

Influencing policy processes

Lessons from experience



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by

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FOREWORD

The dynamism of the rural sector has been a major contributor to overall growth in most developing countries, and experience shows that policy is a key ingredient for the emergence of a vibrant rural economy. The observed patterns in agricultural and rural development are more often than not the result of institutional differences among countries. This is especially true in their political systems, particularly in the way the policy process and its ownership structure, and the depth and extent of stakeholder participation, are set. This book reviews the strengths and weaknesses in the ways policy assistance has been delivered to developing countries by multilateral and bilateral development agencies. The book also draws lessons on good practices that can contribute to improving the effectiveness of policy assistance.

The current context of high food prices calls for renewed attention to agriculture and other food related sectors and activities. Beyond the immediate emergency support that needs to be given to the most affected populations, whether they are poor urban dwellers or agricultural smallholders, policy frameworks for agriculture and rural development need to be reconsidered in order to attract more investments for increased and sustainable food production in the medium- and long-terms that will improve the livelihoods of the neediest sections of the population. How to support accelerated policy processes that will facilitate the adaptation of agriculture and the rural economy to new conditions such as higher food and energy prices has now become a priority challenge for all.

As more attention has been traditionally given to “what is the best advice for countries”, there is very little consolidated experience available in the literature on “how to influence policy processes more effectively”. As a result, individual policy experts have to rely primarily on their personal experience to determine the best way to operate in their advisory work.

This book is based on a major review of experiences and knowledge that was undertaken under the umbrella of the FAO-Netherlands Partnership Programme (FNPP), with a view to identify and promote best practices in policy assistance.

For organizations like the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO), which are knowledge organizations whose wealth resides in the expertise of its staff and which have very limited resources to act directly in the field, policy assistance is a core activity. It is one of the services most requested by FAO Members. As a strategic entry point for influencing the way governments are using their resources and those they obtain from their partners, policy assistance is essential to the work that FAO has been undertaking to achieve the objectives it set at the time of its establishment more than 60 years ago: to raise levels of nutrition, improve agricultural productivity, better the lives of rural populations and contribute to the growth of the world economy. Effectiveness of its policy assistance work is therefore of utmost importance to FAO. This is the prime reason why this review and analysis of experiences were undertaken.

In trying to establish good practices, this book did not limit its scope to reviewing FAO’s experience and that of other organizations working in the area of agriculture and rural development. The review team also consulted with other partners that work in different sectors, thus generating conclusions that can be useful to a broad range of agencies providing policy assistance.

It is hoped that this book will constitute a significant contribution to an improved approach to and management of policy assistance at all levels: international, regulatory frameworks and international agreements or commitments; regional, concerted or common policies; and national, appropriate strategies and policies that are also reflected at the local level.

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

A large body of literature has been developed, both within the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO) and elsewhere, on analytical approaches and tools that can be used for formulating policies in agriculture, rural development and food security. However, the literature available on best practices for providing policy assistance and effectively influencing national policy processes is insufficient to guide those who help countries shape their policies to ensure that their advice has a good chance of being adopted by governments. Experts typically only rely on their individual experience about ways to influence policy and policy processes and concentrate more on the technical aspect of their work. As a result, a considerable number of policy assistance recommendations do not really translate into policy change or modified development programmes and the advice ends up locked in policy reports or briefs read only by a small number of people.

To address these issues, in the context of the FAO-Netherlands Partnership Programme (FNPP) the authors have coordinated a major learning exercise to identify which factors lead to success and failure in providing policy assistance to member countries and to identify widely-applicable lessons and best practices that can improve the effectiveness of policy assistance. The focus of this exercise is on providing assistance at the national level; global- or regional-level assistance is only briefly discussed when it contributes to national-level processes.

This qualitative study is based on a review of existing literature, an in-depth review of 12 FAO policy assistance projects and consultation with 25 agencies conducting policy assistance activities.

There are many approaches for providing policy assistance and most projects use a combination of approaches. Policy assistance effectiveness largely depends on how this combination of approaches is used to influence the national policy process and the extent to which the right expertise is mobilized.

It is critical to conduct a careful assessment of the national context within which the assistance is provided. This context is determined by the: (i) nature of the policy climate; (ii) political will and commitment to change; (iii) conflicting interests and views of stakeholders, including development partners; and (iv) national capacity to organize the policy debate and turn its results into action. This assessment ideally should be conducted on a continuous basis by the agency, or group of agencies, providing policy assistance. It provides the basic national policy intelligence from which policy windows can be identified and on the basis of which it is possible to design an effective strategic policy assistance process.

Because policy is a continuum of formulation, implementation, evaluation and adjustment of measures, it is of paramount importance that the policy assistance process follow a strategic design and consider human factors (e.g. communication, participation, ownership, timing and capacity-building). Policy assistance cannot be limited to providing technical or analytical inputs to the national process, but has to be designed to influence the way this process unfolds.

Political will to change policies is essential for effective policy assistance, but there are many cases where this political will has to be generated. These are difficult situations where the agency and the government are not in agreement and continued efforts are needed to negotiate and persuade the government to change its views to allow the possibility of jointly developing and modifying policies to make them more effective (FAO 2001). Identifying drivers of change and leadership methods and conducting advocacy and capacity-building for government and stakeholders can help generate the will and a domestic constituency for change.

A key finding of this study is that influencing the policy process requires a focus not only on technical skills (e.g. economics, agriculture, forestry, trade, rural development, etc.), but also on “soft” skills such as sociology, political science, negotiation, facilitation, consensus-building and conflict resolution. Facilitation requires neutrality in cases where the conditions are favourable to change. In less favourable conditions, advocacy and alliance-building may be needed. Stakeholders with the power to block progress must be identified and brought on board. Capacity-building should not focus

exclusively on technical and analytical topics, but also on the “soft” skills needed to design and manage the policy process, particularly negotiation skills.

To be effective, policy assistance requires credibility, as well as overarching concepts, models or pilots. It requires trust that can only be established from a long and stable relationship, and a strong reputation based on past successes that are tangible and credible. It is also helpful to have a continuous institutional presence in the country and good communication with national stakeholders before and during the policy assistance process. Capacity-building is important in policy assistance because it helps build trust, contributes to ownership and can offer a safe environment to discuss issues which are too sensitive to be discussed in a more formal setting.

Effective policy assistance also requires working with the right organization that has responsibility, credibility and leadership. Identifying national policy champions with expertise, authority, political skill and tenacity is also critical. Caution is needed to ensure that advice provided is not focused on the interest of the counterpart organization or the champion(s) but rather on that of the country as a whole.

The experts who provide policy assistance should be drawn from many disciplines and should combine sound technical and analytical skills with skills that cater to the “soft” aspects of policy work. Experts with a background in sociology and political science should therefore complement the profiles of economists, diplomats or agronomists, who are traditionally overrepresented in international agencies providing policy assistance such as FAO, the World Health Organization (WHO), the World Trade Organization (WTO), the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund (IMF). Moreover, the team should include a mix of national and regional or international experts. High-level technical and analytical expertise combined with considerable experience lends more strength and credibility to the advice given; however, high-level experts might also be overconfident and kill the process.

Policy assistance programmes must be managed in a flexible way to adapt to changing national conditions, priorities and needs. Administrative and financial procedures should allow for responsiveness to requests for assistance, rapid recruitment procedures and flexibility in budgets, programme duration and scheduling of delivery of inputs, while safeguarding proper use of resources. This can best be achieved by placing management of policy assistance programmes at the national level.

The lessons presented in this study pertain to a very complex, difficult and challenging area – policy change – that entails interaction between partners from different backgrounds, cultures, visions and interests. The study shows that process and expertise, and their effective and creative management, are critical factors in policy assistance effectiveness. It demonstrates the need for international and bilateral agencies to regard policy assistance in a new way: as an area where technical and analytical skills must be complemented – and sometimes preceded – by “soft” skills, such as facilitation and negotiation skills.

The question remains as to whether adopting the good practices identified in this study will be sufficient. This needs to be verified in practice and this study proposes several steps in that direction.

LIST OF ACRONYMS

AfDB	African Development Bank
ASARECA	Association for Strengthening Agricultural Research in Eastern and Central Africa
CGDA	Conseil Général du Développement Agricole (Morocco)
CIDA/ACDI	Canadian Agency for International Development
CIRAD	Centre de Coopération Internationale en Recherche Agronomique pour le Développement (France)
CSO	Civil Society Organization
DAC/OECD	Development Co-operation Directorate of the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development
DFID	Department for International Development (UK)
DIE	Deutsches Institut für Entwicklungspolitik (Germany)
EASYPol	On-line Resources for Policy http://www.fao.org/tc/easypol/output/ , FAO
EBRD	European Bank for Reconstruction and Development
EC	European Commission
EDRI	Ethiopian Development Research Institute
EU	European Union
FAO	Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations
FNPP	FAO-Netherlands Partnership Programme
FSP	Fonds de Solidarité Prioritaire (Priority Solidarity Funds)
GRET	Groupe de Recherche et d'Échanges Technologiques (France)
GTZ	Deutsche Gesellschaft für Technische Zusammenarbeit (Germany)
IFAD	International Fund for Agricultural Development
IFI	International Financial Institutions
IFPRI	International Food Policy Research Institute
IMF	International Monetary Fund
IPPC	International Plant Protection Convention
ITPGRFA	International Treaty on Plant Genetic Resources for Food and Agriculture
MCC	Millennium Challenge Corporation (USA)
MINUA	Ministry of Urban and Environment Affairs (Angola)
MDGs	Millennium Development Goals
NEPAD	New Partnership for Africa's Development
NGO	Non-Governmental Organization
ODI	Overseas Development Institute (UK)
OECD	Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development
OPM	Oxford Policy Management
PROAGRI	Agriculture Sector Programme (Mozambique)
PRS	Poverty Reduction Strategy
PRSP	Poverty Reduction Strategy Paper
SCA	Seed Certification Agency (Bangladesh)
SPS	Sanitary and Phytosanitary Agreement (WTO)
TCP	Technical Cooperation Programme (FAO)
UEMOA	Union Economique et Monétaire Ouest Africaine
UN	United Nations
UNCTAD	United Nations Conference on Trade and Development
UNDP	United Nations Development Programme
UNESCO	United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization
UNICEF	United Nations Children's Fund
USAID	United States Agency for International Development (USA)
WECAFC	Western Central Atlantic Fisheries Commission
WFP	World Food Programme
WHO	World Health Organization
WTO	World Trade Organization