental context may act as a catalyst for research directly influencing policy (Overseas Development Institute, 2004). Development pathways or recent political developments can create the ideal situations for research findings to be used, or completely thrown out the window.

The global discussion on approaches to assessing the impact of policy research is important for Australia. In 2015, the CSIRO published an evaluation guide stating that the CSIRO seeks to document the economic, environmental, and social impact of their research activities. Yet the evaluation guide is based on a series of cost benefit analysis focused guidelines from a range of other public agencies.

This reliance on econometric tools is similarly an expected way of assessing impact in research and development corporations.[1] For example, the Grains Research and Development Corporation have a track record of assessing their impact within economic frameworks.[2] Traditionally, the Australian Centre for International Agricultural Research (ACIAR) has conducted economic impact assessments following general guidelines (Davis *et al.*, 2008), however more recently they have developed a broader range of impact assessment tools to understand impact on society (Carpenter and McGillivray, 2012; Dugdale *et al.*, 2012; Linder, 2011). Given that the *Public Governance, Performance and Accountability Act 2013* calls for greater documentation and evidence of the contribution public funds makes towards organisation's outcome, it is important for Australia to diversify our perceptions of impact beyond economic frameworks. The risk of constraining impact assessment to monetary gains severely reduces the chances of analysing and fully understanding the many other factors that facilitate or inhibit research uptake and impact. Much of this is based on human relationships and worldviews that remain essentially completely hidden to economic methods. Working towards sustainable futures requires fully generating ideas and changes that triangulate social, environmental and economic outcomes at the same time.

The future of impact assessments linking research findings to policy change is full of opportunities. Economic approaches can provide a wealth of detailed information on perceived impact, yet they artificially and unhelpfully limit impact to positive economic gains.

Capturing the broader issues that constrain impact, such as political and environmental context, and the networks that facilitate knowledge application, cannot be done using economic approaches. Doing so requires the use of a range of methods, often qualitative, that capture **how** and **why** decisions are made in one point in time. Crucially, the use of qualitative methods must be grounded in relevant theory to link the observations made with past studies. This link provides the rigour required to complement the quantitative outputs of economic impact assessments.

Overall, at Sustineo we strive for diversifying traditional ways of measuring impact. Issues relating to sustainability extend beyond economics, as a mix of social relations and environmental factors drives them. As such, assessing the impact of research and programs requires a range of tools able to capture the diverse economic, social, and environmental impacts both qualitatively and quantitatively.

References

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[1] Council of Rural Research and Development Corporation Chains. 2007. Guidelines for Evaluation.

[2] http://www.grdc.com.au/Research-and-Development/Impact-Assessment