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## Linking research and policy in water and sanitation: findings from the SPLASH ERA-Net

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**WATER, SANITATION AND HYGIENE:  
SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT AND MULTISECTORAL APPROACHES**

**Linking research and policy in water and sanitation:  
Findings from the SPLASH ERA-Net**

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*The overall goal of the SPLASH ERA-Net is to improve the coordination of European water research aimed at reducing poverty and achieving the Millennium Development Goals. Within this, one of the focus areas of SPLASH is to foster participatory transfer of research into policy. This paper documents the results of an investigation into how to improve the application of research throughout the whole process of designing, conducting and communicating research, to those engaged in policy making and practice. The findings of this consultation have been revealing about the inadequacy of the present design and implementation of research programmes and their uptake into development and policy. However, it also generated ideas, some based on good practice, of how this can be improved and made to work effectively. These are important lessons which can be taken forward into the design and implementation of future research programmes to ensure better uptake of EU Member State research.*

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## **Background**

### **The SPLASH ERA-Net and research to policy linkages**

The overall goal of the SPLASH ERA-Net is to improve the coordination of European water research that aims to reduce poverty and achieve the Millennium Development Goals. To this end, one of the focus areas of SPLASH is to foster participatory transfer of research into policy, by devolving lesson learning between Member States and Developing Countries and improving Member States' cooperation in water for development research. This paper documents part of the work carried out under this remit, specifically investigating how to improve the application of research throughout the whole process of designing, conducting and communicating research, to those engaged in policy making and practice. This includes:

- the extent to which research findings influence policy formulation;
- constraining and enabling factors in this process;
- proven benefits of effective linkages; and
- examples of good practice.

### ***Definition of terms***

In order to better understand a discussion on improved utilization of research in policy making, it is important to clearly define the terms 'research', 'knowledge resulting from research' and 'policy'. OECD defines 'research' as any systematic effort to increase the stock of knowledge; if undertaken to inform and influence public policy, it is categorized as policy research. EHP defines 'policy' as 'the set of procedures, rules and allocation mechanisms that provide the basis for programs and services' (Elledge et al, 2002).

Social learning theory suggests that in the process of transferring research results into policy, research knowledge is not only transferred from the research to the policy making domain but is also created at the interface between research and policy when research findings are interpreted to feed into policy decisions. Thus, research results can be transformed when they are "translated" and transferred (Nutley et al, 2007).

## Methodological approach

### Preliminary e-conference consultation

As a preliminary investigatory tool, an electronic conference was carried out in March 2008 entitled “Towards better water policies: how can increasing the uptake of research findings help?” Broadly, its objectives were to find out where the results of research have been successfully incorporated into sector policy, and to investigate any factors which assist or detract from this process. It generated some important leads to explore in the next stage of country consultations i.e.:

- the incentives needed to bring stakeholders together and how barriers against this can be overcome;
- how the required elements of these interfaces can be ensured; and
- how the potential benefits can be realized in terms of learning lessons, and monitoring and evaluating the impact of research findings on policy development.

A number of sector-related events were chosen on the basis of the potential opportunity provided to carry out key informant interviews. The main criteria for selection were their location (EU, the Mekong, East and West Africa) and the nature and number of participants engaged in research and/or policy making. A combination of pre-arranged interviews with delegates, prior to the event, and interviews arranged at the time gave a total of 22 key-informants. Seven policy and decision making staff, and 15 research staff were interviewed from a range of 13 countries, in both the North and the South.

### Key findings

It is widely acknowledged by both key informant researchers and policy/decision makers that there is some degree of disconnect between research and policy. Opinions may vary as to the extent of this and its effects, where responsibility for this lies, and what constraints exist, but there is general consensus on the benefits associated with strong linkages in this context.

### The perspective of policy and decision makers

The degree of convergence between research findings and policy formulation is an issue which is repeatedly raised, by both researchers and policy makers, and is one which recedes again, finding no satisfactory resolution. Policy makers have a range of attitudes towards the problem; at one end of the continuum, it is seen as a dichotomy of two distinctly non-overlapping elements; at the other end, more positive experiences can demonstrate examples of effective research to policy linkages.

### *Experience of linkages between research and use*

There are examples that show the experience and practice of a range of organizations involved in policy making, either directly (the Kenyan Ministry of Water and Irrigation, Volta Basin Authority, Burkina Faso, and the Water Directorate, Ghana), or as coordinating and regulatory agencies (WRC Ghana and WRC South Africa).

#### **Water Resources Commission (WRC) Ghana**

WRC, Ghana, has a regulatory and coordination role relating to water resources policy. Policies are developed by the government in relation to the regulation and management of water resources. It is then the responsibility of the Commission to ensure that these are properly regulated. In 2000, as part of developing their own strategy, WRC commissioned research by the Water Research Institute on water resources, to find out what are the real issues and priorities concerning this. These results were used to develop WRC's policy on basin management and were key to developing their overall strategy.

### **WRC South Africa**

The mandate of WRC South Africa is to coordinate research in order to eliminate overlap and disseminate knowledge. They are not involved in carrying out active research; rather their role is responsive to research priorities identified by DWAF and involves the identification of appropriate research areas and the soliciting of proposals accordingly. On review and selection of suitable proposals, a steering group is formed to provide support and guidance for the project team. On completion, the final peer reviewed report is published by WRC. All WRC research outputs are free to all and are distributed to schools, the research community and the wider public. Policy and ministerial briefs are also sent to DWAF, and provide information in support of policy formulation.

While there is a range of experience demonstrated, common features of linking research and policy formulation include:

- systematic processes in place;
- discussion and sharing of ideas between a range of stakeholders;
- input from experts in the research and scientific communities; and
- commissioning research based on known demand i.e. based on needs identified at country level.

### **The perspective of researchers**

There is a general frustration evident amongst the research community due to the limitations on the uptake and use of their research findings, poor enabling environments relating to finance, time, institutional priorities, effective dissemination routes and so on, which mean that their research may not reach its full potential to bring about positive change and development. Some researchers can relate good experiences relating to research funding, knowledge generation and research methodologies, but there are also examples where policy has failed to take relevant research into account.

### **Kenyan Training Institute**

The contentious issue of setting water tariffs in Kenya is a successful example of where research has had a positive influence on policy. Research on the views and capacities of farmers relating to this issue have been incorporated into the formulation of bye laws on tariffs, and it is anticipated that this consultation will engender the support of farmers for these.

### **The German-African GLOWA Programme**

The GLOWA Project has designed decision making tools which can provide data on how changing climates can affect different regions. However, key informant interview data suggests that although the GLOWA Programme has engaged with local populations, when these projects come to an end, the support that the research teams can offer also ends. Despite an expectation that they should implement these tools, there is no time to do this within the scope of the project. It was suggested that this would require the renewal of projects or new projects to integrate and develop various aspects of different projects.

### ***Experience of linkages between research and use***

Again, there is a range of experience demonstrated by the researchers interviewed, but some points of note include:

- a limited sense of real understanding by researchers of how to effect greater linkages with policy;
- results are presented to potential users only at the end of research projects;
- face to face contact between researcher and research user is useful;
- certainty over real demand for research is not ascertained;
- policy based on consultative research is more likely to be well received;
- training in research methods and the necessary technical skills should be considered;
- a component focusing on impact is important; and
- effective strategic communication is required.

## **Conclusions and lessons learned**

### **Barriers to linking research and policy**

Both policy makers and researchers identified a number of potential barriers to creating strong links between the two parties, and most acknowledged a wide divide between the two worlds, which requires effort to bridge. These relate to a variety of factors, including:

- pressures associated with the nature of political office which can work against ensuring that scientific research informs policy design and implementation;
- lack of consensus on the prioritization of research given by governments, universities and civil society;
- lack of harmonization between the interests of researchers, research funders and policy issues;
- disincentives for researchers to reach policy makers, due to career progression routes and training; and
- limited evidence in support of the positive impact of research findings on policy.

### **How to improve linkages between research and policy**

The issue of responsibility to create and maintain these linkages is important. Should responsibility be shared, or if not, which of the two parties should be most proactive, and where should their efforts meet? The burden of responsibility was perceived to lie most heavily on the researcher, who should be more identify research agendas and communicate results. Other aspects of improving these linkages were:

- to prioritize time spent on a continual process of consultation, with all relevant stakeholders, including policy makers and practitioners;
- for policy makers to maintain strong links with research institutions, to commission research or to learn about current research;
- to include mechanisms to measure the impact of the research;
- to foster personal relationships at a senior level; and
- to use intermediary organizations which have an important role as an additional communication route, especially where personal contacts are weak.

The data and findings presented in this report have centred on current practice and experience by a range of people involved in research at all levels, from PhD students to senior academics, professors and coordinators of large research teams and projects. Alongside these, the experience of a number of individuals engaged in decision and policy making at various stages and with different levels of responsibility have also been gathered. Their experience covers a range of locations around the world, in both high and low-income countries, although all have a development focus in the South.

The findings of the consultation process have been revealing about the inadequacy of the present situation regarding aspects of the design and implementation of research programmes and their uptake into development and policy. However, more important than the documentation of these negative factors is the collation of ideas, some based on good practice examples, of how this can be improved and made to work effectively. These are important lessons which can be taken forward into the design and implementation of future research programmes to ensure better uptake of EU Member State research.

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