
How research brokers and intermediaries support evidence- based pro-poor policy and practice

**An analysis of the
Locating the Power of
In-between
Conference,
held 1- 2 July 2008, in
Pretoria, South Africa**

Catherine Fisher, September 2009

About the Strategic Learning Initiative (SLI)

We believe that development and social change are greatly enhanced by the availability, accessibility and use of research and information. The Strategic Learning Initiative (SLI) stimulates learning and develops capacity among information and knowledge intermediaries who share this belief. We do this by facilitating learning and innovation and by sharing critical thinking and examples of best practice. Our areas of expertise are Capacity Development, Research, Marketing and Monitoring and Evaluation.

SLI is based in the Information Department at the Institute of Development Studies (IDS), Sussex and supports the IDS Knowledge Services.

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About this publication

This report is an analysis of discussions and presentations that took place at the 'Locating the Power of In-between conference' in Pretoria, South Africa in July 2008. This analysis was undertaken and this report written by Catherine Fisher, one of the conference organisers. The conference was organised to shine a spotlight on the role of research brokers, knowledge and information intermediaries and info-mediaries, and the contribution they can make to supporting and enabling evidence-based pro-poor policy and practice. It was organised in recognition that this group of actors have been largely overlooked in analytical terms, and that their work is not widely recognised or understood.

This report identifies key issues from the conference and presents them for further analysis, discussion and action by people undertaking intermediary work, their stakeholders and those interested in information and communication flows around pro-poor policy and practice. It draws out key points about the realities of evidence-based policy, where intermediaries fit in that context, ideas about how intermediaries can contribute and challenges to their work. In conclusion it points to future action, in particular the need for collaboration between intermediary actors to step up to the challenges identified.

The organisers hope that by starting a debate, illustrating a range of intermediary activities, forming connections between people, and providing the basis for future analysis, the conference and this report will inspire action that will enable intermediaries reach their full potential as development actors in their own right.

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Introduction and rationale

About this report

This report is an analysis of discussions and presentations that took place at the 'Locating the Power of In-between conference' in Pretoria, South Africa in July 2008. The conference was organised to shine a spotlight on the role of research brokers, knowledge and information intermediaries and info-mediaries, and the contribution they can make to supporting and enabling evidence-based pro-poor policy and practice.

This report identifies key issues from the conference and presents them for further analysis, discussion and action by people undertaking intermediary work, their stakeholders and those interested in information and communication flows around pro-poor policy and practice. It draws out key points about the realities of evidence-based policy, where intermediaries fit in that context, ideas about how intermediaries can contribute and challenges to their work. In conclusion it points to future action, in particular the need for collaboration between intermediary actors to step up to the challenges identified.

The analysis in this report was undertaken by Catherine Fisher, one of the conference organizers and is drawn from discussions at the conference. However the analysis goes beyond discussions in the conference in which participants did not often reach conclusions or consensus on the issues discussed. It tries to identify themes emerging from a range of sessions. The conference was documented through a multi-media website and each session in the conference was recorded in a blog posting; blog records of sessions on which analysis is based are linked to throughout the report.

The organisers hope that by starting a debate, illustrating a range of intermediary activities, forming connections between people, and providing the basis for future analysis, the conference and this report will inspire action that will enable intermediaries reach their full potential as development actors in their own right.

About the conference

The starting point for this conference was the recognition that policy – its formulation and implementation - is a key driver for action to address the many issues surrounding poverty and injustice. Policymakers, civil society organisations, development practitioners and researchers are well known actor groups supporting evidence-based pro-poor policy and practice. Less well known are the research brokers and intermediaries or 'info-mediaries' that act 'in-between' these groups of development actors to facilitate information and communication flows.

This new group of actors has largely been overlooked in analytical terms and many of the organisations and groups working as intermediaries do so in isolation from each other. This isolation and the lack of conceptual analysis around intermediaries and their work was the focus of this conference, which is designed to raise the profile of this emerging sector.

The conference focussed on a sub-set of information and knowledge intermediaries – those who focus specifically on brokering research in non-traditional ways. The aim was to develop better conceptual and practical understanding of these information and knowledge intermediaries, alongside a greater understanding of their potential contribution to development processes. Held over two days in Pretoria, South Africa, the conference brought together 100 people; researchers, communicators, NGO workers, policymakers and intermediaries themselves, mainly from South Africa, East and Southern Africa and Europe, so reflecting the conference location and the networks of the organisers, with representatives from Asia, North and Latin America and New Zealand.

The conference format emphasised discussion and exchange rather than expert presentation and much of the conference was based around small group discussion. IDS prepared a background paper that shared its title with the conference: Fisher, C. and Vogel, I. (2008) 'Locating the power of in-between: how research brokers and intermediaries support evidence-based pro-poor policy and practice'¹. The aim of this background paper was to provide a framework for the conference discussions and to give a brief overview of the key concepts. It poses some hypotheses around intermediaries and their contribution to evidence-based pro-poor policy and practice that were to be considered during the conference.

¹ The conference background paper can be downloaded from <http://www.ids.ac.uk/go/knowledge-services/strategic-learning-initiative/publications/working-papers>

Hypotheses presented in the conference background paper

Hypothesis 1: Evidence-based policy and practice is more likely to be pro-poor if it is understood as a practice which encourages the inclusion of a wide range of evidence and perspectives in defining and understanding issues and formulating policies.

Hypothesis 2: Intermediaries represent a distinct new communication structure that contributes to an enabling environment for the use of a broad range of evidence in policy and practice through multiple and hybrid communication and engagement channels.

Hypothesis 3: Intermediaries' unique contribution lies in their commitment to highlighting multiple perspectives that draw on a broad range of evidence sources to create a rich information environment to support evidence-based policymaking.

Hypothesis 4: Even when research communication is happening effectively, intermediaries add value by creating ongoing platforms, spaces and places to promote the engagement of policy and practice actors with a plurality of sources and perspectives.

Hypothesis 5: Intermediaries' contribution is strengthened when they become aware of how their 'power of in-between' affects the flow of perspectives and sources of evidence into the research-policy environment.

The conference started by exploring the context in which intermediaries are operating – it looked at some of the barriers to evidence informed policy and practice from the perspectives of people involved. It then introduced a definition of knowledge and information intermediaries (see following section in this report) and provided an outline of their potential contributions drawing on the background paper and allowed people to discuss. It then looked at different examples of intermediary work from two angles, exploration of different types of intermediary work followed by looking at intermediary work in different sectors.

Day two recapped on day one before exploring some of the movements that are changing the environment in which intermediaries operate such as the Open Access movement. A series of more practical workshops followed. In one of the closing sessions, participants were invited to suggest thorny issues that they had identified during the conference and wanted to discuss. This session identified most of the challenges for intermediaries outlined in Section Five (page x) of this report. Finally in the closing session a panel reflected on the hypotheses, participants and panel were invited to reflect, draw conclusions and look to the future.

Power of in-between conference agenda

Tuesday 1st July

Session 1: **Perspectives on the “problem” of evidence-based policymaking**

Session 2: **How research brokers and intermediaries contribute to evidence-based pro-poor policymaking**

Session 3: **Exhibition space**

Session 4: **Interventions for change: from access to action**

- Parallel 1: **Supporting access:** interventions that seek to improve the ways in which decision makers are able to access research based information
- Parallel 2: **Promoting uptake:** interventions aimed at encouraging greater engagement with and use of research based information
- Parallel 3: **Connecting knowledges:** interventions aimed at “bridging” different worlds of knowledge (eg scientific to experiential, local to global e
- Parallel 4: **Research communication:** case studies that explore innovation and challenges in effective communication of research

Session 5: Research brokers and intermediaries in different sectors and contexts

- Parallel 1: **HIV and AIDS programming**
- Parallel 2: **Agriculture**
- Parallel 3: **Gender mainstreaming**
- Parallel 4: **Local-global linkages**

Wednesday 2nd July

Session 6: **Reflections on Day 1 of the conference**

Session 7: **The changing world of research communication**

Session 8: **Practical issues in research brokering and intermediation**

- Workshop 1 : **Web 2.0 and what it means for brokering and intermediation**
- Workshop 2: **Identifying outcomes and impact** - monitoring and evaluation of research brokering and intermediation
- Workshop 3: **Edge of Networks:** success factors in virtual collaboration and networking for research-policy linkages
- Workshop 4: **Uncovering Open Access:** seizing the moment and making it work for you

Session 9: “Thorny issues” for research brokers and intermediaries

Session 10: How do research brokers and intermediaries contribute to evidence-based policymaking?
Revisited

Definition of knowledge and information intermediaries

There is no universally accepted definition of knowledge and information intermediaries. The background paper to the conference used the following definitions to describe a sub-set of intermediaries, those who deal specifically with research based information, who were the focus of the conference:

“we understand research brokers and intermediaries to be actors who are involved in processes of generating, interpreting, organising or communicating research based information for a particular purpose to particular social groups.... Intermediaries in this sense are specifically seeking to meet the perceived ‘knowledge needs’ of different social change agents, although these needs are not necessarily expressed. They capture and interpret information, adapting it to the context, adding to it, packaging it, communicating it, and they facilitate exchanges between other groups (Wolfe 2006; Saywell and Cotton 1999).” Fisher and Vogel, 2008, p5.

In practice, the kinds of knowledge and information intermediaries that were the focus of the conference were those that play the role in non-traditional ways generally outside the mainstream of communications and information disciplines: that is they were not traditional librarians, or publishers, extension workers or even print or electronic media. Most intermediary work presented at the conference involved use of web-based tools such as databases often used in conjunction with communication tools such as email, print and face to face events. They shared a commitment to brokering research-based information from multiple sources in order to contribute to better social justice outcomes.

However the lack of shared definitions proved a source of consternation and confusion to some participants in the conference as they struggled to ground their discussions. One often used term was “info-mediary” an imprecise yet useful term that manages to convey both the nature of the commodity (information) and the process of moving or mediating between different actors.

The conference did not reach a conclusion about the exact definition of intermediaries, although discussions did appear to reflect a reasonable amount of consensus about what constituted intermediary work. Whether definitions are important is not clear. However the author feels that some sense of common or shared language to describe this group is important in order for what we understand as the new generation of knowledge and information intermediaries to both receive greater analytical attention and to develop the shared sense of identity that will enable them to rise to challenges outlined later in this paper.

Context of evidence-based policy and practice

The problems and barriers to greater use of research evidence in policy and practice provided the basis for discussion throughout the conference. The organisers, including the author of this report, aimed to develop understanding of the problems in order to frame discussions about the kinds of contributions and roles that intermediary actors could play in alleviating those problems. In doing so they hoped to avoid focussing on (often technical) solutions deployed by intermediary actors without deep engagement with the nature of the problems that they are trying to tackle through their work.

Evidence-based policy remains an aspiration if not a reality

Panelists in the opening session of the conference shared reflections from their experiences of the South African political system and the internal workings of the UK Department for International Development (DFID) that told a familiar story. A story of multiple pressures, political and more mundane, leading to “decision making on the fly” in “dirty processes”² where evidence often plays very little part. Some participants asked whether that mattered, questioning the value of research evidence in contributing to pro-poor outcomes and arguing that much research could have the very opposite effect. However overall among participants and panellists there was a broad sense that evidence-based policy is worth striving for.

“we need better understanding about the impediments of why we [policymakers] are willing but not always able to engage” Mastoera Sadan, Senior Policy Analyst, South African Presidency

Link: Perspectives on problem of evidence-based policymaking session blog

<http://powerofinbetween.wordpress.com/2008/07/18/perspectives-on-the-problem-of-evidence-based-policymaking/>

Look beyond the research-policy connection

The background paper to the conference stated ‘the starting point for this conference is the recognition that policy is a key driver for action to address the many issues surrounding poverty and injustice’. However many participants, particularly those from the NGO sector, stressed that policy at a government level is not the only driver of action and in many cases, through accident or design, it does not succeed in addressing the situation of poor people. Throughout the conference there was a plea not to focus only on the research to policy connection but to look at multiple and multi-directional connections between the overlapping spheres of policy, implementation, practice and research. This raised interesting questions. How can experience

² Audio recordings of both presentations are available on the conference website.

Mastoera Sadan <http://powerofinbetween.wordpress.com/2008/09/04/policymaking-as-seen-from-the-belly-of-the-beast-audio-recording/> and Megan Lloyd Laney <http://powerofinbetween.wordpress.com/2009/05/26/policymakers-engaging-with-an-evidence-base-audio-recording/>

from practice better inform research agendas and policy? How can links between policy and implementation be strengthened and what role for research in that? How can effects of policy be evaluated and communicated? How can the perspectives of ultimate stakeholders be heard in these processes?

All of these questions suggest potential roles for intermediary actors. If, as panellist Themba Masilele from HSRC suggested, “policy is a narrative” – can intermediaries contribute to a happy ending?³

“The window of opportunity to influence policy is when it gets implemented...it is when operationalising policy decisions when policymakers need help, there is more often opportunity and space for engagement” Participant in panel discussion

Link:

Thorny issues session blog:

<http://powerofinbetween.wordpress.com/2008/07/22/%e2%80%9cthorny-issues%e2%80%9d-and-issues-emerging-for-research-brokers-and-intermediaries>

Opinion is divided on whether plurality of evidence contributes to better decision making

Underpinning the work of most information and knowledge intermediary actors at the conference is the belief that better decisions (whether in policy or practice) are made if decision-makers are aware of and able to engage with a variety of perspectives on an issue. This assumption was challenged on a number of fronts, mainly that the diversity of evidence available was not as important as the quality and that what is needed is not a range of research but the ‘right’ research. As one commentator pointed out, it is important to recognise the limitation and implication of multiple perspectives, eventually policymakers need to make a decision and too many voices could be counter productive.

Questioning the value of diversity does lead to an emphasis on direct relationships between researchers and decision makers which for many was a more important concern that the potential contribution of intermediaries. On the other hand many participants recognised the importance of seeking out perspectives that might not ordinarily be heard, and intermediary work that had this emphasis, for example HIV projects, was of great interest.

³ Full audio recording of Themba Masilele’s presentation available as a podcast at <http://powerofinbetween.wordpress.com/2008/09/16/policy-process-is-a-narrative-audio-recording/>

Who are the intermediaries in this picture?

After discussing issues and realities of evidence-based pro-poor policy and practice, discussion attention turned to the less well-known actors in these processes: the research brokers and intermediaries or 'info-mediaries' that act 'in-between' groups of development actors to facilitate information and communication flows. Looking at the actions of this disparate 'in-between' actors presented and discussed in the conference, some themes can be identified.

An emerging picture: the intermediary as enabler of information flows

Interactions between policy, practice and research are multiple, messy and complex. In exploring the barriers to effective interactions and the ways in which intermediary actors are trying to address them, a picture emerges of intermediary actors playing a range of roles supporting information flows and communication between different actors in complex processes.

"[my understanding of intermediary roles] has been blown up! There are horizontal roles, vertical roles, one-way, two-way, multi-way, 360 degrees"

participant evaluation

Established intermediaries have been joined by new kinds of hybrid intermediary actors

Well-established intermediary mechanisms, such as the media and libraries, remain and are as important as ever. Yet in an increasingly knowledge-driven world, everybody plays an intermediary role sometimes; relationships are formed and reputation and credibility built by demonstrating a willingness to share knowledge generated by others. Many people are playing cross-over roles. Well-established roles are now supplemented by newer, hybrid forms of this role.

It seems that the number of people and organisations playing an intermediary role in a formal and ongoing sense is proliferating and changing as people harness and combine approaches in pursuit of social change objectives. Participants questioned whether these constituted a "*distinct new communication structure*" as Hypothesis 2 in the conference paper proposed (ibid p6). Some participants observed that the 'newness' was the deliberate focus of intermediary work the work and the use of technologies in the role

"It's broadened my understanding of who intermediaries are – I'm so used to only thinking of librarians. I've been confronted with my (wrong) assumption"

participant evaluation

"information intermediaries are not just one off, short term projects. They are a central and critical part of the development puzzle." Andrew Chetley, Healthlink

A range of intermediary roles – engaged and behind the scenes

A major theme in the conference was that knowledge intermediaries need to go beyond playing a role in archiving and making research material available in repositories and databases if they want to inform policy and practice processes. Greater understanding of those processes suggest that proactive engagement and communication with stakeholders in those processes, as well as repackaging and formatting of research material, is required. Many intermediaries are already playing these roles (*see box*).

This concept was developed in the 'Between Ourselves' workshop that followed the conference⁴ into the idea of 'just in case' roles that preserve materials so they can be accessed in future and 'just in time' roles that take more proactive measures mobilising around processes and windows of influence. Individual organisations may not be able to play both roles but both are required for change to happen.

'Just in case' and 'just in time' intermediary action

Just in case: When playing tennis, Richard Humphries of **Southern African Poverty Research Network (SAPRN)** heard about a document produced by a friend working on flood mitigation in Mozambique, he obtained a copy of the document, made it available online and included it in the SAPRN database. Two years later someone looking for materials related to flood mitigation found this document and used it to develop a policy.

Just in time: When a discussion about national policy on minimum wage was taking place in the Bangladeshi parliament, DNet were able to identify relevant material from a range of research institutes available on their **Bangladesh Online Research Network** service. They packaged it for the key actors involved in debates and used their connections to these actors to share the material.

Links:

Supporting access session blog:

<http://powerofinbetween.wordpress.com/2008/07/18/supporting-access-interventions-that-seek-to-improve-the-ways-in-which-decision-makers-are-able-to-access-research-based-information>

Promoting uptake session blog:

<http://powerofinbetween.wordpress.com/2008/07/21/promoting-uptake-interventions-aimed-at-encouraging-greater-engagement-with-and-use-of-research-based-information/>

⁴ Fisher, C. and Kunaratnam, Y. (2008) Between Ourselves Workshop Report: Workshop report from the 2008 I-K-Medary Workshop

The origins of intermediary actors matter and shape how the role is played

These new intermediary actors and structures are shaped consciously and unconsciously by the sector or discipline in which they are located or from which they emerged. This was apparent in the section of the conference which explored intermediary work being undertaken in different sectors: HIV, gender and agriculture. The gender session for example looked at issues around power and subjectivity and the challenges these issues pose for intermediaries. Jenny Radloff from Association of Progressive Communications (APC) who presented the session highlighted the contested nature of gender as a term, which brought these issues into relief.

In the agriculture session meanwhile, discussion focussed around how intermediaries engage responsibly with communities, a common concern in agricultural extension work. The varied backgrounds of intermediaries and the debates they are having in different contexts point to the value of cross-fertilisation of ideas between intermediaries in across sectors.

No universal acceptance that knowledge and information intermediaries are required

Conference participants did not all accept that there is a need for these new kinds of intermediary roles. Some participants questioned the value of multiplicity, which is at the core of the work of intermediaries as indicated above. Others argued that communications capacities need to be built in researchers themselves, so questioning the need for ongoing intermediary functions. There was also warning provided about creating another layer of development jobs that serve the people within the industry better than the supposed beneficiaries.

What contributions can intermediaries make?

During the conference, information and knowledge intermediary actors shared a range of examples of the kind of work that they are undertaking, and current and potential activities were discussed. It seems that by combining public good missions, trusted identity, communications and information management skills and experience into atypical configurations, knowledge and information intermediaries can position themselves to play a range of range of functions in relation to research based information.

Enabling and maintaining access to information

Enabling and maintaining access to information is central to the intermediary role and the experiences shared during the conference illustrate the many dimensions of this important undertaking. From negotiating with research institutes to ensure material is publicly available, to documenting and digitising information that is currently sitting in people's heads or on dusty shelves, intermediaries play a crucial role in ensuring information is freely accessible to the public and getting it into the digital domain. Intermediaries also organise information so it can be easily found, an extension of the traditional library role into an increasingly populated digital environment. As ever more information is only recorded digitally, intermediaries have a role to play in ensuring access is maintained over time, long after producers of information have moved on (and websites abandoned), curating data in the digital age is an emerging area.

Link:

Supporting access session blog:

<http://powerofinbetween.wordpress.com/2008/07/18/supporting-access-interventions-that-seek-to-improve-the-ways-in-which-decision-makers-are-able-to-access-research-based/information/>

Enabling and maintaining access to information: examples of action

African intermediaries the **Southern Africa Research and Documentation Centre** (SARDC) and **Tanzania Online** regularly digitise print publications to make them more widely available. Conference organiser the **Human Sciences Research Council** has set up a network to enable a joined up approach to supporting open access to an ongoing preservation of digital data sets.

Links:

SARDC <http://www.sardc.net/>

Tanzania Online <http://www.tzonline.or.tz/>

Making information more “edible” to policymakers and other audiences

The story of the “door-stopper” report, a research report so large that people joke it could be used to hold doors open, that is not attractive reading for busy policymakers was shared by Dr Mateora Sadan, Senior Policy Analyst in the policy co-ordination advisory service within the South African Presidency. Many sessions in the conference identified activities being undertaken by intermediaries which aimed to make information more “edible” to different

target groups, repackaging information into formats that are easier for target groups to consume. This might involve translating material from one language to another, from one communications channel to another and in the most proactive form will involve identifying specific information requirements and finding appropriate means of meeting those requirements. All areas demand strong communication skills too often lacking or undervalued in the research community.

Link:

Promoting uptake session blog:

<http://powerofinbetween.wordpress.com/2008/07/21/promoting-uptake-interventions-aimed-at-encouraging-greater-engagement-with-and-use-of-research-based-information/>

Making research more accessible: examples of action

A resource intensive example of making research more accessible is the **Governance and Social Development Resource Centre Helpdesk**, one service provided by a resource centre created to support DFID Governance advisors in their work. A dedicated helpdesk team answers questions from advisors, drawing on theory, best practice, case studies and lessons learned as well as emerging thinking and tacit knowledge from their networks, before summarising and packaging it. This is comparable to a consultant or researcher role, however what marks it out as different is the ongoing nature of the service, reliance on secondary sources, emphasis on repackaging and effective communication and, where possible, commitment to sharing results as a public good.

Link: Governance and Social Development Resource Centre <http://www.gsdr.org/>

Creating demand for research - changing cultures of information use

Participants shared a range of examples that sought to change the culture of information use in decision making processes, for example, in the opening session of the conference, Dr Mateora Sadan talked of a programme aimed at increasing the skills of policymakers to engage with evidence⁵. The idea of addressing skills capacities and motivations to engage with research emerged in the closing session where participants identified the information literacy of different actors within policy, research and practice circles as a key area for intervention. Information literacy was defined as “building people’s capacity and confidences to use information and to

⁵ Blog and audio recording Dr Sadan’s presentation

<http://powerofinbetween.wordpress.com/2008/09/04/policy-making-as-seen-from-the-belly-of-the-beast-audio-recording/>

understand their own information needs and how they use information”⁶. Focussing on these capabilities is in contrast to approaches that seek to improve the communications skills of research producers.

“Intermediaries need to be actively involved in developing the capacity to use information” Mark Hepworth, University of Loughborough, UK

Links:

Promoting uptake session blog: <http://powerofinbetween.wordpress.com/2008/07/21/promoting-uptake-interventions-aimed-at-encouraging-greater-engagement-with-and-use-of-research-based-information/>

Thorny Issues session blog:

<http://powerofinbetween.wordpress.com/2008/07/22/%e2%80%9cthorny-issues%e2%80%9d-and-issues-emerging-for-research-brokers-and-intermediaries/>

Creating demand for research: example of action

The annual **Philippine Development Policy Research Month** organised by Philippine Institute of Development Studies aims to raise awareness and interest amongst those in local and national government institutions and the general public about the importance of policy research to national development. It showcases the range of research available on a topical thematic area from Filipino research institutes through research fairs, public debates and by packaging research outputs for lay audiences.

Link: Philippine Development Policy Research Month <http://dprm.pids.gov.ph/>

Supporting marginalised voices to be heard

The call not to ignore the grassroots or less mainstream voices emerged again and again throughout the conference, particularly in sessions on Connecting Knowledges, Linking Global and Local, Agriculture, Health and Gender. Underlying this sense is that the dominant voices will be able to make themselves heard, whether in policy and practice, but that less dominant perspectives may not. They may require a helping hand that intermediaries can choose to offer for example by creating spaces for engagement between different actors or repackaging material into appropriate formats for different audiences. This repackaging is often thought of in terms of communicating research outputs to community audiences, however it can also be

⁶ Thorny issues blog on conference website

<http://powerofinbetween.wordpress.com/2008/07/22/%e2%80%9cthorny-issues%e2%80%9d-and-issues-emerging-for-research-brokers-and-intermediaries/>

communicating knowledge from communities in ways that research or policy communities can engage with.

Link:

HIV session blog:

<http://powerofinbetween.wordpress.com/2008/07/21/hivaids-research-brokers-and-intermediaries-in-different-sectors-and-contexts/>

Supporting marginalised voices to be heard: examples of action

Aids Portal and **Saf AIDS** have been working with partners and networks to enable flows of information from communities into policy dialogues through e-forums. Experimentation has begun with an “audio” wiki that people can receive and contribute information to via mobile phone.

South African organisation **Women’s Net** has run Digital Story Telling projects that provide training that supports individual women, girls, women’s organizations and networks to take control of their own content and tell their own stories.

Links:

AIDS Portal <http://www.aidsportal.org/>

Saf AIDS <http://www.safaims.net/>

Women’s Net <http://www.womensnet.org.za>

Making connections between different spheres of action

Participants who challenged the dominance of government policy as the default sphere of action argued that intermediaries need to think about how to share knowledge between the spheres of policy, practice and research to ensure better flows of information between them. This thinking was consolidated in the Thorny Issues session of the conference and suggestions some interesting potential roles for information and knowledge intermediaries. Can they build on their locations and connections to play a role in supporting policy implementers to interpret policy decisions and design effective programmes or helping outcomes and lessons from policy implementation feed back into both research and policy processes? Using specialist communications skills and approaches they can repackage information for different groups and help overcome communication barriers?

Link:

Agriculture session blog <http://powerofinbetween.wordpress.com/2008/07/21/research-brokers-and-intermediaries-in-the-agriculture-sector/>

Making connections between different spheres of action: examples of action

Arid Lands Information Network builds on the social networks that already exist around communities in rural areas. They use a combination of face to face, print, telephone and online communication channels to both capture knowledge and experience from communities and to enable people living in rural areas to access knowledge from others and comment on it. They have previously organised farmer forums that bring together farmer with agriculture researchers enabling farmers to provide feedback on the usefulness of their research recommendations.

Link: **ALIN** <http://www.alin.or.ke/>

Creating alternative framings

Emerging from the idea of policy narratives and the importance of ensuring marginalised voices feature in those narratives, was a sense of the potential that intermediaries have to signpost or highlight alternatives to dominant framings of issues, or to bring together evidence and ideas that serve to challenge accepted wisdom.

Creating alternative framings: examples of action

Gender focused intermediary **BRIDGE** deliberately seeks out less dominant framings of issues when creating briefings on key development issues. Using their location within a research institute, the Institute of Development Studies, and their strong brand and reputation, they build relationships with powerful actors, such as international organisations, that enable them to highlight perspectives from more marginalised actors.

Link: BRIDGE <http://www.bridge.ids.ac.uk/>

Challenges and recommendations for intermediaries

The conference's focus on knowledge and intermediary roles not only illustrated their potential contribution to enhancing use of evidence in policy and process, it also surfaced a series of challenges for intermediaries outlined here. The more influential the role, the more mindfully it needs to be undertaken. So if intermediary work is recognised as important and influential then it is also critical that it is undertaken well and responsibly. Analysis of the discussions during the conference suggests that intermediaries need to consider these challenges and implications.

“The conference has ‘problematised’ my understanding [of intermediaries], but positive as it brings out many areas to think about”
participant evaluation

Go beyond playing a repository role to really impact on change processes

As outlined above, a major theme in the conference was that information and knowledge intermediaries need to go beyond playing a role in archiving and making research material available in repositories and databases if they want to inform policy and practice processes. For some intermediaries this poses a challenge to revisit how and by whom their services and interventions are being used. Not all intermediaries are going to want to become more involved in change processes; for some this could undermine values of objectivity and neutrality or be beyond their remit, resources or skills base. In these cases it could be worth exploring actors who are playing these roles and seeking to collaborate or meet their needs better.

“Being an information repository is not enough – intermediaries are part of the knowledge flow” From the closing session

Link:

How do research brokers and intermediaries contribute to evidence-based policymaking? Revisiting the hypotheses session blog:

<http://powerofinbetween.wordpress.com/2008/07/22/how-do-research-brokers-and-intermediaries-contribute-to-evidence-based-policymaking-revisiting-the-hypotheses/>

Engage with issues of trust, neutrality and transparency and the political nature of the role

The idea of an information or knowledge intermediary as an honest broker playing an objective or neutral role was strongly challenged throughout the conference. This was particularly the case in the gender parallel session, which reflected that gender work requires a particular awareness of subjectivity and the politics of information. In that session Jenny Radloff from APC argued that presenting a diversity of material from different sources was not the same as being objective and that ideas of objectivity and neutrality are contested. Gender-focussed intermediaries seemed most at ease with owning their role, its political nature and questioning their position and influence in that role.

Participants from journalistic backgrounds in particular raised questions about editorial ethics and on whose behalf intermediaries are acting and how they are held to account. Issues of trust and neutrality were identified during the Thorny Issues session as a key challenge facing intermediaries. Those who discussed this issue declared that *“no-one is truly neutral; we are all to some extent interest based”*⁷. Thus all intermediaries were challenged to look at their power, status, influences, mindsets and values, to consider to whom they are accountable and to explore further the issue of transparency in their work.

“Who influences the way intermediaries operate and why they operate? Who gives them funding for that? I think we need to rethink why we call ourselves intermediaries, why we exist and how neutral our interventions are.” Gillies C. Kasongo, PANOS Southern Africa

Links:

Gender session blog:

<http://powerofinbetween.wordpress.com/2008/07/21/gender-research-brokers-and-intermediaries-in-different-sectors-and-contexts/>

Thorny issues session blog :

<http://powerofinbetween.wordpress.com/2008/07/22/%e2%80%9cthorny-issues%e2%80%9d-and-issues-emerging-for-research-brokers-and-intermediaries/>

Reflections on day one of the conference session blog:

<http://powerofinbetween.wordpress.com/2008/07/21/reflections-on-the-first-day-of-the-conference/>

Collaboration is needed for information flows between different actors and locations

It became clear that the location of different intermediaries affected the range of material they were able to identify and the people they were able to engage with. Intermediaries are located in different places, some closer to research, some closer to policy spheres, others closer to practitioners, policy implementers or communities. In addition they had different geographical and thematic scopes. Maximising coverage and flows of information between these different groups requires collaboration between intermediaries. This might be working out standards and mechanisms to allow better flows between information systems or for intermediaries to define their niche with reference to each others' strengths and locations, for example dividing up 'just in case' and 'just in time' roles as outlined above (page x). The costs of not linking up, duplication and overlap between databases, networks and communications approaches, would likely outweigh the investment required for collaboration.

⁷ Thorny issues blog <http://powerofinbetween.wordpress.com/2008/07/22/%e2%80%9cthorny-issues%e2%80%9d-and-issues-emerging-for-research-brokers-and-intermediaries/>

“It’s important to know what others are doing in the area and not duplicate, rather collaborate” participant evaluation

“We need to map out our niches and identify areas in which partnerships can be made more efficient and effective” From Thorny issues blog

Link:

HIV session blog:

<http://powerofinbetween.wordpress.com/2008/07/21/hivaids-research-brokers-and-intermediaries-in-different-sectors-and-contexts/>

Develop standards and professionalise the role

There was some debate about whether professionalism and standards would stifle innovation. On the other hand it was argued that professionalisation of the intermediary sector would help it to be recognised. Standards, benchmarks and principles may be means of addressing issues of accountability and transparency. The conference did not itself draw conclusions as to the best approach. However it is possible that establishing norms, such as those that govern other spheres of work like the print media, would help both to raise standards and help stakeholders to hold the new generation of intermediaries to account, so the idea is worthy of further investigation.

Links:

Thorny issues blog: <http://powerofinbetween.wordpress.com/2008/07/22/%e2%80%9cthorny-issues%e2%80%9d-and-issues-emerging-for-research-brokers-and-intermediaries/>

Local and global linkages session blog: <http://powerofinbetween.wordpress.com/2008/07/21/local-global-linkages-research-brokers-and-intermediaries-in-different-sectors-and-contexts/>

Conclusions

This conference confirmed that the issue of how evidence can inform policy and practice is an important and shared concern and, within that picture, the contribution of intermediary actors is significant and worthy of attention. Some key conclusions from the conference are:

- **Policy is not the only driver or action for change** and the research-policy or researcher-policy maker link is just one in a complex web of ways in which research can help contribute to pro-poor outcomes. This requires all concerned with evidence-based policy and practice to think more broadly about the connections between policy agenda setting, policy formulation, implementation, and monitoring.
- **Contexts for and norms around the use of research in decision making in policy and practice are changing**, more work is needed in strengthening the capabilities of all involved in the research, policy, practice connections, looking not only at strengthening the communications skills of researchers but also at the capabilities of research users to engage effectively with research.
- **There is not agreement from all stakeholders that intermediary roles are needed**, nor that plurality of research perspectives are valuable to policy and practice processes. Intermediary work is not broadly understood or discussed, however intermediary actors are active in a range of fields and greater efforts are needed to understand, and evaluate their work and its impact.
- **There are a wide range of areas in which intermediary actors have the potential to address barriers to evidence-based policy.** In their focus on brokering information and facilitating information flows within processes and between actors, intermediary work can complement the work undertaken by other actors. They can add value to researcher communication and also support research users to engage with material. Through their oversight, they can also help to set agendas in research, policy and practice arenas. Yet these roles are not currently being played as extensively as they might, the intermediary sector needs to step up to fulfil its potential.

Looking forward

While the potential for intermediary actors to make a substantial contribution to greater evidence informed policy and practice is substantial, so are the challenges. Intermediary actors need to engage with the challenges posed to them about how they work in order to be responsible and effective part of the development puzzle

Stepping up to these challenges will require addressing some of the problems in the fledgling intermediary sector particularly its fragmentation, lack of shared identity among actors and lack of common understanding of concepts, all of which are barriers to collaboration and innovation.

People playing intermediary roles need to be supported to think and learn about the role, to develop good practice and to foster the openness to connect with one another as peers and collaborators with common objectives. Intermediary roles need to complement each other and intermediaries need to work together to ensure effective information flows. Meeting the challenges described above means channelling efforts, energies and resources to enable:

- initiatives that complement each other and work together rather than compete or overlap;
- newcomers to this important area to be able to build on the experience of others, not repeat their mistakes; and,
- the diversity of experience and ideas from different sectors and disciplines to be harnessed to generate innovative responses to new and persistent challenges.

In the closing session of the conference, there was some discussion about whether a broader community of interest had emerged over the two days. There was certainly a sense of shared common interest and awareness that there is strength in numbers, however, the closing session of the conference concluded that the group of participants was too disparate to constitute a community, and too narrow to be a 'movement'.

Consequently the champion for the issues and ideas emerging from the conference will be the I-K-Mediary Network. This is an emerging network of people who are actively involved in intermediary work that seeks to improve the access to and use of research based information in development processes. This network met immediately after the conference in a workshop entitled 'Between Ourselves'. For further details about the I-K-Mediary Network and the report from the Between Ourselves workshop, please visit the network website at: <http://ids.ac.uk/go/i-k-mediary-group>. Having initiated the discussion, the organisers of the conference will work to address the challenges outlined identified, both in their own work as intermediaries and also as active participants in the I-K-Mediary Network.

The conference evaluation (see Appendix 2) suggested that most participants shared a commitment to build on discussions, whether individually or with others. Of the participants who completed the conference questionnaire, well over half planned to take follow up action, discussing outcomes with colleagues, championing the role of intermediaries in their work or collaborating more with intermediaries. If the evaluation is a good measure of the general experience, then the organisers consider the conference a success.

It is hoped that this analysis will inspire others to think about the issues raised and to undertake further and more extensive analysis to explore the role and potential of information and knowledge intermediaries in both practical and conceptual ways.

Appendix 1 : After the conference

I-K-Mediary Group : Between Ourselves workshop and ongoing network

The most direct follow up action to this conference was the workshop held immediately afterwards exclusively for knowledge and information intermediaries. Called Between Ourselves, this was the second meeting of the I-K-Mediary Group, building on the first that had taken place at IDS in UK in May 2007. This forum discussed issues emerging from the conference as well as practical and conceptual issues around the role. Members agreed to develop the I-K-Mediary Group from an informal network towards a formal I-K-Mediary Network that will enable members to take action on issues arising.

The report from this workshop is available at www.ids.ac.uk/go/ikmediary-group/publications

Take Up Research!

As part of the DFID Research Strategy to understand and create a more enabling environment for research uptake, a 2 day workshop was organised entitled Take Up Research! Attended by participants from the conference, it identified 10 ingredients to help take up of research.

<http://euforic.blogspot.com/2008/07/ten-ingredients-help-take-up.html>

Power of In-between conference website

The conference organisers created a multi-media website to act as an ongoing public record of the event. It features the background paper, details of each session, links to powerpoint presentations, video clips, participant reflections and information from the conference. It has been updated with developments since the conference.

<http://powerofinbetween.wordpress.com/>

Appendix 2: Summary of Conference evaluation

Evaluation findings suggest that of the 55 participants who completed the evaluation questionnaire, 76% thought that the conference met or exceeded their expectations. From the questionnaires we can see that all the participants could say in one way or another how the conference had helped them to:

- Debate and discuss the role: Helping to define, understand, broaden, clarify, value and explore the challenges relating to the role of the intermediary/research broker
- Share lessons and experiences with other intermediaries and learn from others: Particularly in relation to gaining new ideas, comparing experiences and setting their work in a wider context

From the follow up activities people mentioned, it also appears that the majority of participants:

- Plan to co-operate with intermediaries in future
- Identified opportunities for collaboration with other institutions and actors
- Will apply new thinking, ideas and practical tools to their own work
- Will share their learning with their colleagues and others in their organisation and networks

The main criticisms of the conference were that there was not enough time and that there was confusion over terminology and the hypothesis which could have been clarified and set in context at the beginning of the conference. There were also differing views on the focus that the conference should have taken with some participants suggesting it should have focussed on policy processes and others more on grassroots engagement.

Link:

Full evaluation of the conference is available from the conference website:

<http://powerofinbetween.wordpress.com/?s=evaluation>

Appendix 3: About the organisers and funders

The conference was organised by the Human Science Research Council (HSRC) and Institute of Development Studies (IDS). The conference was funded by HSRC and the Strategic Learning Initiative at IDS as part of the DFID funded Mobilising Knowledge for Development programme. The organisers share a belief in the value of the brokering and intermediary role; a role which both organisations play as a core part of realising their respective missions as outlined in further detail below.

Human Sciences Research Council

The HSRC is a statutory body, established in 1968. It supports development nationally, in the Southern African Development Community (SADC), and in Africa. It primarily conducts large-scale, policy-relevant, social-scientific projects for public-sector users, non-governmental organisations and international development agencies, in partnership with researchers globally, but specifically in Africa.

As of August 2005, the HSRC entered a next phase of strategic realignment to support its role as 'knowledge hub', intended to help bridge the gap between research, policy and action; thus increasing the impact of research. This will be achieved through collaboration with key constituencies, including government, other research organisations, multinational agencies, universities, non-government organisations and donor organisations. Research programmes in the organisation have been consolidated and strengthened to achieve greater levels of synergy, efficiency, and collaboration.

Institute of Development Studies

The IDS is a leading global organisation for research, teaching and communications on international development. IDS hosts five dynamic research teams, eight popular postgraduate courses, and a family of world-class knowledge services. These three spheres are integrated in a unique combination – as a development knowledge hub, IDS is connected into and is a convenor of networks throughout the world.

IDS is a pioneer in development communications. We host a range of innovative and highly regarded knowledge services – including Eldis, id21, BRIDGE, Livelihoods Connect and the British Library for Development Studies. These services seek to mobilise knowledge to support more informed decision-making by those in a position to influence change. This is based on our belief that decision-making is strengthened when it is underpinned by timely and relevant information that reflects a diversity of viewpoints.

Appendix 4: Conference participants

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