

# *Evaluating Policy Research*

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**Executive Summary**

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## Executive Summary

This paper aims to advance understanding of how to evaluate research undertaken to influence public policy. It adopts a broad understanding of public policy which includes both discrete policy decisions and the ways in which policy is developed. There are two parts to the paper followed by a summary.

**Part 1** explores expectations about the influence of research on policy. Why research findings are not more often used by policy-makers, and when and how they are used, have both become fashionable subjects of investigation in Canada and elsewhere. Most investigators agree that it is impossible to demonstrate a causal link between the presentation of research results and a policy decision. Yet most also agree that research can play a very important role in changing the way policy issues are understood and addressed. This has been called the ‘enlightenment’ role of research. The process it follows and the time it takes are unpredictable. A research institute or network can play an enlightenment role by:

- Identifying and bringing new issues to public attention;
- Reframing old issues in new ways;
- Bringing different stakeholders into the search for solutions; and
- Showing how other countries or agencies have addressed similar issues.

Doing this means developing new information, mining existing data, reviewing ideas and proposals and bringing them together to address new concerns or concerns which have hitherto proved intractable. The paper calls this function ‘problem definition’ and suggests that it is the most important contribution a policy research network can make.

Policy research networks can play an important role in policy development but it will be indirect, and how and when it happens cannot be predicted. Policy-makers seldom signal a need for research findings in advance and it is too late to start research when the issue is on the table. Hence a network which wants to contribute to policy development takes a risk in starting up a research program. The risk is increased when the way in which it defines the problem and suggests framing a response challenges accepted wisdom. Yet many observers see a need to challenge accepted wisdom and established consultation mechanisms. As the time available to policy-makers to weigh up the issues and take their decisions becomes shorter and as the issues become more complex on the national and international scenes and the public more demanding, they are tempted to become risk averse. They need help from outside government in defining the issues and in formulating empirically-based solutions. Thus there is a real but latent demand for relevant research results.

**Part 2** asks how to evaluate a policy network's contribution to policy development in the context of the findings of Part 1. How does such a network add value? Comparing its inputs of time and money with its outputs of publications, speeches and meetings will not answer the question. Qualitative as well as quantitative methods examine the impact of government programs with increasing sophistication. Qualitative methods have the advantage of looking at the process of program delivery, including the learning that takes place from both positive and negative experiences, as well as its results. In the context of the demand for government accountability, the Treasury Board Secretariat's *Results-based Management and Accountability Framework* attempts to link inputs with outcomes as well as with outputs. This approach is an improvement over conventional compliance evaluation in assessing the effectiveness of programs, but it does not provide a satisfactory methodology for identifying and observing outcomes in policy development.

The kinds of outcomes a policy research institute or network hopes for are that policy-makers will:

- Take account of new knowledge to modify their priorities and agendas;
- Consider different ways of tackling persistent issues;
- Acknowledge the importance of new issues being brought to their attention; and
- Look for ways to address them. (This supposes willingness to learn from outside experience, to accept new interlocutors and to reconsider entrenched positions.)

While it is difficult to observe such changes in behaviour as they happen, it is even more difficult to relate them to particular activities of a research network. Each policy decision is influenced by a myriad of inputs. It is usually impossible to find quantitative data linking research results to policy decisions. Qualitative data, including case studies and interviews, can suggest links but they are difficult to interpret and to accept as representative. So evaluations of policy networks often fall back on media citations or success in fund-raising as indicators of influence on policy-makers. But the citations have been shown to be a poor indicator of impact while the fundraising only tells us that the network is maintaining its existence not that it is attaining its mission.

The paper's findings can be summarized in a paradox. It is impossible to demonstrate a causal link between policy research and policy decisions yet policy research has a crucial role to play in Canada today. The search for its added value should start by examining an institute's or network's mission and objectives, relate these to its problem definition activities and determine indicators which show its presence in the policy-making environment. These indicators should, of course, be determined at the beginning of each programming cycle. They could include:

- The time that senior officials and business leaders repeatedly devote to the network's activities;
- Signs of opposition from decision-makers who feel threatened by different ways of approaching familiar problems; and
- Sustained willingness by new groups of stakeholders to engage in policy discussions facilitated by the network.

As long as a think tank produces quality research, such indicators will allow observers to understand the network's contribution, and to infer its value added although they can never quantify it.