THE INTERFACE BETWEEN RESEARCH AND POLICY DIALOGUE:
Substantive or Symbolic?

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Abstract

While there is little consensus amongst policy scholars about the relationship between research and policy, there is some agreement that the contribution of research to the policy process is at best, weak, at worst, symbolic. The reason for this tenuous link is manifold, but some policy scholars suggest that it is a consequence of the absence of sufficient dialogue between the various participants in the policy process. This paper proposes two outcomes. First, we survey selected literature on the policy dialogue process, exploring the research-policy link as it is played out in the interface between political structures and the actors involved. We explore the nature of informal and 'non-linear' policy decision-making processes identifying macro formations that exert influence over which policy ideas are noticed and which are ignored. Second, in a mode of critical self-reflexivity, we document our experiences as members of a research team engaged in a policy dialogue initiative in the Southern African Development Community (SADC) region. Through a reflection of our research (as it unfolded) on the relationship between Information Communication Technologies (ICTs) and poverty, we offer an analysis of the political, ethical, and methodological dynamics inherent in research of and/or for policy, The paper appraises the nature, quality and value of the policy dialogue opportunities afforded by the project.

Introduction

This paper interrogates the policy dialogue process through the lens of a trans-national research project commissioned by the Southern African Development Community (SADC), which focuses on the conditions necessary for effective implementation of ICTs in Botswana, Namibia and Seychelles (referred hereafter as the ICT project). One of the key characteristics of the research project (as specified by SADC) was the need to engage in policy dialogue as a means of bringing researchers, policy makers, practitioners and other interest groups into interaction. This paper does not focus on the actual research findings, but reflects critically on the process of policy dialogue as we experienced it in the process of conducting the research.

The paper has five sections. First, we discuss the concept of policy dialogue as it articulates with research. We then provide a brief synopsis of the methodology of the research project itself, since it is the methodology that has the potential to open up or close down formal and informal opportunities for dialogue between researchers and stakeholders. This is followed by a discussion of the integrity of the policy process, particularly in contexts where research is conducted of and for government institutions. Part four documents our experiences of policy dialogue in the field and part five focuses on the research – policy dialogue interaction and its implications for regional policy development.

PART 1: THE ARTICULATION BETWEEN RESEARCH AND POLICY DIALOGUE

The emergence of policy dialogue

As debate around the policy phenomenon rages on, often without consensus, there is increasing agreement amongst policy scholars and policy makers that the policy process is neither linear nor coherent and the link between policy and research is at best, a tenuous one. Instead, they acknowledge the inherent political nature of policy development and the implicit assumptions and discourses embodied in policy, as well as the unpredictable and experimental life of policies and the weak link between policy-making and practice. There is also increasing admission by policy scholars that the rationalist model of a divided, dichotomous and linear policy development sequence is simplistic and reductionist. Increasingly, there is acceptance that the positivist view of the policy process as rational, balanced, value-neutral and analytical cannot survive empirical scrutiny. Clay & Schaffer, (1984) suggest that a more plausible conception of the policy process would acknowledge it rather as 'a chaos of purposes and accidents', in which policy implementers interact with policy-makers, by adapting new policies, co-opting the embodied project designs, or simply ignoring new policies (Maxwell, 2000).

Following this cleavage in the policy discourse, another commonsense that is increasingly being demythologized is the role of research in/on/for policy. There is skepticism about the reliability of determining a causal link between research and the outcome of a policy or the value of a policy outcome. There is now admission that the relationship between research and policy is often unpersuasive, and the contribution of research to the policy process is nebulous. Many reasons are offered for this weakness: Policy makers often fail to commission appropriate research, and/or ignore or subvert the results; researchers often pursue their own research interests, which may not coincide with current policy imperatives. The failure on both sides has recently been seen as a consequence of failure to communicate effectively. From this view, a new literature has emerged, focused on policy dialogue.

Policy dialogue is emerging as an interdisciplinary science that has the potential to provide a bridge between theory and practice, between public service management and academia, and between political and civil structures of society (Pampallis, in Hoppers, 1997). One of the more influential proponents of policy dialogue in Southern Africa, Catherine Hoppers (1997:1) defines policy dialogue as:

> ...a kind of 'intermediate policy science' is about communication and breaking barriers between academics and practitioners, between analysts, politicians and civil society, and across disciplines. It is about empowerment in the policy sphere by levelling the playing field in order that truly democratic and egalitarian participation can occur. This should involve developing early warning systems that can highlight pitfalls along the course of policy development. It should involve the supplying of relevant information and generation of analyses to policy processes, while developing the capacity to translate information into knowledge to enable effective participation by civil society and other marginalised groups.

Policy dialogue necessitates the transformation of the role of researchers by infusing greater responsibility for academic outcomes, including research findings. This is particularly in Africa where the past few decades have seen a vigorous production and enactment of policies, the success of which is not always apparent.

Conceiving of the policy process from an archaeological perspective orients the analyst to a range of critical issues that bear relevance to those seeking to engage in policy dialogue. Scheurish (cited in Gale, 2001) articulates the following questions:

- What are the conditions that make the emergence of a particular policy agenda possible?
- What are the rules or regularities that determine what is (and is not) a policy problem?
- Why do some ideas that circulate in the research/policy arena, have greater currency than others, and are therefore more likely to be picked up and acted on, while others are ignored and disappear?
- Why are some policy actors involved in the production of policy (and not others)?
- What are the conditions that regulate the patterns of interaction of those involved?

While an engagement of a detailed discussion of all these arenas falls outside the scope of this paper, we will dwell on our own experience of the policy dialogue process giving particular attention to the last question. In reflecting on these experiences, our analysis is framed by Gale's (2001) **archaeology of policy positions**. Gale is not interested in a subjective analysis of policy actors but in their objectification. That is: what is important to uncover is not so much who speaks but what is spoken, what positions it is spoken from, and how this is mediated by the speaking positions of others. In other words, his interest in policy actors is "not an interest in authorship but in vocality" (ibid.). The issues of authorship and vocality are crucial in understanding why so few policy initiatives survive their life-cycles and so many more are relegated to the archives.

Policy Research in Relation to Policy Dialogue

Research is not necessarily a precondition for policy dialogue since the notion of dialogue is premised on the exchange of views. By the same token, policy research may not necessitate policy dialogue. Nor may the results of policy research be subjected to any dialogical interaction. This is because the commissioning agent (be this a government or funding body) may intend policy research to serve a legitimation function for a pre-existing policy orientation. Government may expect the research to produce the empirical justification for a particular policy, the absence of which may result in the research project being embargoed for the very reason that it presents bureaucrats with unwanted 'answers'. Alternatively, government may commission research to make symbolic gestures towards seeking policy answers without any intention of enacting them.

Outside of these environments, what does research bring into the policy dialogue process that is unique? Does a research driven policy dialogue produce any qualitative value that is different or better than a policy dialogue process that does not incorporate a deliberate research component?

Reimers and McGinn(1997) (Cited in Jansen,2003,85) refer to nine 'situations of action' that make it possible – but not certain - for research-based knowledge to inform policy making. The Reimers and McGinn model is a broad one and not singularly focused on policy dialogue as a 'method', but they identify three important 'situations of action' for the policy dialogue approach. These are to:

- Define what dialogues go on and should go on among key stakeholders
- Empower groups for dialogue
- Establish rules for knowledge-based dialogue

Unterhalter (2003) shows through a case study of research – policy interaction in Bangladesh, that the relationship between research and policy is a dynamic one, and that with time, at least in Bangladesh, the propensity was for the policy making process to be more amenable to influence by research and through dialogue.

2: METHODOLOGICAL ASPECTS

The Research Methodology and its Opportunities for Policy Dialogue

Having introduced the concepts policy dialogue, policy research and their interaction, we now briefly provide an overview of the methodology of the study. This account of how the research was conducted will provide the framework for our analysis of the policy dialogue themes embedded in the project. It is important to emphasise that the aim here is not to discuss the finer details of the methodology, since this paper focuses less on the actual findings of the project than how it served as a vehicle for policy dialogue. The main focus of the analysis will therefore be on illuminating how the different phases of the project produced opportunities for interactions between various stakeholders and players, and how this affected the project outcomes.

The ICT project is one component of a set of three research projects on the theme of poverty alleviation currently under way within SADC. Out of a self-selecting process, Botswana, Namibia and the Seychelles became the countries in which the ICT focused research was conducted. Mindful of the potential for subversion latent in policy processes, this study was conceived within a participatory framework, involving education ministries, donors and research organizations. Their involvement in all aspects of the study from agenda setting to delimitation of the research questions to selection of the research organizations provided some transparency to what might usually be considered opaque institutionalized procedures. In practice, while the policy dialogue approach may appear compelling and promising at face value, it was not without hazards for both research organisations and their clients.

What follows is a synopsis of the research phases and the associated opportunities for policy dialogue that were presented in that structure.

1. Proposal development and presentation at the SADC forum

This phase involved two meetings with SADC Permanent Secretaries to ensure that there was a shared understanding of the aims, objectives and methodology of the project and to ensure that countries took ownership of the research project.

2. Country overviews

Researchers in each of the three countries were contracted to write in a brief position paper on the status of ICT policy development in each country. The aim of the country overviews was to capture the key policy instruments, and influences on ICT provisioning. Since writing *about* policy is different from writing policy, it served as an opportunity for the in-country researchers to identify gaps in the policy frameworks and to initiate dialogue with bureaucrats in the Ministry of Education on the inherent hazards and opportunities.

3. Instrument Design Workshops

In-country researchers were invited to contribute to the design of the instrumentation for the study. Of the two instruments designed, one was developed to capture data on the costs of ICT equipment in schools. A second instrument was developed in the form of an unstructured

interview schedule intended for interviews with various officials from the Ministries of Education & communication, schools, IT providers, and higher education institutions.

4. ICT Survey: conducted by country researchers

The aim of the survey was to obtain a complete audit of ICT equipment in a school, and capture all the recurrent costs of ICT provisioning (eg: consumables) and services (eg: computer repairs, network maintenance etc.).

5. Interviews and panel discussions in each country

The fieldwork component was based on in-depth *interviews* with key managers and participants in each of the three countries, as follows:

- Government Departments (eg: Education and Communications) involved in school-based ICT provision (eg: from policy, to educator training to procurement)
- Ministry of Education (eg: Minister, Permanent Secretary, Directors of Divisions of: Curriculum, Teacher Training, ICT Curriculum Development etc.
- Non-Government Organisations involved in school-based ICT provision. NGOs in formal partnership or without formal partnerships with government will be surveyed.
- Private sector firms engaged in ICT as: funders and or as suppliers of ICT equipment, software and services to schools.
- A sample of schools engaged in ICT work

Typically, the research driven policy dialogue process is influenced by decisions on who should be involved as respondents (or dialogic participants). The selection of the participants is also determined by the content and influence of the policy in question. Furthermore, different respondents may be involved at different points in the research process, with different consequences. Sometimes respondents were deliberately selected for their capacity to provide deep insights into existing policy. However, the research process was not so rigidly structured that it precluded serendipitous insights.

6. Analysis and writing up of draft reports

This component involved the development of a framework for reporting on the key question: the conditions necessary for successful implementation of ICT.

7. Presentation of draft reports to the SADC

The draft results were presented at a conference to SADC Permanent Secretaries

8. Presentation of draft reports to each participating country

This component (which has not yet been undertaken by the research team at the time of writing) is considered an important phase in the process as the intention is for the research report to be dialogued with a range of interest groups and managers in each Ministry of Education.

9. Publication of Final Report

The publication of the final report is considered important for its potential to enhance the influence of the research in the policy domain. However, the publication of the report effectively signals the termination of direct billable involvement of the researchers in the policy issue at stake and may have implications for the sustainability of the policy process. As can be seen, policy dialogue is a process element that can be inserted at – almost – any point in the research trajectory. This implies that the policy dialogue process is understood as

an iterative and not linear, and potentially follows into implementation, evaluation reflection and critique.

PART 3: THE INTEGRITY OF THE POLICY PROCESS

We recognize that there are researchers who may not be explicitly interested in changing policy and therefore do not invest their energy in communicating their research findings beyond their chosen community of academic or research practice. This is not to suggest that such policy-disinterested work may not ultimately have some influence. Rather, our interest is in research that is undertaken explicitly of and or for policy.

We also recognize that 'policy dialogue' is by no means a panacea for the impediments that leech integrity from the policy process. The potential weaknesses of policy research are not swept away through implementation of a methodology based on policy dialogue. In the section that follows, based on our experiences, we reflect on the complex set of relationships and motives that inform research of and for policy.

Research and Policy Dialogue for Government

Often, the cause of policy failure is attributed to the lack of capacity, as is frequently the case cited in South Africa for unsatisfactory service delivery. The lack of capacity is seen as a consequence of the absence of frameworks for deeper communication and dialogue between various actors at all levels of the policy process. It is this lack research capacity within government departments to develop policy which necessitates dialogue.

Sometimes, the absence of dialogue is compounded by the latent distrust (Hoppers, 1997) between the government ministry and the academic institution conducting the research. In particular government formations, the civil service may resist 'new' political ideas, or conversely, where the civil service has a weak policy-making capacity and is unable to undertake the analysis and development work necessary to turn ministers' ideas into reality, commissioning policy research to independent research organizations has benefits for both governments and research organisations. In the first instance, it minimizes government culpability, that is: it minimizes the potential danger of government advocating an idea that does not enjoy popular support. The ostensible "neutrality" of the research organization offers it the intellectual freedom to maneuver in ways that governments can never hope to do, as well as the potential to act as agents of policy innovation in ways that governments can never hope to do. Ultimately, if the public reception of ideas is favourable, politicians can appropriate the ideas and propagate them as their own; if not, they can repudiate or ignore them. In other words, the dialogic process offers governments the space to distance or dissociate themselves from ideas that are likely to spurn populist resistance.

Government may well be amenable to policy research activity, but not necessarily on account of their interest in the outcomes of policy. In the ICT study, it became apparent from the outset that a persistent hazard for research organisations in contexts of donor-sponsored research is the likelihood of governments conceiving of research as a precursor to receiving funds from international donors. Here the research activity is not seen as having any intrinsic worth, but is valued as a mechanism to procure funding through the agendas of multilateral and bilateral agencies. In other words, governments value researcher organisations for their income generating potential rather than for their ideas. This kind of opportunistic relationship is not uncommon, especially in developing countries, where research projects are known to generate valuable foreign currency. In these contexts, policy development has the potential of

being reduced to an act of policy transfer (Stone, 2001). The pervasiveness of the policy transfer paradigm has earned it a range of sometimes unflattering euphemisms, such as: policy band-wagoning, policy borrowing, policy shopping, policy inducement, direct coercive transfer, and other less euphemistic labels such as those who promote imported ideas being regarded as policy pushers.

The above considerations render the relations between research organisations and governments a delicate one. On the one hand, policy researchers may have a responsibility – assumed or real - to inform or influence policy-makers. This necessitates the use of some degree of inducement while simultaneously preserving congenial relations with the client, as it addresses the client's concerns. On the other hand the research organisation has to guard against pandering to the dictates of the client by simply telling it what it wants to hear. Researchers face the risk of losing legitimacy and credibility if they have nothing significantly new to offer the debate, or if they fail to signal contentious issues that might already be in the public gaze. Hence, part of the dialogic process involves the art of preserving the researchers' independence in setting their own agendas, and on the other, tailoring their work to make it relevant and compelling to policy-makers.

Advocacy, Dissemination and Consensus Building

Dissemination and consensus building may be considered a precondition for successful implementation of policy research. Policy scholars have long acknowledged that it is no longer sufficient simply to release glossy research reports and wait for their ideas to percolate slowly through the mind of government (James, 999). Active dissemination of ideas with a view to having them implemented is a necessary element in the policy dialogue process, not least to convince the funders of policy research that their money is being well spent. This necessitates a multi level approach, using informal meetings with policy-makers; testimony to committees of the legislature; participation in conferences; and above all, the use of the media to promote research findings and influence the public agenda (ibid). Of crucial importance, is the need to be sensitive to the diverse information needs of different personas and groups in the system.

James further cautions against lobbying solely the Minister in charge of the ministry that has commissioned the work. While engaging the attention of the political head is important, it is an insufficient condition for successful advocacy since ultimately, the policy process falls into the hands of less senior figures. Hence, it is important to extend the congenial relationship to civil servants - who are the real policy actors. Invariably, it is these actors who will or will not enact the technical and practical dimensions of policy. James recommends the 'triple track' approach. That is, getting the issue into the public eye and keeping it there; using political contacts to arouse interest and response within the government; and making sure that all levels affected by the issue within the Ministry are given a clear and rational statement of the case, mindful of another potential impediment: that a sudden turn over of staff in a ministry or of the minister him/herself could subvert the entire process.

Ontologies of Street Level Bureaucrats

In general, the best-laid policy plans are mediated by individuals tasked to implement them. While research can enable policy outcomes, it cannot mandate compliance. At each stage in the policy process (if such stages can be discerned) policies are interpreted and reinterpreted; are subjected to the personal and professional motivation of those with the power to manipulate policy and ultimately, policy is encrusted with the values and imperatives of "street level bureaucrats" (Lipsy, 1980). It is these bureaucrats who consciously or

unconsciously influence the practical unfolding of a policy to produce an outcome that may be significantly in variance with that originally intended by a policy maker. If the policy context is related to schooling, we can reasonably expect to factor-in another policy impediment: that teachers in general are likely to resist change, and subvert any attempt at destabilizing their familiar worlds and practices.

Sometimes, analysts may provide relevant technical direction, such as the economic dimension, but fail to understand the multitude of other ingredients in effective policy analysis, such as the socio/political/cultural dimensions that act as filters for uptake. Hence, what an analyst concludes to be a policy imperative from an economic perspective might be in conflict with the imperatives of officials, who are concerned about other dimensions of the effects of a policy in addition to narrow economic ones.

A further hazard is that the process of making policy accessible to bureaucrats risks further dilution and even perversion. Complex theorization, which undergirds good policy, runs the risk of oversimplification in the act of tailoring policy for uninitiated audiences in the dialogue process. Conversely, researchers' lack of understanding of complex bureaucratic machineries and cultures and a lack of understanding of "the subtleties and nuances of administrative work" (Motala, 2003), if not accompanied by an examination of the "conflicting ontologies deeply felt by some administrators… might be politically acceptable for populist politicians but it undermines the intellectual and theoretical claims" of serious research (ibid.)

The Potential for Superficiality in Policy Research
It is not difficult to see why policy research in these contexts can be reductionist and simplistic. The quality of commissioned research is contingent upon budgets and time frames. The jetting-in, jetting-out "airport anthropology" model that researchers are often forced to adopt as a result of limited funding can generate policy proposals that are products of flawed assumptions, insufficient or inappropriate data, untested conclusions and culturally biased observations. Three-day trips to foreign countries means that analysts must rely on readily accessible data, and often adopt generic models that have wide applicability in sometimes vastly differing contexts.

This approach to policy analysis requires reliance on a set of ideas about what policy interventions are appropriate rather than an understanding of the complexity of any given country's policy environment. A further consideration is that when faced with a range of possible funded policy research agendas, governments opt for a particular research agenda merely to supplement what is already the domestic policy-flavour of the day. Since a significant component of the research for/of policy is shaped by meta-analysis of what is already in existence, the kinds of resources, documents and literature made available to researchers for this process has the potential to lead research teams 'by their noses' into legitimating current policies and practices, giving credence to Kemiss's (1990 cited in Taylor, et.al.,1997:3) claim that education policy has become a bureaucratic instrument with which to administer public expectations of education.

Deconstructing the "Discourse" in Policy Dialogue
Although research may not have direct overt influence on specific policies, the production of research may still exert a powerful indirect influence through introducing new vocabularies and shaping the policy discourse. Weiss (1977) describes this as a process of 'percolation', in which research findings and concepts circulate and are gradually filtered through various

policy networks over time. A central 'tool' in the percolation process is the cultivation of policy discourses or policy narratives that gradually come to have popular appeal. This involves a process of framing and naming, of categorizing and classifying and of privileging certain discourses while excluding others. Discourse in the policy context is not only an ideological means of controlling attitudes and modes of thought, but even at a more fundamental level, discourse *is* language. Language can be used to remove an essentially political problem from the realm of political discourse and recast it in the neutral language of science (Sutton, 1999). Using the language of science, policy is portrayed as objective, neutral, value-free, and is often couched in legal or scientific jargon, which emphasises its rationality. In this way, the political nature of the policy is hidden by the use of technical language, which emphasises rationality and objectivity under a cloak of neutrality.

Language has the power of infusing mundane concepts with profound ideological overtones. Labels such as "rural poor"; "dispossessed urban dwellers"; "landless masses" although over-determinate and under-descriptive, have the power to reify such labels, according them with irrefutable moral nuances. A common vocabulary is one means of galvanizing groups, communities and networks through a process of normative linguistic conditioning, which transmutes vocabulary into conventional wisdom. Such conditioning has proved successful for some national and international networks, which are variously called policy streams (Kingdom, 1984); policy communities (Pross, 1986); epistemic communities (Haas, 1991); and advocacy coalitions (Sabatier & Jenkins-Smith, 1999).

PART FOUR: EXPERIENCING POLICY DIALOGUE IN THE FIELD

We now move from generalisations based on a scan of the literature, which resonate with our anecdotal experiences of the dynamics within the policy process, to an analysis of our actual experiences in the field. One of our more significant observations was the way in which research policy dialogue disrupts roles, risks autonomy, mediates authority and challenges power relations.

Determining the Research Agenda

One of the more constraining aspects of donor funded policy dialogue is that the relative autonomy of the researcher is mediated by the funder sponsoring the research enterprise. The funder invariably sets the agenda, determines the methodology and provides the core funding. In this context, there is a potential of the balance of power tipping in favour of the sponsor. The unintended consequence of this shift is that the balance of power can in turn be passed on to the participating country or ministry. This was quite apparent at one of the meetings hosted by the sponsor, which was intended to disseminate information to stakeholders and to secure the commitment of ministries. One of the countries had this to say about the research teams:

> *(paraphrase) ...you don't come here and try to shove down your pre-determined research agendas on us. We will tell you what we need to know and how you should go about finding it...*

The fact that the research agenda was in fact the product of a prolonged collaborative process did not seem to impress the ministry official, who appeared to be more concerned about what the research could do for his ministry rather than what was intended for the broader regional collective as determined by the sponsor.

Risking Autonomy, Mediating Authority

This problem is exacerbated by the rigid prescriptions placed on the policy dialogue process such as, for example, the involvement of ministry officials as resource persons, and/or researchers to ensure (ostensibly) that they take ownership of the process. We learnt quite early in the research process that the role of mercenary elements from within research organisations as well as from within the ministries being researched is not to be underestimated, particularly when they are one and the same. In at least two of the three countries in the ICT study, bureaucrats have assumed the role of researchers in the project. It might be argued that there is some merit in this approach since the data generated is the product of an intimate insider view. However, the probability of manipulation by researcher bureaucrats in order to present a sanitised view of their domains should not be ruled out. In one of the sites surveyed, the resource person (an education ministry official), who was really one of the kindest and most efficient bureaucrats we've met, took the notion of 'ownership' beyond our expectations. He took the liberty of arranging the entire itinerary for the fieldwork, a responsibility originally entrusted to the in-country researchers. His efficient planning ensured that we were provided with an array of sites, which were impressive, but somewhat suspect. Although we provided guidelines for how the sample was to be constructed, we have no guarantee that the sample was not manipulated to serve the interests of the ministerial resource person.

When the autonomy of the research organisation is undermined by the shift in the balance of power to participating ministries, the researcher is sometimes vulnerable to the emotional sensitivities of ministerial representatives. Hence, the policy dialogue process demands highly developed interpersonal and communication skills, reinforcing our earlier claim that the political context, the actors involved in the enterprise, and who is telling the story are perhaps more important considerations than the message. This was evident when one of the researchers in a parallel study argued that policy development should be left to policy researchers rather than entrusted to civil servants who had a myopic view by virtue of the positions they occupied. Predictably, this raised an outrage from the majority of participants who resented the insinuation that they were merely policy consumers. While this researcher cannot be excused for her lack of tact and diplomacy, the real issue here, which appeared to elude the embattled civil servants, is that in engaging with the policy process, underpinned by a dialogic ethic, civil servants need to step aside to allow for a critical distance between themselves and their offices, to permit a re-examination of the familiar spaces they have come to occupy. Interpreting the researcher's suggestion as a personal affront, the remark had the unfortunate outcome of courting unnecessary defensiveness on both sides, which ultimately resulted in a potentially useful policy development experience being unceremoniously rejected.

Disrupting Roles
Part of the fieldwork involved visits to schools offering ICT. A ministerial representative in charge of ICT provisioning escorted the research team to the research sites. He admitted that for the first time since he assumed office, he had the opportunity of hearing first hand, the perspectives of practitioners: their views, interpretations and conceptions of ICT policy within the broader purview of the national education policy. This was an experience, he claims, his job would ordinarily not permit, given that he was often no more than a bureaucratic functionary. He was grateful for being afforded a glimpse of how the other side experienced policy.

In one of the countries, interviews were conducted in the company of senior managers from the ministry of education, who also constituted the research team. Although the research design did not provide for these ministry officials to formally participate (since the researchers were only tasked with the responsibility for setting up the interviews), the ministry of education officials grew increasingly involved in the actual interview process. As the series of interviews unfolded, they began to see themselves less as functionaries, whose role was to set up the meetings, and to establish the bona fides of the project. They became more active as participants in the research process. Their increased active involvement provided two unanticipated benefits. First, it added value to the interviews themselves, because they frequently brought different perspectives by pursuing issues that were based on their own insider knowledge of the education system.

Second, our informal and unstructured discussions between the ministry officials during the course of the fieldwork added significantly to our understanding of the complexities of a small state. Issues arising out of the interviews could be clarified or developed further openly and frankly outside the constraining formality of the interview context. What made these discussions so valuable was that the ministry officials were willing to speak from their own experiences as participants in the education system rather than in a more defensive way as official representatives of the system itself. We valued the ministry officials for their willingness to go beyond 'official-speak' and their willingness to desist from using the guarded politically neutral and opaque language that government servants utter in the presence of interlocutors from the 'outside'.

PART FIVE: POLICY DIALOGUE AS A REGIONAL PROCESS

Policy Dialogue - from Bi-lateral to Multilateral

Much of the literature surveyed has implicitly or explicitly reflected on policy dialogue aimed at the development of educational policy at the national level. However, the ICT project was commissioned by a regional body, the Southern African Development Community, and is expected to produce relevant policy knowledge – through dialogue with SADC education policy makers – **for the SADC region.**

Hence, while the focus of this project is on policy dialogue at the regional rather than the national level and is important in its own right, it generates some interesting questions: How can the interest in policy dialogue at the SADC regional level be explained? To what extent do the unique characteristics of the subject of the research (ICTs) predispose a regional logic for policy making over the school curriculum? And then more broadly, in what ways are regional policy dialogue processes similar or different to experiences of policy dialogue conducted within a national system, bilaterally between research agent and government?

We attempt to answer these questions by observing how the globalisation of education is increasingly being mediated through regional organisations, noting that the evolution of regional organisations such as SADC itself may be understood as manifestations of globalisation, which both mediate and construct regional policy. An analysis of regional organisations as subjects of educational globalisation is offered by Dale and Robertson (2002:10-36) who refer to economic regional organisations such as the EU, NAFTA and APEC. While acknowledging the obvious differences between these regional entities in size, power and levels of integration, we use their work as the basis from which to explore the nature of policy dialogue on the evolution of education policy in the SADC region, As the

NEPAD concept gains prominence on the African continent, its influence as a supra-regional organisation will be of considerable interest in terms of the extent to which it creates conditions for regionally based policy development.

Although regional organisations, like SADC, have primary interests in trade and economic relations, their activities necessarily have wider social implications. This has become a stronger trend with the onset of global economic relations, where internationally, there is recognition of the "increasing interdependence between the economic and extra-economic factors making for systemic competitiveness"(Jessop cited in Dale and Robertson, 2002:16) within regional blocs. This explains, in part, SADC's concern with education policy issues that are of interest to all member states. However, it raises another interesting question: What is it about ICT that as warranted it becoming a policy issue, not only for African countries on an individual basis, but also for the SADC region? We contend that this has something to do with the nature of the technology, and also with an increasingly recognisable pattern of African nations responding to the challenges of ICT.

Dale and Robertson, (2002:18-19) suggest that a policy dialogue process may influence education policy in at least two possible ways - "either on educational politics (eg: new curricula, discourse of social exclusion) or the politics of education (such as new governance rules and procedures, discourses about the knowledge economy)" The focus of this research project (ICT) straddles both of these dimensions, which is possibly why the dialogue process became somewhat diffused.

If one hazards using policy development in Southern Africa to be representative of the general state of affairs on the continent, then it is apparent that the development of well-elaborated national policies on ICT in education in the African context still seems to be in the making,. Butcher observes that in Southern Africa: "Despite the range of approaches used to establish education-specific ICT policies, the overwhelming sense within the region is that very few policies exist. Where they do, they tend to remain vague and make little reference to implementation."(2001,5)

Cogburn and Adeya(1999,9) identify the importance of "international harmonisation of policy and regulatory frameworks" on policy issues relevant to the development of the information economy and electronic commerce in Africa. But Cogburn and Adeya seem to be referring more to the underlying technological harmonisation requirements. SADC's interest in ICT is based in its educational and more specifically, its knowledge dimensions. But why should ICT and technological literacy be privileged over other subject areas?

The Politics of Policy Convergence?

It is important to recognise that although member states may share a particular policy concern, they may be approaching it from very different starting points. As Dale and Robertson (2002,20) observe: "education's contribution to human resource policy, or social policy, (may) be viewed very differently across the regions in terms of its overall content but also that the structures through which it is administered, and the extent to which education might contribute to those overall purposes of the regional agreement vary considerably and with very different social, political and economic consequences". Our fieldwork revealed that there are differences between the countries participating in the study at both a general level and at the level specific to ICT policy making, and that this may affect the extent to which the policy dialogue process associated with this research influences national level policy making at all.

It is also important to observe that the effects of such a process will be relative to the level of maturity of regional cooperation at the level of educational policy and on the "set of accumulated institutional relations and cultural practices" that are the outcome of negotiations over particular agendas through time (Dale and Robertson, 2002,18). As such, it will be interesting to consider – in time to come - the extent to which the exercise in policy dialogue (as constituted in this research project) contributes to growing regional cooperation. Two comments are apposite here. First, in so far as we are aware, SADC does not yet have any shared agreements or undertakings to achieve common performance goals or indicators in the domain of ICT in education at the school level. Second,

The extent to which globalisation can - or - does permeate knowledge production and transmission in national education systems is of considerable interest from several standpoints. In this instance, we are interested in asking whether policy dialogue at the regional level has the effect of homogenising policy at the regional level. Clearly, there is a difference between policy formulation and implementation, which means that even if countries subscribe to a shared policy view, this will not necessarily translate uniformly on the ground. Notwithstanding the slippages that can surely occur between the framing and implementation of policy, we observe that international funders are increasingly chanting the policy dialogue mantra. The reason for this is not difficult to divine. The prize for such agencies is to succeed in influencing regional policy formulation since this enables them to capture not one country but a regional constellation in one policy net.

Dale and Robertson, (2002, 36) argue that-"it is necessary to ask whether the transnationally initiated effects we have been looking at are leading in the direction of policy convergence of education systems, and/or policies and/or practices." Based on our recent experience of actual policy dialogue in the plenary session of the SADC-EPSI policy forum, we are forced to conclude that due to the absence of consensus on fundamental issues, such as, a common understanding of what constitutes poverty and whether SADC needs ICT, the envisioned dialogue was subverted by dubious – even dismissive- education ministers. In discussion sessions, participants expressed relatively low levels of common purpose. Hence, at this stage, it is too early to speculate on the short to medium term effects of the SADC policy forum and the impact of the final report on policy dialogue intra-nationally or even in bi-lateral discussions between member states.

One of the challenges confronting the research team at the policy forum was how to discourage education managers in SADC from becoming sucked into the politics of comparative analysis. Even though this research project was clearly intended to de-emphasis the national and to highlight common features in the country case-studies, the reporting of findings provided opportunities for trans-national comparison, which is especially problematic in a region which is socially, geographically and economically diverse. This left us with the question of how to institute a non-competitive understanding of the process of regional policy dialogue?

Finally, this research alerted us to another enduring problem: that in contexts where policy environments are underdeveloped and in the absence of sufficiently convincing local or regional models of best practice, there is danger of research being over-reliant on exemplars from other countries. While this may under particular circumstances be a necessary and indeed economical way of improving the quality of public policy, there are distinct dangers in culling ideas uncritically from other contexts. The problem is exacerbated when dealing with

transnational contexts, which are uneven in terms of demographics and resource distribution, level of development and domestic priorities.

Concluding Comments

This paper has attempted to explore the potentiality of policy dialogue in national and regional contexts. In reflecting on whether the process is substantive or symbolic we have observed, through our experiences in three Southern African contexts, that the policy dialogue process enjoys marginal successes at the individual and possibly at the local ministerial level, and is more likely to receive support in smaller states with relatively stable economies. The approach is less successful in regional contexts, especially in the absence of consensus on policy imperatives. However, despite the relatively low yield emanating from the policy dialogue process, relative to the effort invested by research teams, the process should not be dismissed as ineffectual. The unintended consequences of the policy dialogue exercise can generate potent catalysts, which have the potential to change the face and pace of the policy process. This emerged, (in one of the countries) in a focus group interview with a panel comprised of bureaucrats, policy makers, teacher educators, university academics and researchers involved in ICTs. The unintended outcome of this exercise was that for the first time, it assembled a group of unlikely bedfellows around a common cause, bringing them face to face to face with each other, forcing them to confront each other's antagonisms, fears and suspicions. This interaction (chaired by us as researchers), gave us the privilege of mediating the discussions, which had the spin-off of encouraging new alliances, partnerships and of initiating dialogue. Whether or not these new alliances will have any substantive outcome is difficult to predict. If nothing else, the exercise provided a forum for articulation of competing and contestational, but potentially consensual voices.

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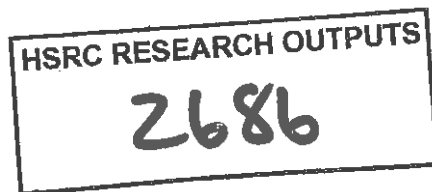
Andrew Paterson

07/04/2004 08:22

To: Cilna De Kock/Hsrc
cc:
Subject: ADDITION TO OUTPUTS

DHUNPATH,R. and PATERSON,A. (2003) The interface between research and policy dialogue: Symbolic or substantive. Paper presented at Kenton and SACHES Conference 2003, Goudini Spa, Worcester 30 October to 03 November.

THE INTERFACE BETWEEN RESEARCH
AND POLICY DIALOGUE:
Symbolic or Substantive

Rubby Dhunpath &
Andrew Paterson
HSRC

Preamble:

- Data derived from multi-site study on Poverty alleviation in selected SADC states: Botswana, Namibia & Seychelles

- SACHES commissioned the HSRC to investigate the status of Information Communication Technologies in Curricula

- Acknowledgements to:
    Linda Chisholm (project leader)
    SACHES (Sheldon Weeks); SACMEQ; ERNESA
    SADC –EPSI (Angela Arnott)
    SANPAD, UNESCO
    In country Researchers
    Ministries of Education and Permanent Secretaries

Preamble

- Purpose: To develop policy options for the conditions necessary for ICT provisioning, and their curricular implications

- Prescription of the funder: a process of Policy Dialogue should underpin the research process

Structure of this paper

- Relationship between research and policy dialogue

- Integrity of the policy research /dialogue process

- Methodology

- Our experience of policy research/ dialogue in the field

- Policy dialogue as a regional process

Scope of this Presentation

- Conceptual/theoretical framework

- Focus is not on the research findings, but a meta-analysis of our experiences as we undertake the research and policy dialogue

- Presented in a mode of critical self-reflexivity

- Only a partial analytical picture presented: voices of other participants need to be solicited for a fuller picture.

Debates around the policy process

- Tenuous relationship between policy and practice

- Policy as a 'chaos of purposes and accidents'

- Demythologizing the relationship between research and policy

- Policy as: Trading, Bargaining, Arguing, Stalling, Maneuvering, Lobbying

Why the weak link between research-policy and policy - practice?

- Policy makers fail to commission appropriate research

- Researchers pursue their own agendas with only a marginal interest in policy

- Failure of both policy makers & researchers to communicate effectively

- The need for POLICY DIALOGUE

Policy Dialogue

- *a kind of 'intermediate policy science' is about communication and breaking barriers between academics and practitioners, between analysts, politicians and civil society, and across disciplines.*
- *It is about empowerment in the policy sphere by levelling the playing field in order that truly democratic and egalitarian participation can occur.*
- *involves developing early warning systems that can highlight pitfalls along the course of policy development.*
- *involves the supplying of relevant information & generation of analyses to policy processes, while developing the capacity to translate information into knowledge to enable effective participation by civil society and other marginalised groups.*

(Hoppers, 1997)

Policy Dialogue: From an archaeological perspective

- What are the conditions that make the emergence of a particular policy agenda possible?
- Why are some items on the policy agenda (and not others)?
- Why are some policy actors involved in the production of policy (and not others)?
- Why do some ideas that circulate in the research/policy arena, have greater currency than others, and are therefore more likely to be picked up and acted on, while others are ignored?
- What are the conditions that regulate the patterns of interaction of those involved?

Policy dialogue is cognisant of:

► The political context

► The actors (Networks, Organisations, individuals)

► The message

► The media

The need for policy dialogue amongst governments and regional formations?

- Researchers do not invest energy in communicating research findings & policy proposals

- Lack of capacity among civil service

- Minimises government culpability

- Provides space for governments to manoeuvre

The Ontologies of Street level Bureaucrats

- Research can enable policy outcomes. it cannot mandate them.

- Ultimately, policy is encrusted with the values and imperatives of street level bureaucrats (Lipsy)

- Researchers lack of understanding of complex bureaucratic machineries undermines the dialogue

Promoting Dialogue: Risking Autonomy
(especially in the context of donor funded research)

- Jetting-in, Jetting-out 'Airport Anthropology'

- Desktop analysis can be perfunctory and superficial

- Prescriptions of funders: role of bureaucrats in the policy process – preserving the sanctity of their offices

- Vulnerability to the emotional sensitivities of ministerial officials

- Providing a forum for the articulation of contestational but potentially consensual voices

Methodology: Opportunities for Dialogue

- Proposal development [SADC PS]
- Country overview
- Instrument design workshop
- Survey of school ICT facilities
- In country interviews and panels [MOE]
- Analysis and report writing
- Presentation of draft report [SADC PS]
- Presentation in participating country [MOE]
- Publication

Policy dialogue as a regional process

- Policy dialogue viewed from within bi-lateral framework

- Implications of shift to multi-lateral research policy dialogue

- Globalisation seems to be mediated through regional organisations

- How and in what ways do regional organisations construct policy in this environment?

Regional organisations

- Dimensions of regional organisations
  - Purposes – trade/economic (NAFTA) trade
    - political
  - Integration (EU, SADC)
  - Size, density, diversity (NEPAD)
- Interdependence of economic & non-economic
- Increasing importance of regional competitiveness

ICT policy convergence?

- Why ICT policy? Why not other curriculum areas? (language, mathematics etc.)
- ICT as a technology with global implications.
- Technologisation of discourse – homogenised view
- Does ICT exacerbate or ameliorate inequity?
- Focus on harmonisation of policy – based on technical issues outside of education and curriculum
- Uneven policy formulation in region

The perils of policy dialogue

- Shared policy concern is mediated by layers of intra-national concerns- need to interrogate dynamics
- Shared understanding of key concepts is not yet achieved
- Policy cynicism
- Intraregional politics of comparative analysis and competition
- Maturity of process - Set of accumulated institutional relations and cultural practices (Dale and Robertson,2002)

Key issues in the process (ii)

- Questions out of ICT research about regional policy processes:
  - Can regional policy making equally effectively address:
    - Educational politics? (eg: equity, new curricula)
    - Politics of education? (eg: governance, teacher unionism)
  - Is regional policy making inherently different to national policy making?
  - Is educational policy making different to other forms of social policy in the region?

Concluding Remarks

- A 'symbolic or substantive' process
- Conditions and contexts for success
- Unintended consequences of the dialogic process/method are important

- Regions- policy divergence or convergence?
- High stakes attract funders seek to influence regional policy – one size fits all policy?

Thank You