



University of
Nottingham

Institute for Policy and Engagement



Engaging with policy in the Global South

Conference Report

How UK researchers can
partner with policymakers in
the Global South to achieve
impact



July 2022

Introduction

The Institute for Policy and Engagement's one day conference on Influencing Policy in the Global South took place on 26 April 2022. This event came about in recognition of two key facts:

- Many academics in Nottingham and the wider UK Higher Education sector whose research has valuable insights for policy makers are seeking to influence policy not in the UK, but countries in the Global South
- Engaging with policy actors in these contexts comes with a set of complications, challenges and risks that academics need to be prepared for, and for which support may not currently be readily available. These challenges particularly relate to how academics can best work with policy audiences in contexts of complex historical relationships, global power imbalances and cultural differences.

Rather than give a detailed account of the conversations that took place on the day, this report aims to give an overview of the themes that emerged, before examining specific challenges that were raised for the University of Nottingham, the wider Higher Education sector, and individual academics. It concludes by outlining how the Institute for Policy and Engagement plans to take forward this important area of our work.

Objectives of the conference

Recognising that examining these issues required facilitating direct engagement between academics and policy actors in the Global South, many of the speakers came from the latter background, including the keynote speaker David Moinina Sengeh, the Sierra Leone Minister of Education. Other external speakers included senior officials from the African Union Commission, the Commonwealth Secretariat, UNICEF and UNDP, as well as NGO practitioners in the research to policy space.

The conference was thus an effort to spark conversation within the University and the wider sector about doing policy work in these contexts, to begin to equip Nottingham academics with greater skills to engage with policy in the Global South, and to help the Institute for Policy and Engagement understand how it can best work to take this agenda forward.



Emerging themes

Academic skills and awareness

Delegates emphasised the importance of academics approaching their work with intellectual humility and respect for local communities. This is key to the entire process of research but particularly important when formulating and communicating policy recommendations, which must be done in ways that are sensitive to local cultural and historical contexts, and with awareness of the academic's status as a privileged outsider. Academics need to be facilitators, not try to be policy makers, and to pose questions with full respect for local knowledge.

A particular point of discussion focused on the division of labour and the sharing of risk in partnership relationships. This can be a serious source of conflict in these relationships, particularly where the job of knowledge generation and conceptualisation is monopolised by the (UK-based) principal investigator, with local partners left to focus on field work. Delegates emphasised the need for a clear shared vision and mission between partners that explicitly addresses the question of the knowledge hierarchy. From a policy impact perspective, this is crucial for establishing trusted and equal relationships that answer the most appropriate policy challenges from a local perspective, and that are equipped to harness the social, cultural and political capital of local partners to engage with policy.

These issues become more acute in post-colonial contexts, where just the act of undertaking research as a UK academic inevitably carries with it assumptions about the post-colonial world and the rights and eligibility of Global North academics to engage in the Global South. Academics must be mindful of this and to interrogate their own identity, perceptions and powers. Failure to do this can lead to the reproduction of colonial relationships, to the point where the post-colonial threatens to become the neo-colonial.

All of this requires a depth of thinking and reflection of academics that can be supported by better skills building within the sector, to develop diplomatic skills and cultural awareness.



Funding and administration

A second set of concerns focused on the practical and administrative barriers that can hinder research in these contexts, and the repercussions these have for effective policy engagement. In particular, issues around risk management and the restrictions placed on academic staff were a source of great frustration, with a sense that university bureaucracies were unwilling to recognise the expertise of academics and their partners when it comes to assessing local risk.

Many delegates felt that administrative processes could inadvertently support the reproduction of colonial structures, particularly around risk assessments and funding processes that place the power in the hands of partners in the Global North. One solution might be for university risk managers to draw on the insight that academics and their partners with first hand experience can bring in their assessment of risk. Delegates also felt that operational issues tend to have a disproportionate impact on the success of research programmes as a whole, with a need to facilitate the earlier involvement of operational staff and for university management to review processes with a view to facilitating more effective transnational relationships.

Other question in this area included how academics are incentivised, with some delegates feeling that the way in which the sector operates tends to push them to ask questions that can further their careers rather than necessarily ones that can solve local problems; bringing the two together was therefore seen as a priority.

The Global South and EDI agenda in the UK

A third area demanding further exploration is how engaging with the Global South fits into the EDI agenda in the UK, particularly around the ways in which academics from the Global Majority based in the UK are supported in their careers. It was acknowledged that such academics – particularly those who are from the countries where they seek to work and have impact – have a particular position in terms of how they relate to local stakeholders and power structures, and that this manifests in complex ways. There was consensus that there is space to explore how, for instance, African diaspora scholars in the UK can be supported to play a greater role in policy impact in Africa, and to access external sources of support and funding to pursue this agenda.

The global and the local

Finally, many delegates emphasised that even responsible engagement in specific places in the Global South do not take place in a vacuum; they have implications for and are embedded in the global context in which they take place. Academics can also be seen as having a responsibility to support locally generated insight to feed into global agendas and generate global knowledge, but they also need to recognise that the localisation of policies pursued at a global level may not always make for a good fit. The role of multilaterals is important here.



Multilateral organisations are very helpful channels for identifying common problems and common public goods, and can effectively pool resources and access. But access to them can seem opaque to academics, and there can be questions about the extent to which they encourage genuine two-way sharing of knowledge rather than imposing externally-developed policy solutions.

Challenges

For the sector

- Can the sector develop and share new best practice, particularly around incentives, funding, risk management and partnership management?
- Can the sector work with funding bodies to review funding processes and how they may inadvertently impede positive relationships and reproduce colonial power structures?
- Does the sector need to review its definition of impact, which can vary between academics, institutions, partners and beneficiaries? Can local voices have more presence in deciding who policy impact is for?
- Can the sector support and facilitate more effective co-creation of research questions and local ownership of research, with a view to developing pathways from research to policy before the research happens?
- Can the sector do more to engage with multilateral institutions, particularly in the area of funding in order to embed collaboration and engagement with local partners and policy actors?

For universities

- Can universities take a lead in reviewing its administrative processes to support better partnerships?
- Can universities develop tools to guide academics towards international policy impact? Tools suggested by delegates include:
 - A [glossary of terms](#) for academics
 - A map of the [global policy landscape](#)-who does what and where, and entry points.
 - A map of [funding opportunities](#) to support research in GS countries.
 - A map of [academic partners](#) in different countries.
- Can the universities' global engagement efforts do more to market academics to policy audiences?
- Can universities review incentives and time allowances?
- Can universities continue this conversation and offer academics opportunities to further develop their understanding and skills?
- Can universities adapt a funding architecture compatible with local contexts in Global south countries, and resolve operational bottlenecks in the funding and disbursement processes for international research and policy engagement?
- Can universities foster closer communication between Research & Innovation and Finance & Infrastructure, and provide additional resourcing for more complex international agreements?

For individual researchers

- Are researchers ready to embrace two-way knowledge exchange as a fundamental element of how they go about working internationally? What can academics learn from the resilience of systems in the Global South?



- Do researchers understand who can effectively deliver brokerage between research and policy at the local level? How can they develop this knowledge?
- Can researchers do more to interrogate their personal agency and approach? Delegates proposed a “4 As framework” outlining the key principles at play here:
 - [Attitude](#): deep listening, humility, respect
 - [Awareness](#): reading the room
 - [Action](#): focusing on research leading to action
 - [Aptitude](#): investing in the skills and knowledge necessary to engage in policy locally, including learning about the background and reasons for current policy.
- Are academics ready to invest in:
 - Their [social capital](#) and sensitivity to context;
 - Their [networks](#) – solid, robust, and moving beyond academic partners;
 - Their [communications](#) – recognising the need for both public communications and private diplomacy?

Next steps for the Institute for Policy and Engagement

The Institute is currently in the process of developing its international strategy, which will be strongly informed by the issues and themes coming out of this conference. We will of course continue to support individual academics looking to engage on policy in the Global South, but we recognise the need for a clear approach to our work in this area that reflects its particular challenges.

As the home of policy impact at the University of Nottingham, the Institute is in many ways the natural home for the second group of challenges identified above. A priority of our international strategy will therefore be to answer some of those challenges; for instance, we will review the possibilities for developing some of the tools proposed by delegates. However, what became very clear from discussions at the conference is that this cannot be done in isolation from our colleagues supporting other parts of the research process. We will therefore also be taking forward a number of internal conversations with colleagues to try to respond to some of the management and administrative questions that are most pertinent to delegates.



Finally, we note the keenness of all delegates to continue this conversation and encourage more academics engaging with policy in the Global South to interrogate their ways of working and relationships in the field. We will continue to support this ongoing conversation both within the University and in the sector more widely, beginning by sharing this report and its challenges and presenting an open invitation for interested partners to follow up with us with their ideas for further exploration. We will offer a platform to academics and their partners who have important perspectives on these issues and will continue to be a voice within the sector calling for these questions to be prioritised in how research is supported and implemented.

We believe that UK research sector has an enormous amount of insight both to offer and to gain from engaging with policy makers in the Global South, and that all concerned stand to benefit by challenging this process of knowledge sharing to be as equitable and effective as it can be. We are very grateful to all the delegates whose insights provided the basis of this report, and we hope you will continue to come with us on this journey.

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