

From research to policy

The role of researchers in shaping urban climate resilience

Policy pointers

- Research can provoke debate, raise awareness, frame discussions and influence action and policy.
- Effective, influential research agendas should be shaped by the policy context in question – which means understanding who the key actors are, their level of influence (national, provincial, local), and engaging them from an early stage.
- Understand the policy environment: is the research question relevant to current ‘hot topics’ and filling in a clear knowledge gap?
- Communication of findings is key: can other actors drive forward the agenda if engaged in the research and its findings, such as local communities or the private sector?
- The research findings may not be what policy makers want to hear, but it can still be important to disseminate and discuss them.

The impacts of climate change can have devastating effects on urban areas, which are home to over half of the global population. The scale and complexity of cities and towns, as hubs for economic, political and social activity, can make it difficult to plan for and implement actions to build resilience to the changing climate whilst continuing to thrive and grow. Research, when effectively targeted and communicated, can play a valuable role in informing actions taken in urban areas, by filling in evidence gaps, identifying key areas for action, or assessing possible approaches.

In October 2013, NISTPASS¹, ISET² and IIED jointly convened a workshop for researchers engaged in the urban climate resilience arena in Vietnam. The workshop centred on approaches to ensuring that research is relevant to the policy environment and more effectively reaches its target audience. This briefing paper sets out the key recommendations which emerged from the contributions of the research teams and the productive discussions held during the workshop, which are of relevance to researchers everywhere.

What is urban climate resilience?

Climate change resilience is the capacity of an individual, community, or institution to dynamically and effectively respond to the changing climate, whilst continuing to function and prosper (www.accrn.org). Resilience comes from the ability to understand potential impacts and take appropriate action before, during and after a particular event – and research can play a role in shaping this action. Resilience in urban contexts is focused on

the interactions between people, the existing systems on which they rely (such as electricity, water and ecosystems) and the rules and institutions that connect systems to people, such as land tenure systems, legal frameworks and planning processes.³ The complexity and inter-linkages across these three building blocks means that an understanding of how resilience can be developed requires a nuanced and context-specific approach, to which researchers can contribute alongside other stakeholders.

What role can research play?

Research plays an important role in generating new knowledge and furthering understanding of complex topics. Research may provide a different perspective on a particular issue. It can provoke debate, raise awareness, frame discussions and influence action and policy. Research may delve in depth on a certain issue, group or area, and consider the wider implications of climate change impacts to other sectors and actors; or it may take a broader view on a larger scale. Research studies may examine questions or gather and analyse data through methods beyond the capacity of the government, or may consider matters from a different angle, for example through in-depth case studies and qualitative interviews. All of these approaches may supplement the existing information available to policy-makers, or may uncover new matters of importance.

In order for research to have an impact on policy, it should be clear from the outset who the targeted end-user of the research is, and the study should be designed with the end-user in mind. This means that the priorities, responsibilities, and policy framework within which the end-user operates, should all be considered from the beginning. If the end-user works in government, it is important to recognise that they might not be in a position to shape policy – they may be policy users themselves.

A toolkit for effective policy research

The discussions at the workshop led to the development of a step-by-step approach for effective and influential research, based on the experiences of the participants.

Define a field of action

The first step to influencing decision makers is to define a field of action: that is, defining a research goal and intended audience, and developing a strategy to ensure the results reach the target audience. This means considering whether the research question is topical, and of relevance and interest to policy-makers and their fields of influence.

Account for the necessary time and resources

When planning and budgeting for the research project, researchers need to account for not only time required for engaging with decision-makers, but also the resources for doing so.

Why might research not influence policy?

- Asking the wrong question: the topic is not a priority issue, or nobody has responsibility for the matter at hand;
- The topic is what the researcher wants to do, rather than what the policy maker is interested in or responsible for;
- The topic is still too new to attract policy attention, or too controversial, and therefore unlikely to be addressed by the present government;
- The findings are not communicated to the policy maker in a way which is actionable, or the policy maker may be faced with too much information.

Define the ‘boundary partners’

Any research project is shaped and defined by its ‘boundary partners’: individuals, groups or institutions who can influence and take action around the research result. By identifying these actors, the researcher can understand whether they have the authority to take policy decisions, therefore targeting their recommendations in the most appropriate manner. There may also be opportunities for involving government staff in the research project, for example as members of the research team, or from the initial kick-off workshop onwards.

Understand the decision-making context and the individuals involved

Past experience has shown that research which has successfully influenced policy has done so because of the researcher’s efforts to understand the policy environment in which the decision-maker is operating. Without understanding the policy context, even the most innovative and exciting research may lack relevance and hence impact. There are four categorisations of the research-policy inter-linkage:

- There is clear demand for the research by decision makers;
- Decision makers are interested, but there exists no leadership or capacity to respond – in this case, the researcher should determine how to best move their research up the priority list;
- A new issue attracts research interest, but no policy attention: decision makers are looking to solve problems they already have – this is a difficult route for a researcher;
- Decision makers are uninterested in the research or hostile towards it – it may threaten their interests.

Case study: SUMERNET research project on PFES

The Vietnamese Government has piloted Payment for Forest Environmental Service (PFES) in Lam Dong province as an approach to forest management and poverty reduction. A research project supported by SUMERNET aimed to evaluate the performance and impact of the pilot PFES program and its potential for application across Vietnam, and in Laos and Cambodia. The research results would be used to develop a legal framework for a national policy on PFES.

An important factor contributing to the success of this research project was the identification of potential users of project outputs from the start. Representatives from the Lam Dong Department of Agriculture and Rural Development (DARD) and Lam Dong Fund for Forest Protection and Development were invited to a kick-off meeting introducing the research objectives, the analytical framework and research methods. They were invited to participate in research activities, as these would touch on the challenges constraining implementation of the pilot PFES. The research team recognised their role in bridging the gap between the reality of PFES implementation and policy, and the importance of effective communication of research results to the target policy audience. The research team were trained in writing policy briefs, press releases and communication skills, in order to effectively present their findings in government meetings from the provincial to national level. Project findings were also published as papers and book chapters.

The project recognised the high demand for learning lessons from PFES implementation among provincial DARDs in Vietnam ahead of national scaling up, and the value of involving research end users in the research process.

Dr Bui Duc Tinh, College of Economics, Hue University

Further information: http://www.sumernet.org/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=73:evaluation-of-pilot-program-on-payment-for-forest-environmental-services-in-vietnam-and-policy-implication-for-laos-and-cambodia&catid=32:projects&Itemid=59

The ability of the research team to identify those with authority to make and implement decisions related to the study's findings, and with the oversight to bring findings from research into the policy domain, is essential for influential research. It is also important to understand the rules and regulations and the institutional framework relevant to the research topic and the key actors in the domain. At the same time, there may be external sources of influence which should be considered when framing the research study.

Communicate with the policy audience from the beginning of the project

Early communication with the identified end users of the research findings can ensure that the study is better tailored to integrate any concerns they may have and meet any requirements or criteria they have to fulfil in order to use the study results.

However, other approaches for engaging with the policy audience are possible – such as building the capacity of local policy-makers through the research process itself, and encouraging the use of evidence in policy debates. Some researchers have found it effective to work with local communities, who can in turn help the researcher to understand

avenues for influence. An ability to identify and include all relevant stakeholders and to manage this network is a valuable attribute for a researcher intent on bridging the gap between research and policy.

Recognise individual strengths as a researcher and the knowledge gaps to be filled

Researchers have the ability to use approaches that decision-makers within government normally do not use, and as a result, can offer a different perspective on a given issue. Researchers can use tools or methodologies that may not be currently utilised in the decision-making process. In introducing these approaches, researchers can assist in ensuring that policies and decisions are effectively formulated. For example, experimenting with pilot projects may offer an avenue to introduce new and innovative ideas to decision-makers and local officials.

Researchers should also look for opportunities to expand knowledge and understanding in the policy implementation process. For example, confusion may arise when implementing a national policy at a local level, and researchers can actively contribute to filling this gap in knowledge.

Be prepared: perceive a research opportunity in sudden change

Policy issues can arise quickly in the public domain; as a result of rapid or increasing public interest in a topic, or because of an unexpected event which brings attention to certain issues. Researchers should be adaptable and ready to work with decision-makers on these issues when they arise, to supply them with the necessary data for informed decision-making. Having the existing networks in place to take up this opportunity requires initiative, planning, and establishing prior boundary partner networks.

Collaborate, learn from failures and develop opportunities

The process of influencing decision-makers takes time and is a learning process. Past experiences can provide valuable lessons for improved impact in future, and collaboration and communication with other researchers offers valuable learning opportunities, and possibilities for broader impact through multidisciplinary research projects. Workshops or events can enable researchers and decision-makers to meet and establish connections for future collaborations.

Communicating research effectively

For research to reach and influence its intended audience, it needs to be communicated effectively, including through non-academic publications. Documents should be written with the time-constraints of policy-makers in mind – briefing papers can convey key policy messages, whilst providing links

and references to further evidence in longer documents. Researchers should also be ready for a ‘30 second elevator pitch’, to convey the key actionable elements of a study, when in a face-to-face situation with a decision-maker. This could be a vital opportunity to get a key actor on board with a research study.

Indirect routes to influence can be important – such as alliances with **international donors** and agencies. Government actors may be more likely to adopt and sustain activities initiated by donors. Working with other research actors to develop strength in numbers around a particular issue can also help – by participating in communities of practice, conferences and workshops.

Politicians and policy makers will often only take action when they ‘feel the heat’ – can the research findings be used to educate the voting public to advocate for change? By communicating research through mainstream media – including press conferences, newspaper articles, TV shows, and documentaries, awareness can be raised amongst local populations, who can then push an agenda forward. **Local communities** can also be useful allies and participants through the research process, to be engaged from the inception workshop onwards – their opinions and experiences may be a key finding of the study in question. The **private sector** (enterprises, whether small or large) may also be another key wielder of influence in driving forward a particular agenda, so organisations such as Chambers of Commerce or guilds could be an important audience.

Aim of Series:

The findings presented here are drawn from research published in the Asian Cities Climate Resilience working paper series. The series has arisen out of the Asian Cities Climate Change Resilience Network (ACCCRN), an initiative funded by the Rockefeller Foundation – more information can be found at www.acccrn.org

Collaborators: The workshop benefited from the contributions of ISET and NISTPASS in shaping the agenda and discussions, and the active engagement of the workshop participants led to the fruitful discussions which informed this briefing.

Further reading

Carden, F., 2009, *Knowledge to Policy: making the most of development research*, Sage, IDRC

Notes

1. National Institute of Science and Technology Forecast and Strategy Studies, Vietnam <http://www.nistpass.gov.vn/en/>
2. Institute for Social and Environmental Transition, <http://www.i-s-e-t.org/>
3. Tyler, S. and Moench, M., 2012. A framework for urban climate resilience, *Climate and Development*, 4(4): 311–326

Contact

Dr Bach Tan Sinh (NISTPASS), sinhbt@gmail.com
Dr Diane Archer (IIED), diane.archer@iied.org

Published by IIED,
January 2014

IIED order no: 10654IIED
<http://pubs.iied.org/10654IIED.html>
ISBN 978-1-78431-014-1
80-86 Gray's Inn Road,
London WC1X 8NH, UK
Tel: +44 (0)20 3463 7399



This and other papers from the Asian Cities Climate Resilience Working Paper Series are available from: www.acccrn.org.