

*Excerpted from:*

# The influence of research and publications on conventional wisdom and policies affecting forests

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*An analysis based on a survey of forestry experts suggests that research influences policy in an indirect way.*

Funding agencies expect policy researchers to show that their efforts have a measurable impact. This poses a considerable challenge. It was traditionally thought that research influences policy directly and that specific policies can be traced back to particular research findings. However, many analysts have now come to regard the link between research and policy as more diffuse: research induces changes in "conventional wisdom" (the set of dominant paradigms at a given moment regarding the desired ends of policy and the means of achieving them) and "policy narratives" (simplifying assumptions about the problem to be addressed and the approach to be taken), which in turn influence policy outcomes.

Given the bewildering array of factors that influence policy-makers' decisions, it would be naïve to overestimate the role of knowledge acquisition in that process. A role exists nonetheless.

Between December 1997 and March 1998, the authors asked forest policy experts by e-mail which publications influenced international and national debates on policies that affect forests. The survey elicited 162 replies.

## THE POLICY-MAKING PROCESS AND RESEARCH UTILIZATION

"Dost thou not know, my son, with how little wisdom the world is governed"

**Count Oxenstierna, letter to his son, 1648**

**In J.F. Lundblad, *Svensk plutarik* (1826)**

Research often affects policy through circuitous and diffuse paths. Weiss (1977) argues that policy-makers use research more to help them define prob-

lems, think about issues and provide new perspectives than to solve specific problems. Research findings are just one of policy-makers' many sources of information.

Policy-makers use research not only as an input into decision-making, but also as a political tool to justify decisions made for non-scientific reasons (Boehmer-Christiansen, 1995).

## PUBLICATIONS THAT HELPED FORM CONVENTIONAL WISDOM

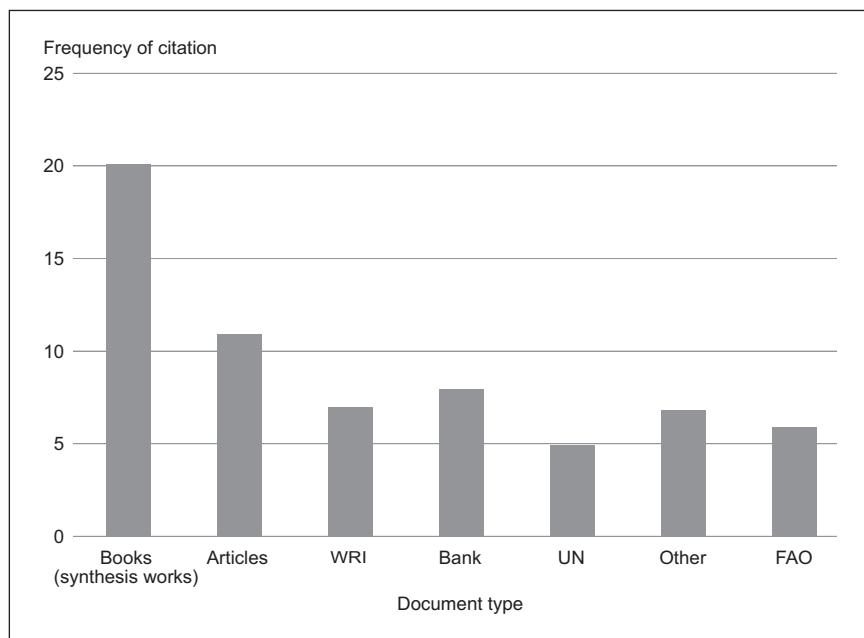
### Survey methodology and sampling

Since the impact of research *per se* is abstract and difficult to measure, a sur-

This article examines the extent to which seminal forestry publications "weave knowledge into development" by shaping conventional wisdom which in turn influences international or national forest policies. *Unasylva* does this too, by disseminating experience and best practices that then enter the mainstream of accepted knowledge.

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vey was carried out to explore the influence of publications, which are loosely interpreted as a reflection of research. The survey, initiated in December 1997, sought to determine which publications forestry policy experts have considered influential in international and national



**Frequency of citation, by document type, for documents cited three or more times**

debates regarding forest policies. The survey was distributed through the Forest Policy Experts (POLEX) electronic mailing list, managed by the Center for International Forestry Research (CIFOR). The POLEX list consists of individuals considered to be opinion leaders in forest policy issues. Recipients were asked to list:

- three articles, reports or documents that they believed to have had a significant influence on international debates concerning policies towards forests in the past 20 years;
- three articles, reports or documents that they believed to have had a significant influence on national debates (or a specific national debate) concerning policies towards forests in the past 20 years.

The role of publications in influencing debates was stressed rather than their role in modifying specific policies because the intention was to identify publications that had an impact on conventional wisdom and policy narratives in a broad sense.

#### Survey results: what was influential?

The most influential publications were mostly semi-popular books, general articles in prestigious non-disciplinary journals and institutional documents (see Figure). The Table on the following page lists the most-mentioned publications.

The responses make it clear that three institutions have dominated the debates regarding policies affecting forests over the past 30 years: FAO, the World Bank and WRI. Approximately one-third of all respondents mentioned at least one document associated with FAO or the World Bank. An even higher number (64 respondents) mentioned at least one publication associated with WRI. In the case of WRI, the results were greatly affected by the large number of people (34) who mentioned Repetto and Gillis' book, *Public policy and the misuse of forest resources* (1988). Even so, 34 respondents (21 percent) mentioned at least one WRI-related publication besides that book.

The major role of the World Bank and

FAO in defining conventional wisdom can be explained in part by the critical mass of intellectual resources these institutions command and in part by the fact that they can promote their ideas by funding initiatives supported by their perspectives.

The survey results showed a troublesome dominance of authors from the United States and Europe. Of the 39 authors and co-authors of documents cited by five respondents or more, not one was from Africa, Asia or Latin America, even though the majority of the literature mentioned focused on tropical forests. The results may partially reflect the low representation from those continents among the individuals sampled, but that is probably only part of the story.

#### How did the publications influence the debates and policy?

The survey responses provide little evidence that the documents that respondents considered influential directly affected policies. In most instances, it is likely that the publications have influenced general conventional wisdom and policy narratives in international policy, academic and funding circles, and that the influence has eventually filtered down to policy-makers in specific countries.

Nevertheless, at the national level, many respondents did claim that World Bank and government reports and Tropical Forest Action Plans directly influenced policies. This is logical since these documents are associated with groups directly involved in bringing about policy change. It was probably not the documents *per se* that had the impact, but rather the processes leading up to the documents or following their creation, which resulted in agreements on what needed to be done.

Survey respondents also mentioned that some issues became prominent as a result of the actions of popular movements, specific events or the efforts of journalists. Research on these issues sometimes

reflects “jumping on the bandwagon” to gain research funding and command policy-makers’ attention.

It is not possible from the survey results to make a distinction between issues and arguments that become prominent because of certain publications and those that gained momentum for other reasons but later became associated in experts’ minds with a given set of publications.

Many respondents stressed that the fact that a publication was influential did not necessarily imply that it was good. Several commented that certain influential pieces were much weaker than others available on the same topic. The influential pieces were apparently marketed better, i.e. given a journalistic treatment, placed in widely read outlets, promoted by public figures or movements or connected with prominent institutions or policy change processes.

A few respondents even claimed that influential publications often gave incorrect or misleading messages, either by oversimplifying issues and exaggerating threats and opportunities to reach a wider audience or by bending the facts to support their particular agendas. Work that is later criticized or discredited can nevertheless be extremely influential in raising issues, shifting scientific debate and shaping policy outcomes.

## FROM EVENTS AND PUBLICATIONS TO CONVENTIONAL WISDOM AND POLICY

“It is the customary fate of new truths to begin as heresies and end as superstitions”

**T.H. Huxley, “The coming of age of the *Origin of species*”**

**In *Science and culture and other essays* (1881)**

A comparison of the chronology of influential publications cited in the survey with key events and social trends mentioned in histories of forest policy debates (Humphreys, 1996; Kolk, 1996; Shepherd *et al.*, 1998) revealed suggestive links in the evolution of policy narratives related to forests.

For example, Eckholm’s book *The other energy crisis: firewood* put the fuelwood crisis on the map in 1975. FAO picked this up in 1978 with its map of the fuelwood situation in developing countries. In 1980, FAO’s assessment of global forest cover helped convince donors and others of the importance of tropical deforestation and the fuelwood crisis. Fuelwood remained a prominent issue until several critical publications in the late 1980s effectively removed it from the international debate.

Another illustration: from the late 1970s to the mid-1980s, several works by

Myers, including “The hamburger connection: how Central America’s forests became North America’s hamburgers” (in *Ambio*, 1981) and *The primary source* (1984), highlighted the gravity of the tropical forest crisis and the importance of biodiversity. In the late 1980s, a flurry of publications and activities related to biodiversity, including a 1988 United States National Academy of Sciences book edited by Wilson, preceded the signing of the Convention on Biological Diversity in 1992.

Over the past 20 years, policies and projects in many countries – particularly the smaller and poorer countries that depend on foreign support – have reflected similar shifts in conventional wisdom. The spread of ideas provoked and mirrored changes in priorities and positions in the World Bank, FAO and the main bilateral aid agencies. These agencies, in turn, provided developing country policy-makers with new ideas and financial incentives to accept them. In addition, a relatively small cadre of consultants went from country to country broadcasting the conventional wisdom of the moment and designing and implementing projects based on it.

In most cases, there was probably a lag of several years between the “launching” of new policy narratives in well-

## Documents cited as being influential by five or more survey respondents

Authors and year	Document	Number of citations
Repetto, R. & Gillis, M. (1988)	<i>Public policy and the misuse of forest resources</i> . New York, Cambridge University Press	34
Peters, C.M., Gentry, A.H. & Mendelsohn, R.O. (1989)	Valuation of an Amazonian rainforest. <i>Nature</i> , 339(29): 655-656	22
Poore, D., Burgess, P., Palmer, J., Rietbergen, S. & Synnott, T. (1989)	<i>No timber without trees: sustainability in the tropical forests</i> . London, Earthscan Publications	22
UN Conference on Environment and Development (UNCED) (1992)	<i>Agenda 21: Programme of action for sustainable development</i> . New York, UN	17
FAO (1985)	<i>Tropical Forest Action Plan (TFAP): a call for action</i> . Rome	15
World Commission on Environment and Development (Brundtland Commission) (1987)	<i>Our common future</i> . Oxford, UK, Oxford University Press	13
UNCED (1992)	<i>Non-legally binding authoritative statement of principles for a global consensus on the management of all types of forests (the “Forest Principles”)</i> . New York, UN	11
Westoby, J. (1978, 1987)	World Forestry Congress presentation, <i>The purpose of forests</i> (1978); <i>The purpose of forests – follies of development</i> . Oxford, UK, Blackwell (1987)	11

publicized events or prominent publications and the filtering down of these ideas into changes in conventional wisdom, policy and funding.

### CONCLUSIONS

It was difficult to identify publications that directly influenced policies towards forests solely by the force of their arguments. Although certain publications have been influential, specific policies cannot usually be attributed to them. Still, policy research does seem to enhance policy actors' awareness and to shape conventional wisdom.

Some documents were found to have directly influenced policies at the national level; however, it was probably not the documents *per se* that had the impact, but rather the processes accompanying their creation. Research that targets or associates itself with major policy processes or powerful organizations has a better chance of having an impact and being recognized.

Being "right" does not seem to be either a necessary or sufficient condition for having an impact. Some documents have been both influential and wrong. Work that is later criticized or discredited by scientific peers can nevertheless be extremely important in raising issues, shifting scientific debate and shaping policy outcomes.

Credibility is at least as important to the impact of policy research as "being right". Credibility seems to be closely linked to the reputations and track records of the authors, the prestige of the publishers and the influence of the organizations that sponsor the research and/or promote the findings. Unfortunately, the process by which credibility is acquired has given a rather small group of Northern policy analysts and a few large organizations an inordinate amount of influence, potentially stifling the effective input of analysts and institutions in developing countries.

Research that tells policy-makers and opinion leaders what they want to hear

has a better chance of being influential than work that goes against the tide. Conventional wisdom and policy narratives can be successfully challenged and debunked, but this is easier when the prevailing political, social, economic and scientific winds are blowing in the same direction.

Policy researchers can increase their impact not only by providing good answers to the right questions, but also by supplying these messages to the right (most influential) people at the right time and in an appropriate format. The most influential researchers and institutions will be those who effectively build "coalitions" to support their viewpoints in the policy arena and succeed in associating their work with well-funded initiatives.

Impact-oriented researchers and institutions must pay attention, not only to the development of the "research product", but also to the "market" in which that product must compete. The findings from this survey highlight some important aspects of the research market. Researchers and institutions wishing to enhance their influence must constantly appraise the demand for their research products and identify opportunities for their work to gain prominence. Surveys such as the one presented here have an important role in that appraisal. ♦



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