

id21:  
tracking routes towards impact

"knowledge is power,  
but sharing information is progress"

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# PART 1 INTRODUCTION

## 1.01 terms of reference

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id21's goal is **“to establish means by which the influence of UK development research on policy can be increased in a way that creates significant, lasting and (if possible) measurable impact”**.

The importance of mobilising research and knowledge for pro-poor development has been outlined before (in DFID's 1997 White Paper for example). But demonstrating the links between research at one end and policy and practice at the other is problematic, the relationships between the two, and those in between, being complex and difficult to track.

The literature from which to draw lessons is very limited: there are no directly relevant examples of any assessment of impact of web-based information programmes and research dissemination mechanisms.

Yet id21 owes it to a range of stakeholders (its users, researchers, policy makers, and funders) to explore these relationships with reference to its own programme in order to ensure that its resources are being used most efficiently and effectively.

Overall, this project sought to gather data and information from a range of sources and stakeholders and to collate this information in ways that:

1. allow id21 to explore the ways in which policy makers and decision makers access research;
2. test the validity of the dissemination methodologies [formats and channels] that id21 employs; and
3. assess actual performance to date in relation to id21's outputs and the outcomes resulting from this (if possible, also including examples of impact).

## 1.02 methodology

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This report draws on four primary sources:

1. Over 90 face to face, semi-structured interviews with target id21 users and potential users in South Africa, India and Uganda, conducted in spring 2002. Interviewees were promised complete anonymity, but included senior personnel from twelve national and local government planning and development commissions, sixteen government health programmes, fifteen government ministries, nine DFID country offices, six UN offices, the World Bank, fifteen national research centres and policy think-tanks and over twenty national and international NGOs.
2. A survey of id21 email news users (generating 1414 usable responses).
3. A survey of subscribers to id21's quarterly print review *Insights* (generating 348 usable responses).
4. A survey of researchers, mainly UK based, who have had research posted by id21 (generating 83 useable responses).

In addition, some background documentation has also informed the report. See Appendix for details.

As external consultants, the authors of this report were commissioned “To write an impact assessment report”. The project was developed and conducted in partnership between the authors and id21. The programme of field visits was organised by id21 and the interviews were conducted by id21 staff and the authors. id21 gathered and processed the survey data.

The findings relating to the research to policy dynamic [parts 2 and 3] were interpreted and ordered by the authors on the basis of this evidence, with id21 staff inputting into the process.

The assessment of id21's contribution [part 4] and the recommendations that follow from this analysis [part 5] are presented by the authors for id21's consideration.

## 1.03 report structure

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This report has been written primarily to assist id21 in assessing how effective it has been in moving towards its goal. To do this, part two reviews some theoretical models and considers the policy context whilst part three examines the impact of research. Part four looks at how effective id21's chosen methodologies are in helping research to create impact on policy, and part five makes specific recommendations for id21 to consider in order to progress towards its goal.

Owing to the lack of relevant research in this area, the report relies heavily on the views expressed by interviewees during visits to India, South Africa and India. In these interviews there were sometimes conflicting views expressed which we have tried in some cases to reconcile and in others to leave as contradictions thereby indicating the need for any assessment in this complex field to recognise that there is often no consensus.

The report also seeks to indicate how id21 could take innovative steps in developing methodologies to assess the impact of development research on policy in a measurable way. If these steps are taken it could help to further establish id21 as a leader in the field of web-based research dissemination - and remove the bracketed 'if possible' from its stated goal.

## PART 2 POLITICAL AND POLICY CONTEXTS

### 2.01 theories of public policy making

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#### 2.01.1 rational models

The rational-comprehensive model describes a logical sequence of policy making phases in which the role of the policy maker is to identify alternative options, finally choosing the best one. In this model, research takes on the form of contributing apolitical expertise, inputting into the various phases of policy making, which are defined as:<sup>1</sup>

1. recognising and defining the nature of the issue to be dealt with
2. identifying possible courses of action to deal with the issue
3. weighing up the advantages and disadvantages of each of these alternatives
4. choosing the option which offers the best solution
5. implementing the policy
6. possibly evaluating the outcome

There are also those who propound incrementalist theories<sup>2</sup> who propose that decision makers choose compromise policies in a bid to find solutions that are acceptable to competing demands. These theories describe a more pragmatic, expedient policy making process, in which there is a narrow focus on a few policy options, a concentration mostly on immediate problems to be remedied, and a general absence of policy innovation. The implication here is that researchers are likely to be sidelined, unless they operate within the parameters within which decision makers are prepared to operate.

In an extension and redefinition of the incrementalist approach, the policy paradigm<sup>3</sup> model suggests that policy making is characterised by long periods of incremental change, punctuated by brief periods of major change. Again, research becomes subordinate to political interests. Change occurs on different scales. First order change involves minor adjustment to policies, second order change introduces limited experimentation, and third order change involves a radical shift in learning that informs policy and forms the basis for a new period of stability.

#### 2.01.2 inchoate, interactive, indefinable

Reductionist models - based on the assumption that the policy process advances step-by-step from the identification of a problem to the attempted resolution through the implementation of policy change - have of course been much questioned and critiqued.

Given the prevalence of political ideology and expediency, capacity constraints in policy making, limitations on available research, the paucity of research dissemination, the weakness of many political institutions, the plethora of interacting policy networks and subsystems, and the costs of acquiring information, one description of the relationship between research and the policy process is one of “a chaos of purposes and accidents”.<sup>4</sup>

Indeed, policy making could be more helpfully characterised not as a linear, equilibrated process but as a complex system, comprising many interacting parts, with multiple, mutual feedback loops built in, profoundly sensitive to initial conditions, dissipative not predictable, with any resulting policy arising

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<sup>1</sup> from Sutton (1999)

<sup>2</sup> Lindblom cited in Stone et al (2001)

<sup>3</sup> Hall cited in Stone et al (2001)

<sup>4</sup> Juma & Clarke quoted in Stone et al (2001)

through an emergent not managed phenomenon. Given this analysis, it may make more sense to interpret policy making through attempting to understand the prevailing *conditions*, rather than trying to track the *process*.

## 2.02 key characteristics of the research/policy dynamic

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Models only represent reality, they do not reflect it; but in this case it seems that the rational models of policy making represent a reality that is simplified to the point of distortion. In particular, evidence from our interviews suggests that the models are flawed to the extent that they are underpinned by assumptions of linearity and apoliticism.

### 2.02.1 non-linearity

Interviewees were anxious to point out that there is no lineal relationship between research and policy. As a Ministry of Health official remarked, *"The path from policy to research is not always straight, but it doesn't mean that just because it's not a straight road that research doesn't influence policy. Sometimes ...politicians take decisions based directly on research findings; but in most cases research provides an analysis of the political, social and economic context, within which policy makers take decisions"*. Similarly, a UN economic advisor explained how, *"It's not like chemistry where you mix and see a result immediately; it's a slow process for people to change what they are talking about"*.

Unsurprisingly it was stressed that other factors beyond the quality of the research influenced policy makers. A senior Civil Servant noted that, *"Researchers believe that just because they have carried out some research that their findings should be embraced and policy should be changed. That is a big dream. It doesn't happen like that because researchers focus on their research and don't have to take into consideration other factors. They concentrate on a very small narrow area whilst policy makers have to take in the bigger picture - in Uganda's case this would include the need for continued political stability, the economic impact, the equity issue and the religious aspect. Once factors like these are taken into consideration research findings are often watered down and don't feed directly into decision making"*.

In the words of a Director of a research unit, *"There is no linear relationship between research and policy making; policy makers are influenced by other factors such as budget considerations, demands of the electorate, their own personal experiences, as well as international pressures – none of which may have any kind of evidence base"*.

### 2.02.2 power and politics

As a Director of a Policy Research Unit stated: *"Policy is not a rational process. Power makes policy. Research is a source of power ... Sometimes you can win intellectually"*. Information has power, as a Director of a national NGO confirmed: *"There is nothing that gives you more confidence than knowledge and updated information and this is important when you are meeting ministers"*. But expert power – the power that is vested in you because of your expertise – is only one source within a set of complex power dynamics that infuse policy and political processes. As an interviewee from a labour research institute commented, *"to be effective, research has to be invoked by people with the power to make their view dominant"*.

### 2.02.3 a necessary but insufficient precondition

One interviewee from an NGO stated that, *"I believe research and development have a very strong link today. Governments and other stakeholders would not do anything out of the blue, they want facts and*

*figures that support their arguments*". But this was probably a minority view. Others emphasised that *"researchers have the illusion their research plays a more important role than it actually does"*.

As an NGO policy officer asserted, quality research is normally a precondition for affecting policy change: *"You cannot deal with policy issues without having the facts on your fingertips"*. This was confirmed by a civil servant who acknowledged that, *"Sound policy cannot be made without proper research"*.

The importance of research was placed in context by an interviewee from an NGO support centre: *"Research does empower groups, you have to have it to make your case, you can't just shout slogans. And it can win people over. But it's important to recognise its limitations"*. Research alone is not enough, all kinds of influences apply, as described by a member of a WHO unit connected to the Ministry of Health: *"It is almost impossible to make a clear cause and effect between research and policy outcome. Some influence is very subtle, much unattributed, some is at state level, some national level, some direct personal contact. Sometimes policy change is about changing rules not just legislation, sometimes just changing an approach. What is important is to ensure the people involved in the chain receive the information and that it can seep into the processes"*.

## 2.03 the political context

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Given that research disseminated with the intention of influencing policy makers is a political intervention in a political context, it is clear that wider considerations affect the extent to which research proves to be – or not to be – influential. Some of the distorting factors emerged strongly from the interviews.

### 2.03.1 research as a conferrer of spurious objectivity

In some cited cases, the rational policy-making model - in which options are researched and policy is based on identification of the most beneficial approach - seemed to have been inverted so that, as described by a parliamentary lobbyist, *"research is channelled within a narrow range, then wheeled out to give credibility to a pre-determined [policy] route"*. Thus, research may be commissioned in an attempt to provide evidence to support political positions, rather than to provide a genuinely objective exploration of solutions to a problem or issue.

The process, too, can be subject to distortion. An interviewee from a research institute described how, *"decisions are made by small groups of government officials, consultants, business and trade union officials, who will use the research simply to prove they have consulted a wider group"*.

### 2.03.2 research as a delaying tactic

Identifying another dissembling tactic, a consultant working in the NGO and policy sectors, echoing many others, saw the commissioning of research as *"a way of reacting to issues that have come to the fore – a way for policy makers to avoid having to take on the issue"*.

In this interpretation, as a civil servant noted, *"researchers are often useful to the bureaucrats and politicians because they can be used to delay the implementation of politically unpalatable but necessary policy solutions"*. So even where research is commissioned by policy makers notionally seeking solutions to topical issues, the motivation may sometimes be more about delay rather than the desire to provide sound policy recommendations. Typically, this can lead to some areas being over-researched. The lessons from previous research are ignored in order to allow for subsequent research in the same area until politicians are happy with the results.

### 2.03.3 ideological constraints

We also encountered situations where dominant national and international political-ideological discourses apparently restricted research influence to an extremely narrow range. Thus, a parliamentary officer from a labour organisation gave the assessment that *“dominant neo-liberal ideology means that governments are reluctant to hear about options and alternatives, even if they’re well-researched and evidence-based”*.

Ideologies change of course, and researchers, if they want to achieve impact on policy makers, find that they must adapt to changing political priorities, look for the new opportunities for input, when *“incoming ministers use different language, have different priorities, focus on different agendas”*.

### 2.03.4 research amidst indifference

Equally problematic for those seeking to promote the influence of research on policy were the examples we came across where researchers find themselves swimming in a sea of indifference.

In one health economics example, the policy problem was described by a former academic now working in the private sector in stark terms: *“There’s very little government control ... No one ever costs things appropriately ... projections tend to be hopelessly inaccurate ... The interface between those involved in accepting new technology is chaotic. Health economics is virtually non-existent. Different budgets (e.g. purchasing, insurance, maintenance) are managed separately and overall impacts not collated ... In any case, costs are calculated on a reductionist basis ... [and] social cost benefits are not recognised”*. But it was the **political** problem that was proving the hurdle most difficult to overcome: *“No one’s interested. The focus should simply be on what works and what’s the cost benefit. But it’s nobody’s priority - everyone sees it as someone else’s problem ... Examining bodies, professional bodies, trade unions – none of them disseminate new developments ... Guidelines don’t exist at a national level ... Different levels of government are continually passing the buck ...”*

## 2.04 research and the political domain

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### 2.04.1 research capacity constraints

We found problems relating to resource capacity (a lack of skills, time, money) within executives, legislatures and amongst civil society organisations

In government, researchers’ salaries are often low. Resources dedicated to research are typically scarce. Often, therefore, capacity is weak. An interviewee from a South African policy institute made the comparison: *“Developed countries might have government departments with whole buildings full of researchers. In developing countries, governments often have very limited capacity even to read research or do analytical work”*. One consequence of this is that *“they outsource, so they get the wrong results”* because external researchers/consultants sometimes fail adequately to understand the political and policy context [see section 3.03].

A common description of government we heard was one in which, as a senior official put it, *“there’s no room to think, a lack of resources, skills, experience – it’s constant crisis management”*. Not surprisingly, therefore, *“government-sponsored researchers tend to focus on the short-term”*. In this scenario, any research-based recommendations to policy makers to take action are simply seen as a problem, not as a potential solution.

Even where relevant research exists, there may be a shortage of people in government who are sufficiently qualified to understand and make effective use of the research. In the words of one official, *“Our bureaucracy still is not geared to respect research”*.



Particular problems were cited within Southern country legislatures, within which, according to one representative from an NGO working in the policy area, “MPs have varying educational backgrounds, some may be illiterate; with some MPs [for example] from rural areas, struggling to understand complex legislation. Often too there is a high turnover of MPs, so they don’t have the background information”.

NGOs similarly struggle to integrate the need to conduct and use research within their overall programmes. A think-tank director, with an NGO background, commented that, “Many organisations leave out research in their project planning because of the cost. But how can you influence when you don’t have the facts?”

Even those who recognise the need may not have the means. A training institute in Uganda had a clear vision - “we are here to influence policy, to bring about changes in the area of health provision for persons with disabilities and especially children; but our main problem has been funding”.

There was a sense across all three countries that there was gradually improved research capacity within government but an official confirmed that “the majority [of research] is still funded externally”.

## 2.04.2 funders’ agendas

It seems clear that the influence of donors is significant, affecting funded organisations on three levels:

1. programme orientation
2. policy positions
3. research programmes and focus

A stark example of funders’ agendas influencing programme orientation is that one organisation that we visited was in the throes of closing down precisely because funders did not back their own developing analysis of the problems facing their country and appropriate strategies to address them. More generally, as one political commentator reflected, “there are plenty of NGOs ... mostly they play to the donor community” identifying a suspicion that the dependency of indigenous NGOs on funders results in distortion of their programme.

A corollary of the growing trend in some countries for more international funders’ money to go through government (with the adoption of a Sector Wide Approach) is that the erosion of the independence of NGOs and other civil society organisations is threatened. NGOs end up as a delivery arm, funded by government itself. This can lead to what was described, by the coordinator of an NGO network, as “a shyness to criticise ... How do you bite the hand that feeds you?”

A consequence of this is a generic wariness of research assessments where the results may be perceived to have been influenced by the funder’s agenda. In India, for example, one commentator suggested, “There is generally far less cynicism about foreign funded research than in the past, though many people are still ideologically uncomfortable about World Bank-funded research”.

The influence of funders can also be felt in the scoping and shaping of the research that is conducted. For example, research dissemination may not be a high priority funding criterion. Or, as noted by an interviewee from a Ugandan think-tank, funders influence the methodology of the research, sometimes with negative results: “Nobody wants to fund very expensive research; what gets done may be cheaper yet lacking in value”. Funders may even take responsibility for defining whether research takes place at all. A chief executive of an International NGO indicated that, “research is important for funders, they are always asking to see the evidence base”.

Some international institutions have an influence beyond their role as funders because they are active and key players in current economic and political debates. For some, therefore, in overall policy terms, as expressed by an interviewee from a labour organisation, “This is where driving force is – what will satisfy an international audience”. As a result, international financial institutions provide a starting point, a jumping off point, for local and national NGOs’ research programmes. One research institute provided the following analysis: “IMF and World Bank positions are always invoked, no matter how spurious; therefore our role is to critique these positions”.

### 2.04.3 reasserting government's policy development role

One minister we met suggested that bilaterals, multilaterals and external universities often have more information about the situation in his country than he himself has access to.

It seems that there is latent conflict between different stakeholders for control of policy development agendas. In particular, as noted from within a policy institute, government attempts to gain greater control over the research agenda, to “*reclaim its mandate over policy development*”, appear to be a common trend in the three countries we visited. One Minister bemoaned the fact that “*Unfortunately the research is not all generated within the Ministry ... most of the research is engineered and driven by donors who pay for it*”, explaining how, “*At the beginning I didn't see the relevance of a lot of the research that was taking place but now we have more control over it ... we had to move away from what the donors were demanding and put forward our own ideas*”.

Many felt that outsourcing research to external consultants had proved to be problematic; one analyst from a policy unit described the problem: “*officials aren't in control; externals are not fully engaged in the project, therefore the government doesn't get what it wants*”. Similarly, but from a different perspective, a representative from a research institute indicated how “*There used to be a lot of input from externals to government – NGOs, academics, international consultants – now we're moving away from that. We used to formulate policy, now we're being asked to evaluate implementation*”

### 2.04.4 government heterogeneity

*“Research provides information – but the balance of political forces counts more”.*

Thus, for research to be influential, as indicated by a member of an interventionist policy unit, those who promote its findings must “*seek to identify and work with the people who initiate the motivation for change*”. Government is never monolithic. There are invariably significant areas of innovation. This truism has dimensions that are both vertical (primarily based on the nature of the relationship between local and central governments) and horizontal (based on the relative power of different ministries and the individuals and groups within them).

We identified trends, although apparently somewhat hesitant and partial, in both South Africa and Uganda towards decentralisation. Researchers have a role in the process itself: “*The research we conducted ... convinced the Ministry of Finance and central government that more funds had to become available for local governments*”.

In theory, at least, the process of decentralisation gives greater opportunity for grassroots and civil society organisations to help set priorities that relate to local conditions. As an outreach officer for an NGO network explained, “*People at the local level know the problems. No policy is perfect but now people at the local level can now use participatory research to express the will of the people and identify policies*”.

### 2.04.5 researchers as neutrals and/or advocates

*“So called value-free research is a flawed approach, mere technical number crunching ... There should be no pretence of neutrality; research should embolden and inspire social movements”.*

As this quote from a policy analyst indicates, it seems from our interviews that more civil society organisations are beginning to question their role: as service deliverers are NGOs effecting meaningful change, or do they need to move away from delivery mode towards addressing wider socio-political issues? This is part of a wider trend towards seeing sustainable change as being achieved through a set of parallel processes, including policy influence.

One interviewee from an NGO described this trend: *“Many civil society organisations now are integrating development research into their work because providing services will not solve the problems at the end of the day ... besides government has become complacent”*. Some would say that civil society has become complacent too. The NGO ethos of neutrality, moderation and constructive engagement was dismissed as being such that, as one NGO network coordinator noted, *“They say ‘round here that NGO stands for Next Government Official”*.

One interviewee posited two typologies of research: *“One, incremental research that identifies attractive outcomes, for example by emphasising value for money options; and two, oppositional research, where you are pressurising government to do better”*. One NGO assessment of the researchers’ role supported the latter approach, based on the analysis that *“Neo-liberalism needs a counterweight otherwise there are no political costs to the broadly conservative model where the poor are ignored”*.

All research is of course susceptible to subjective bias, but there are concerns about the move away from the model aspiration to conduct research that is politically disengaged and “objective”. The sensitivities were expressed by an interviewee from a donor agency: *“Policy advocacy is seen as distinct from normal research activities and there is a tension between research and advocacy ... [although we] support some organisations which have a strong advocacy element there is some unease over this - is objective research compatible with advocacy?”*

## 2.05 geo-political contexts

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Unanimously, researchers are most interested in country specific information. Thus, a common refrain we heard was that *“We will look at multiple sources, but we’re particularly interested in locally-relevant information”*.

A reliance on international research arises partly as an aspect of resource constraints. A researcher noted how, *“Funding is not adequate to study a problem first hand, therefore a literature review becomes important to supplement primary research”*. Another relevant factor is that, paradoxically, topical external research can be easier to source quickly: *“It is important that the information is accessible and relevant as sometimes we have urgent need for specific information that we can not get hold of”*.

But overall it was generally perceived as being valid and important in itself to make comparisons with best practice or experiences in other countries. *“I always look at international research - political/economic globalisation makes it relevant. Our challenge is to consider how international models fit with our own reality. Obviously each country has specific pre-conditions; hence the need to consider how things are different and therefore what are the relevant aspects”*. It’s likely that this may be particularly true in some areas (e.g. privatisation) but it was a view that was expressed widely.

Indeed, comparative study sometimes provides crucial background information. A journalist described how, *“There was a problem of vendors on the street. The management of the city is trying to get people off the streets – it’s not the right way to go about it. So we researched vendors in other countries, went to the library to look at the situation in Nairobi, Johannesburg, London and Paris. We came across a comparative study online from the Netherlands that compared policy towards vendors in four cities carried out by a social development institute. Very useful”*.

But the relevance to developing world context can be questionable. According to a community paediatrician, *“It might be based on evidence, but the minute you translate the finding to the developing world you hit basic snags”*.

Two conflicting trends were described to us by those with contrasting viewpoints (both interviewees worked for policy institutes). One view was that social, political economic and technological globalisation make it increasingly important to look more globally. *“International research is increasingly important, as theory influences practice and practice influences theory, countries’ historical specificity is waning”*. In disagreement, some identified *“a new focus on indigenous research ... Imported solutions just aren’t working; very real difficulties in implementation have emerged”*.

In India in particular, but to a lesser extent in both South Africa and Uganda, there appeared to be some scepticism about Western research. According to a DFID advisor, “*We source other research but often come up against the issue that India wants to have everything researched in India, even clinical drug trials ... if it's been done in India that's the gold standard - 'if Tamil Nadu's done it we want to do it'*”.

One representative from an international funding agency expressed the opinion that, “*There's an element of Indian nationalism which inevitably militates against sources of exclusively UK-funded research*”. This then can be an explicitly political response, sometimes even an expedient one. Hence the perspective, from within an International NGO, that, “*There is a great suspicion of 'western agendas' in research from non-indigenous groups ... Plus the international tag can be a convenient excuse for politicians to dismiss international research they don't like*”. Such that “*in practice it may not even be desirable to reveal the impact of UK-funded research because this is politically counter-productive - people may be uncomfortable that Indian government policy is being made on the basis of UK-funded research*”.

Obviously, these comments, like all the comments made in our interviews, are influenced by subjective political perspectives. In any case, there are a number of variable factors at play here, including, for example, the specific nature of the research and the methodologies deployed. An international observer suggested that, “*British research can only have a very limited impact on policy in India because not much UK-funded research is focussed on India or has policy implications ... what distinguishes [relevant British researchers] is that they tend to work closely with Indian partners*”.

## PART 3 FROM RESEARCH TO POLICY AND PRACTICE

### 3.01 research relevance

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#### 3.01.1 reflecting reality

As well as operating in a political context, research also abides within specific social and economic realities. And yet, according to one employee from a national NGO, *“too much research focuses on issues that only really affect small numbers of people”*.

This presents a challenge to researchers from the start. The first requirement in the route from research to practice is at the commissioning stage. As an interviewee from a policy institute made clear, the key is to *“Make research relevant. There must be a value in the service”*. Yet it seems that much research falls at this first hurdle. In particular – but not exclusively – as noted by a lobbyist in South Africa, *“academic research is very removed from the reality of most people”*. The academic ivory tower is apparently such that, according to a programme officer from an NGO network, *“Academics are often isolated from reality, they deal in ideal situations which do not exist”*.

Nathan Caplan<sup>5</sup> hypothesised the “two communities model” to explain the under-utilisation of research as a function of the different values, language, reward systems and affiliations of social scientists and policy makers. The above analysis indicates that sometimes there seem to be three unconnected communities – with real people stuck in the middle.

#### 3.01.2 interface with the policy environment

And yet, as the range of quotes highlighted in this report perhaps shows, Caplan’s demarcation of communities does not seem to apply so strictly, or so clearly, within the Southern context. No obvious dichotomy emerged between the attitudes offered by those at one end of the research-to-policy dynamic from those at the other. Across the spectrum of opinion, there was generally a practical sense that maximising the interface was important to good policy making.

Thus, indigenous researchers tend to have more fluid relationships with those further up the policy chain than Caplan’s model indicates. This seems to be due to the existence of extended policy communities, within which the quality and extent of interactions between different players in-country are higher than those that Northern-based researchers would find it easy to achieve.

Thus, the recognition amongst researchers in the South that research must be relevant is (according to our findings) prevalent. As enumerated by an interviewee from a policy unit, *“Effective research is about the political moment. Identifying issues with resonance”*.

Many researchers we talked to were clearly anxious to take more practical steps to ensure that research would prove policy-relevant, for example, by discussing with the relevant ministry any mooted research projects. Others’ strategy involved influencing policy by piloting ideas at the local level.

But this user-focused approach to developing research agendas is not always apparent. One Minister described how, *“my main problem with research is information management - there used to be too little, now there is too much. But paradoxically even though there is a lot of information there is still a lack of information to assist with immediate decision making. What we have in our files is not always*

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<sup>5</sup> cited in Neilson (2001)

*relevant to the questions we are asking. Now I must commission more research that is directly relevant to the problem I'm trying to formulate policy on".*

One interviewee from a research and policy institute described how, *"Success depends on reading the policy environment correctly. Policy makers would never proactively search out research. They would identify an issue and then get consultants to look for what's available"*. Once again, however, the charge was levelled against academics that *"University researchers almost never think about policy matters"*.

### 3.01.3 research methodology

Types of research of course frame their own usefulness, for example, *"research informing policy is generally more formative; that required to inform planning and practice is more operational"*. Methodologies deployed must also reflect political realities. In this respect, the research process is as important as the final product, as one academic noted, *"unless you've been transparent and consultative, you won't get anywhere"*.

## 3.02 research dissemination

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As revealed through the interviews, the means of dissemination tended to be commonly deployed; and broadly fall into five categories:

- dissemination through policy networks
- producing policy briefs to share findings with policy-makers
- media promotion, press conferences
- conferences, workshops and other specially organised dissemination symposia
- publication, working papers and journal articles

And yet whether research is being shared quite as effectively as some suggested is open to significant doubt. As a former academic, now involved in health service delivery asserted, *"The percentage of literature that gets into some form of media is very low. Extra effort is needed to translate research into papers, conferences, etc"*.

Even when this extra effort to diffuse information is made (and it is apparently made only rarely) it is in itself insufficient. According to one health expert, *"Publication is not enough. Someone writes an excellent paper and thinks that the act of publishing will mean that something happens. Dissemination is critical"*.

It would seem that insufficient attention is given to research dissemination. The view from one research institute was that, *"Lots of academics are doing interesting stuff, but using obscure publications to talk about it"*. A typical process was described as follows: *"Policy isn't normally considered during the research proposal stage. The typical output would then be a book or a report, which the researchers hope might be read in policy circles. Occasionally workshops may be planned specifically geared towards the needs of bureaucrats and policymakers ... But these tend to be the exception rather than the rule"*.

The bottom line is that, as described from within an international donor agency, *"there are few if any institutions currently publishing any kind of tailored product for people concerned with public policy"*. In other words, some of the basic questions about how to communicate information are simply not being asked. (Or if they are being asked, they are not being capably answered.) This seems to be a cultural problem for some researchers, as well as an issue of capacity (time, resources and skills). Some described the process of trying to encourage research organisations to be more proactive and imaginative about dissemination to policymakers to be a *"dispiriting and extremely difficult"* one.

Not surprisingly, there were mixed views about policy makers' receptiveness to research. One view from a senior civil servant was that *"Politicians do not see any requirement for them to listen to researchers"*. This lack of interest tended to pervade ministries where, for example, *"the post for Economic Advisor in the Ministry ... was actually occupied by an engineer, not an economist"*. The

alternative view, emanating in this case from a research institute suggested that quality research is precisely the kind of information that policy makers are susceptible to - *“By and large [policy makers are] receptive to research rigour. But more thought is needed about how research results are presented”*.

Either way, researchers are not always making it easy. Policy makers are having to be proactive in seeking out information, instead of having it presented in user-friendly formats and relevant forums: *“you have to really search for the information you need”*. This, of course, runs counter to the information needs of ministers and officials. *“[Research findings] need to be summarised and translated into something [policy makers] can do – this is a vital stage of the research process: which piece of legislation does it relate to; which department is responsible; where should the budget come from?”*

In producing reports for policy makers, one interviewee from a policy centre applied a more succinct criterion: *“Can it be read on a one hour plane flight?”*

### 3.03 researching the politics of research

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#### 3.03.1 how government works

As one interviewee from a policy institute indicated, *“Policy is political, not academic. If you forget that, it can be frustrating to see the absence of a link between research and policy”*.

One state official suggested that, in relation to the extent that research influences policy, *“[Whilst] there is a shortage of relevant research, the main problem is that the interface between researchers and policy-makers is not correct. Research is needed on this area itself”*. Key to this is a better understanding of the interface between researchers and policy makers. *“Researchers should be interested in how government works”*.

Thus, for example, talking about one issue where there was current political pressure against a position being advanced by a particular policy institute, the Director took the view that, *“Micro-studies won’t have impact. We need to approach the issue on two levels. We need to do the research. And we need to research the politics of research – what is the potential impact, who are the audiences, the agents of change, the interest groups ...?”*

Governments are not monolithic. Research may strengthen the relative position of one camp at the expense of another. The duty of the researcher, according to one policy analyst, is to *“Figure out who has a voice, interest. Find out who’s open to persuasion. Get heard in the right corners”*.

Building trust and establishing working personal relationships are essential components of this approach. As a representative from an international donor agency suggested, *“Getting research lessons to policymakers is a theoretical priority but in practice is very challenging to achieve. It often depends on personal relationships with decision-makers ... the opportunities for influence may be limited and also ad hoc – it’s difficult to be systematic in this context”*.

Or, as another interviewee, this time from a research centre, described it, *“At international conferences I am often told that there is a problem in other countries, but in Uganda links with policy makers are excellent. It probably helps that I went to school with some of the key policy makers!”*

Even policy researchers willing to engage may find it more efficacious to deploy intermediaries, both to bolster the argument and to deflect adverse reaction *“governments are always sensitive to criticism, therefore we look for proxy critics, such as MPs”*. There are capacity questions too that researchers need to consider, both in terms of time commitment and in relation to the skills that they have, or may not have. As one commentator from a funding body noted, *“It’s a long-term process and researchers may not be the best people to carry out dissemination”*.

One significant development in the interface between government and those seeking to exert influence is the internet. A member of an Indian think tank described how, *“Before, the bureaucrats could hide away and not justify where their information came from. Now information is much more accessible and different organisations and even the public can challenge Government positions. Government departments are increasingly keen to have dialogue and to share and discuss research. The web will help policy formulation as everyone will be better informed. Bureaucracies are no longer the gatekeepers of information and research”*.

### 3.03.2 willingness to engage flexibly

One challenge for policy institutes – and others - is that, *“The policy process is politicised. Quick. There is always pressure to deliver, no time to think through options, or even identify them”*.

All kinds of problems with timing were evinced, about how timescales of research and policy making fit, or do not fit *“by the time the working group report was written, the main report was already out”*. This seems partly due to a cultural clash, a reflection of Caplan’s “two communities” model within which, according to an intermediary in the process, *“researchers want perfection, policy makers simply want something credible”*.

But it is the researchers who must adapt. *“The policy process follows a certain timeframe – the research process has to follow the same timeframe; deadlines may shift, researchers have to be prepared to work flexibly”*. In other words, researchers engaging in the process will sometimes need to be agile and opportunistic. One DFID health advisor described how, *“Recently [a company] had come up with a computer programme to demonstrate to the Minister of Health that aerial spraying was the best way to eradicate malaria. So of course there was a scurry of activity behind the scenes and we managed to come up with a one page summary of the evidence about the ineffectiveness of aerial spraying as opposed to more effective methods. We needed the research really quickly”*.

### 3.03.3 the impact-peer review trade off

*“Researchers face conflict between the need to publish academically and the importance of community impact”*.

In the face of this conflict, more strident comments suggested that researchers, in general, were failing to fulfil a moral-political imperative; one interviewee engaged in policy influencing suggested that, *“Researchers are irresponsible at translating and packaging their findings”*. Some starkly suggested a negative correlation: *“if you want to influence policy, writing for peer-reviewed journals and attending international conferences can’t be your main focus”*.

## 3.04 implementation

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### 3.04.1 problems at implementation

A health professional working at community level indicated that, *“Very little research gets translated into action, even on issues that are international in scope ... There are effectively two big problems*

1. *transmitting the information to end users*
2. *the end users actually acting on the information”*

And, notwithstanding the caveats introduced in Section 2.03, according to the same source, normally *“the problem isn’t political will. It’s the capacity to implement change. Any new initiative is just a problem. Capacity to change the system is very limited”*.



One research institute that we visited has been investigating the gap between policy and practice; problems they identified included the following:

- an excessive ambition of vision than does not fit with actual capacity
- an inability to understand constraints, even straightforward ones such as budgets and costs
- a failure to prioritise
- an inability to take political risk into account
- a lack of accumulated experience
- a gap between what the policy elite think is going on and what is actually going on,
- policy being produced, by people who have no experience of the government machine
- political style and culture
- structural factors obstructing the participation of poor people
- failure to get buy-in from practitioners, to the extent that *“sometimes enacted policy constitutes a bizarre misunderstanding of how human beings actually operate”*.

In many cases, these problems are exacerbated at local levels of governance: *“The ability and capacity to formulate policy is not there. The provinces don’t always follow up framework [national] legislation, because the required technical and legal skills often don’t exist”*

In South Africa, for example, local governments are required to produce Integrated Development Plans – and central government legally should provide the resources to enable this. But one policy analyst outlined the hurdles at which failure can occur: *“Some simply don’t have the means to produce any kind of plan. Some don’t follow the process. Some follow the process but don’t end up with coherent strategic plans at the end of it. Some produce plans but then don’t implement them, or only haphazardly”*.

Meanwhile, central government does not have the capacity to monitor progress at the local level. This is indicative of the further lacunas that emerge at the monitoring stage. An advocacy officer, based in Uganda, working for an International NGO, conceded that, *“We rewrite policy papers with government and feel good that we have influenced policy but afterwards there is no way of keeping track...”*.

### 3.04.2 researchers must act on their findings!

Whilst social change theory is used to decipher the policy making process, when policy reaches the stage of implementation (or non-implementation), it’s arguably organisational change theory that becomes a more relevant paradigm. Often the balance of forces at implementation pivots on how change processes occur within bureaucracies, many of which may be operating within an authoritarian norm.

The researcher we interviewed who (somewhat reluctantly) had concluded that *“researchers must act on their findings”* was questioning the validity of researchers relying on intermediaries to deliver actual change. At the very least, it was vital for researchers to open up the channels more; to communicate with policy makers and the media, and, critically, to engage with the “street level bureaucrats” responsible for implementing research-based policy recommendations.

The argument here is that researchers who understand and are able to interpret policy and implementation contexts are more likely to produce recommendations that are meaningful and susceptible to being implemented without distortion.

In addition, leaving responsibility for policy implementation in the hands of authorities who are already overburdened and are unlikely to regard the new initiative as a high priority could be construed as an abnegation of ultimate responsibility. Arguably, in this situation, the role of researchers extends to providing practical training and capacity building to help administrations cope with change or at the very least engage with people or organisations who are willing to take on this role on their behalf.

## 3.05 tracing research routes

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In terms of the influencing channels through which research flows, we came across what seemed to be reasonably clearly demarcated generic routes. These were typically mutually exclusive within a single organisation, although across networks and broader influencing coalitions, it is likely to be desirable that different approaches act in ways that are complementary and reinforcing.

Advocates of different approaches advanced what were apparently contradictory arguments for taking one approach over any other, but our overall impression was that each can be equally well argued as valid route to take.

### 3.05.1 academic

The academic route provides two parallel, indirect, medium-term routes of influence. As well as the osmotic influence of academic research, lecturers in certain disciplines are additionally addressing audiences of students who, as one part time lecturer in South Africa suggested, “*typically go into government*”.

We got some sense that academics tended to be more regular consumers of id21 than users from other disciplines. But across academia, it was suggested, there was both reluctance and resistance to introducing the findings from new research to students. The opinion of one health professor was that, “*Academics must be plugged into recent developments, but it tends not to happen; people give the same lecture for 10 years*”.

For him, it boils down to cost-benefit practicalities: “*The key issue is to get students to embrace new thinking. But if it’s not going to be part of the examination, they’re not interested*”.

### 3.05.2 insider influencing

“*There is little point producing research without dialogue ... Engaging with the policy process is vital*”.

Insider organisations proffer the most direct, if not always the most visible, route of influencing. They tended to have developed sophisticated schemes of intervention throughout the evolution of a research project, from pre-research (understand the political interests involved, seeking to get buy-in), through the conduct of the research, and beyond, sharing and promoting results to different diverse stakeholder audiences. Those seeking to work with the executive, typically engaged with the legislature too, despite problems revealed by a parliamentary researcher that “[*parliamentary*] committees may simply rubber-stamp something that’s come down from cabinet”. Timing is a fine concern too: “*by the time legislation gets to Portfolio Committee, negotiations within parties have already been conducted; stakeholders try and influence policy too late*”.

The feat of effective insiders is to avoid being trapped by the closeness of relations to government. An interviewee from one policy unit in South Africa indicated that, “*We operate as trusted insiders and critical outsiders simultaneously ... It’s a good place to be*”

### 3.05.3 influencing the policy debate

“*Research can change the terms of debate, through presentations, through media work, and various other forums where people in power are present or get to hear about it*”.

We interviewed representatives from organisations that are rarely involved directly in policy influencing, instead preferring to operate in the public domain, inviting new thinking on policy questions and seeking to generate discussion and affect the terms of debate. These organisations tended to be strongly networked, dedicated to promoting innovative thinking, and willing to embrace

and assimilate diverse inputs. Their emphasis was on the long-term, cumulative nature of the influence of ideas.

### 3.05.4 community organisation

*“Researchers should work in partnership with civil society organisations: building capacity and contributing to the discourse”.*

In contrast to those working with and through policy élites, the rationale of community organisations is to be *“connected with the people, close to the grassroots, able to articulate the voice of the poor ... we keep [government] in touch with reality”*. Roles adopted included *“acting as catalysts, asking questions, raising awareness, challenging thinking and acting as mediators ... we’re there to add the strategic input, to link the researchers to the community groups”*. This holistic, participative approach is fundamental to the process: *“Community organisers who want beneficial change must work with people – some researchers are averse to that”*.

Because of the value that community organisations place on local context, they tended to be least interested (although not wholly uninterested) in secondary international research literature.

### 3.05.5 media, public opinion and action

*“The target audience for dissemination is not the bureaucracy ... Instead the target is the general media ... because where good or bad practice and policy-making is reported in the press, the public awareness puts pressure on the bureaucracy to eliminate bad policy and replicate examples of good policy”.*

The rationale for this approach is simple: *“a lot of policy makers read the papers and then act ... journalists are the voice of society”*. Thus, media communicators’ role is to use research findings *“as the basis of a mass media campaign whose purpose is to raise public awareness and generate debate on the issues so as to: provide information ... persuade ... [and] put pressure on the government to introduce policy changes”*.

Sometimes research is recognised as fulfilling a need and findings are adopted by policy makers, but if there is resistance to the findings, civil society must articulate the need for change: *“Research provides the technical power, but often the technical side is not strong enough ... the NGOs provide the voice”*.

## PART 4 id21's METHODOLOGY & CONTRIBUTION

In this context it is necessary to examine whether the chosen methodologies of id21 have the potential to enable research to impact on policy. Two basic questions need to be answered.

1. Does the combination of website and printed distribution have the potential to reach (or is it already reaching) those who have an influence on policy
2. Is the selection criteria and the presentation of the research providing the necessary information to influence policy

### 4.01 mapping the effects of the internet

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#### 4.01.1 access and connectivity

*“If you're urban or peri-urban, the internet will have changed your life completely”.* But many rural based NGOs, for example - along with a third of the world's population - may have no access to electricity and therefore no internet access. Ensuring consistency of electricity supply has additional costs, for example the purchase of a generator. Rural access is improving, but slowly. It's still broadly true that *“NGOs in towns and cities are probably well connected via the web but in rural areas they are not”.*

In any case, it's easy to fall into the trap of overstating the scale and speed of change: the context is that only 0.4 percent of people in sub-Saharan Africa and South Asia are internet users, contrasting sharply with user figures in the US and Western Europe. The audiences we are describing in this report are primarily policy activists and political élites.

For those without direct internet access, internet cafes provide an alternative, but an expensive and time-pressured one. Even where there is access, organisations may experience poor connectivity and high phone charges. Time restrictions on access often apply. Slow speeds are costly in both time and money and can mean that using the web for research is ultimately a frustrating and inefficient use of time. One chief executive complained that, *“downloading research documents can take up to 30 minutes”*, time he simply didn't have.

Access is not just about connectivity or technological restraints. There are also cultural, social, political and economic barriers. A significant barrier is the level of literacy and choice of language. Even in so-called English speaking countries, only a minority may speak English as a first language. There is a gender dimension, too: internet users are predominantly male and internet-based dissemination can act as a barrier for women who do not have access or relevant ICT skills. However, for the disabled, who are often excluded from traditional methods of information exchange, the internet can be a liberating experience according to a UK based Senior Research Fellow.

#### 4.01.2 resources and skills capacity

Organisations face both technical and financial constraints (lack of both ICT skills and resources). It was not uncommon for us to hear from an organisation that they had only one computer, used by the administrator. Problems of limited access are compounded by a lack of knowledge about how best to use the Internet, when opportunities do arise. Some of the barriers to using the Internet are therefore training issues.

No doubt partly driven by the plethora of associated problems, there is a cultural dimension to take into account. In the opinion of a coordinator of a community development network, *“No deliberate attempt*

has been made to make internet research a culture of our organisation [or other organisations in Uganda] ... the internet is not yet seen as a potentially rich source of learning”.

### 4.01.3 sectoral variation

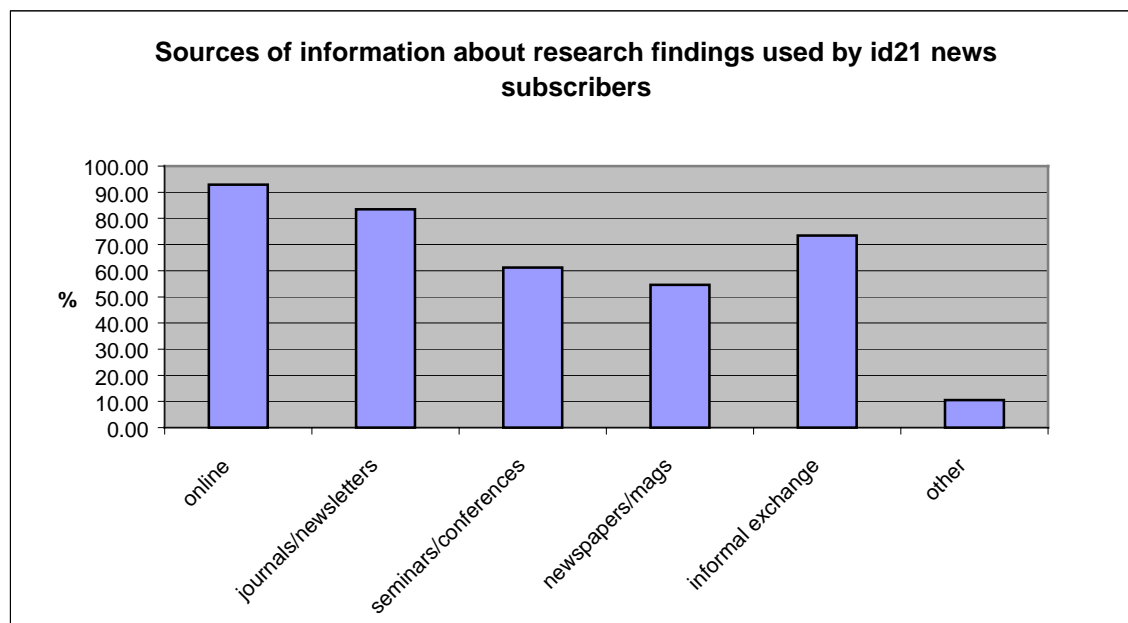
For most academics we met, connectivity at university is excellent but, in South Africa for example, it was suggested that, “outside the top 2 or 3 universities, they don’t even have landline telephones”.

It seems that civil society access is typically much more advanced than government, where Central Government Departments are only now beginning to come on line. Most local governments do not have internet access; some individuals in local governments might have access but not the local authority itself.

Typically, whatever the sector, if you want to reach beyond the organisation and below leadership levels, “you have to go and talk to people face-to-face or produce printed publications”.

### 4.01.4 how information and research is sourced

“Information comes from 2 main sources. (1) The grapevine - you ask someone who is more knowledgeable and they point you in the right direction. (2) The internet”. As the Executive Secretary of a Ugandan information exchange network put it.



Our sense, albeit anecdotal, from the interviews is that the above data downplay the relative importance of networking (reflecting an inherent bias in the sample). “There are a lot of people in Uganda who are experts in various fields and they can always be relied upon to come up with information”. Typically, then, “Most research is accessed through word of mouth ... Reports are shared among us”. Within academic and civil society networks, this diffusion might now more accurately be called “word of email” –information, updates and papers now typically being distributed electronically.

This view was confirmed by some responses to the id21 survey of researchers who have had research posted on the id21 site: “busy people rarely search out information. You have to deliver it face-to-face”.

In terms of internet usage amongst those who have reasonable quality access, it’s possible to discern three groups. A group who rarely, if ever, use the web; perhaps the largest group, who use a narrow

collection of sites on the web; and a minority who find the time to surf proactively (through searches and meandering through links) on a semi-regular basis.

For some early adopters the internet had revolutionary properties - *“the internet signals a fundamental change in the nature of the relationship between researchers and information”*. Others simply lacked the time and the capacity and the interest to be part of this vanguard.

#### 4.01.5 information management issues

*“Without the Internet the job was more difficult but also easier as you could live in your cocoon. Work used to end when you left the office - now you can access from home and carry on into the night. There is information overload”*.

Many confessed to be *“completely overwhelmed by the volume of available information”*. Not untypical was the interviewee who had *“about 50 reports on my desk waiting to be read ... I never find the time to read them ... normally I end up taking one home to read the night before a meeting”*. Similarly, although someone may subscribe, with the best intentions, to email digests, *“in practice I usually delete them without reading them because of lack of time”*. Hence the paradoxical problem with the internet that *“searches tend to be too fruitful”* although, of course, this is partly down to the fact that *“you get so much useless stuff when you do searches”*.

### 4.02 aspects of quality in web-based research dissemination

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There were some substantially consistent views - from individuals across all disciplines and operating at different places within the research to policy dynamic - about what makes for a good quality web-based research dissemination service. The following criteria were said to be paramount.

#### 4.02.1 accessibility

A good research-dissemination website is easy to use, quick to download, with few graphics. Text only options were specifically appreciated. Users looked for clear and meaningful categorisation and a straightforward, well-laid-out search facility. Sites were unpopular if they were *“too voluminous, too many links, too onerous”*.

Links were vital and they must be quick - *“I don’t want trying them out to turn into a major commitment”*. Access to primary documentation was considered vital too. Some felt it useful to be able to make contact with the researchers, others contended that it was essential.

#### 4.02.2 language and presentation

*“Let the language be simple - let the message be understandable. That is a challenge researchers have - to make it appeal to a wider audience, rather than just a few. . . I wish that research was written in a simple language, useable by as many people as possible”*.

Aspects of user-friendliness included the language and presentation of individual research pieces, as well as the site packaging -i.e. *“you need to be able to source what you need”*.

Demands for simple language were pretty much unanimous. *“Language needs to be accessible to non-experts - should not be full of jargon or be too intellectually heavy. A lot of academic papers are extremely difficult reading - even for experts like me”*. Self-evidently, as noted by a government official, *“[researchers] who have the most influence on the bureaucrats are those who can write in the most accessible and least academic style”*.

### 4.02.3 trusted source

For some the plethora of websites means that it is “*difficult to balance the credible stuff and the nutcases*”; quality concerns may mean that they attempt to guarantee credibility through accessing academic or peer reviewed research. For others, “*trust doesn’t come into it – I just want somewhere to find stuff*”. Most felt equipped to make their own judgements about the quality of research represented in terms of its rigour and methodology. It is also important that information is up to date, timely, not static. Topicality is key.

The authority of a particular website comes from “*range, references, reliability, recognition*”, from building a track record over time. Generally, impartiality is looked for – “*we prefer this one, it’s really balanced. You don’t feel you are being pushed, people haven’t selected things to push you in a particular direction*”.

Not everyone, of course, is seeking purely objective research, even assuming such a thing exists, and some suggest that “*all the good alternative thinking comes from NGOs*”. But users are seeking if not balance, then at least transparency, “*you have to know what the political agendas are*”.

### 4.02.4 edited data

For the vast majority, summaries are “*very very attractive*”; for obvious reasons of time economy. It was suggested that good summaries include

1. a précis of the key arguments,
2. a reference to methodology,
3. some interpretation i.e. why should someone read it; and
4. a presentation of the context

A vital concomitant of summary provision is that full documents should be available. This is because summaries can by their nature be problematic, because they are interpretative and because of what they necessarily leave out: “*it’s important to have access to full research reports in order to determine the validity of the underlying methodologies*”

Another key factor is that access to researchers is important for research users: “*I was writing a piece on the decision of the Ugandan government to license vendors ...I emailed one of the researchers I had come across and they responded .... In this case, I directed a very specific question and got an answer that was relevant to the article*”. Most found pre-selection of sources helpful too, but “*prioritisation on the basis of quality control, not ideological position*” was favoured. Ideally, people want “*to go to one place to see competing ideas*”.

What interviewees tended to want to have was information provided through connected tiers of detail:

1. email alerts to give a sense of what is current and what is available;
2. research summaries;
3. access to full documents;
4. opportunities for further investigation, through links and portals

### 4.02.5 printed materials

We met some whose preferred mode of communication was electronic, others who preferred print media.

Advocates for the latter indicated the following advantages:

- it is easier (in some ways) to disseminate
- the layout makes it easier to read
- reading printed material is less diverting and distracting than using the internet
- it is interactive, in that you can take it on the bus with you and access it at times that suit the reader

Whilst this finding is obviously not in itself surprising or new, it does have implications for web-based disseminators, i.e. that if they focus exclusively on electronic dissemination, they sacrifice a key target audience (and not just comprising those who have no or limited internet access). In this respect, it's worth noting the results of the id21 surveys with id21 news subscribers (Internet based) and Insights (printed) users. Again, the response is not surprising as it reflects the user types:

### Information sources preferred<sup>7</sup>

	by id21 news subscribers	Insights users' preference	Africa Insights users' preferences	EU Insights users' preference
prefer online	63%	23%	18%	33%
prefer printed	31%	77%	82%	67%
unsure	6%			

## 4.03 some overall responses to id21's service

The findings outlined in the previous section should be read as an encouragement to id21. To a high degree, the service that id21 offers corresponds to the kinds of things that people are ideally looking for.

What is more, those who actually use id21 are equivalently complementary. One interviewee remarked, *"I would be devastated if id21 closed down ... it's like an instant library on the web ... The id21 format is good, it's updated regularly ... everything is good about it"*. Another interviewee said that they were *"eternally grateful"* to id21, yet another expressed the view that id21 is *"incredibly useful"*. A researcher who responded to the id21 survey was similarly impressed: *"id21 is excellent; short and succinct, easy to read, easy to access, a good network"*. Another stated: *"id21 in all its forms is an excellent service and has provided a model for other dissemination activities (e.g. the 300 word summaries)"*.

What is perhaps equally encouraging for id21 - in terms of the product if not the marketing, - is that those who were introduced to id21 through the interviews were also almost all positive about the site as well. *"When id21 contacted me I checked the id21 site and found a lot of interesting things and I appreciate the fact that they are summarised as that makes the job quite easy. Having done that I downloaded quite a number of documents ..."* although there is a sting in this particular tale: *"... there they are, all waiting for some time to read them!"*

The following assessments of id21 were made:

- the summaries were widely praised, although there was one comment that, *"we would have picked out different points to include in the summary ... because the summaries are aimed at a global audience ... we would find more local-specific information useful on a practical level"*.
- *"the newsy feel"* was liked (although some felt the service could be more timely, for example by tying the release of research into specific external hooks or topical debates).
- people valued the accessibility of language and style: *"the language is familiar, simple and non-academic"*; although one or two interviewees suggested that yet more de-mystifying could usefully be attempted.
- the packaging was described as *"very good, brief and accessible"*.
- the range of issues covered was commended too - *"stuff like this is actually what we need"*.
- Insights in particular was appreciated for its content, format and layout.

In the words of one unsolicited comment, *"It enables me to keep up with research in a wide range of areas and to quickly select those that are more relevant to my work. As a non-academic, I really value this service. To perform my role effectively, I need to be current with the literature, but my job does not allow much time for this. As a result, I find your service really helpful"*.

<sup>7</sup> sources: id21 news user survey; Insights user survey



## 4.04 id21 user profiles

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id21's surveys of news users, Insights subscribers and researchers have generated some quantitative data which show that the user profile of id21 is diverse both in thematic and geographic coverage.

As indicated below [see section 4.04.2], of those who indicated their location, just over half of respondents to the id21 users survey (53%) were from either the EU (37%) or North America (16%). Without wishing to disparage Northern users wholesale, it would seem appropriate that a high proportion of users from the South be some kind of measure that id21 is reaching its target audiences. Given the overwhelming preponderance of internet use in the developed world, and the location of id21 itself, we therefore regard these figures as reasonably heartening, although it is difficult to make anything other than a subjective judgement about this, without relevant comparative data. It is also worth noting that these data come from survey respondents and not subscription figures. It is probable that Northern users, with faster internet connectivity and better IT and communication equipment, were on the whole in a better position to respond to the surveys than Southern users. It is also true to say that a large proportion of id21's 'Northern' users are in fact international NGOs, and so likely to be engaged in policy formation and development practice in the South.

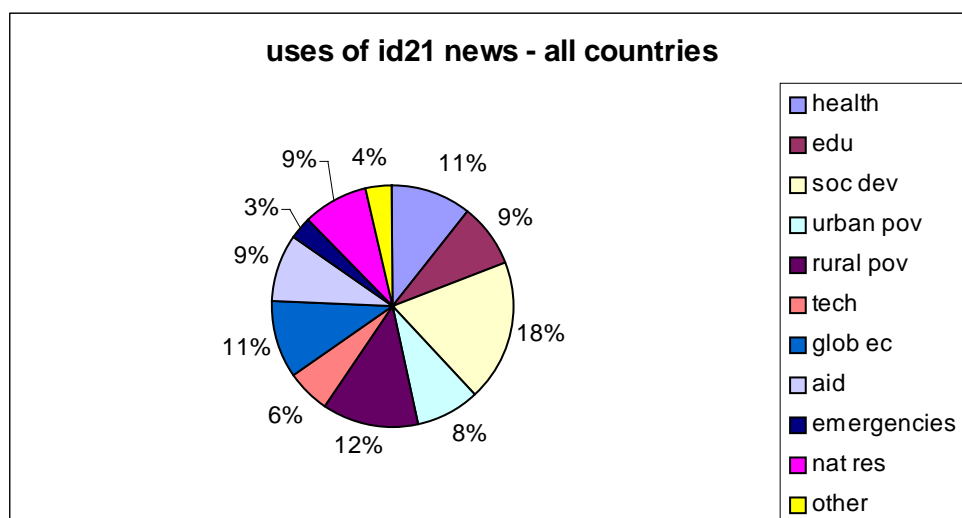
However, these figures almost exactly correspond to results from an id21-conducted survey in August 2000,<sup>8</sup> which revealed that 54% of news subscribers from Western Europe or North America (35% and 19% respectively). Some kind of "improvement" on the South-North balance might have been anticipated in the intervening two years.

Data regarding user occupations [see section 4.04.3] seem to point to a disproportionately, but not unexpectedly, high level of usage by academics, at the expense of others whose position would be more likely to be more integral to the policy making process.

Overall, though, these figures can be inferred as showing that id21 is well placed to reach into policy making processes in all fields and in all areas of the world. These quantitative data are of course, of minimal use per se in determining impact, but they may have a role in reassuring stakeholders that the potential to influence policy is there.

### 4.04.1 thematic coverage

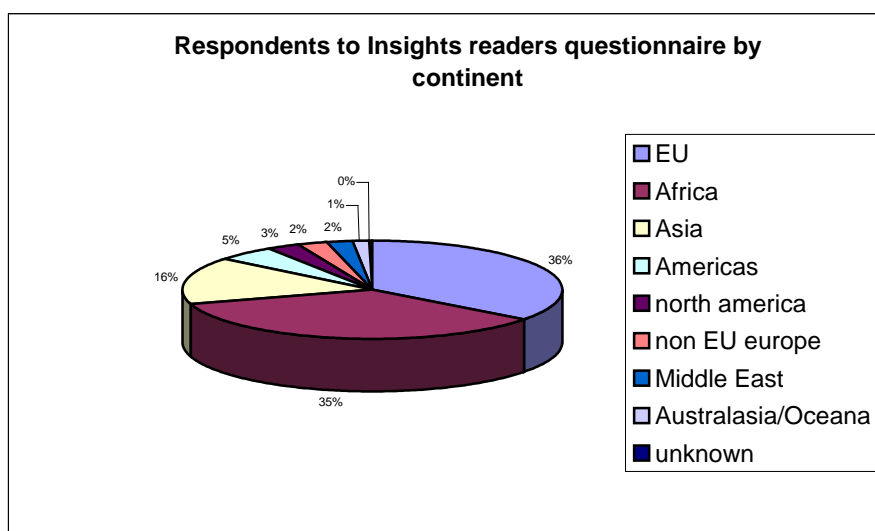
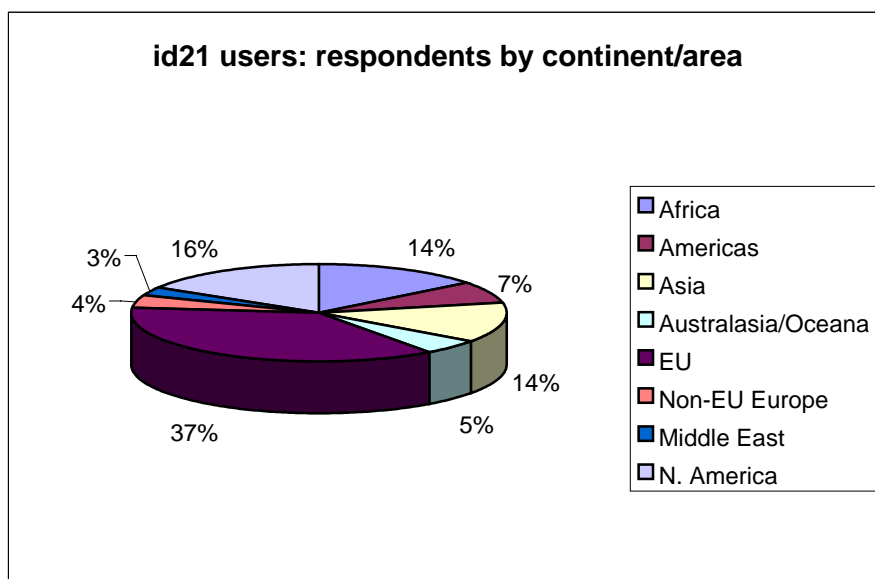
**Which of the following subjects do you use id21 to gain information on?**



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<sup>8</sup> based on 777 responses

## 4.04.2 geographic coverage

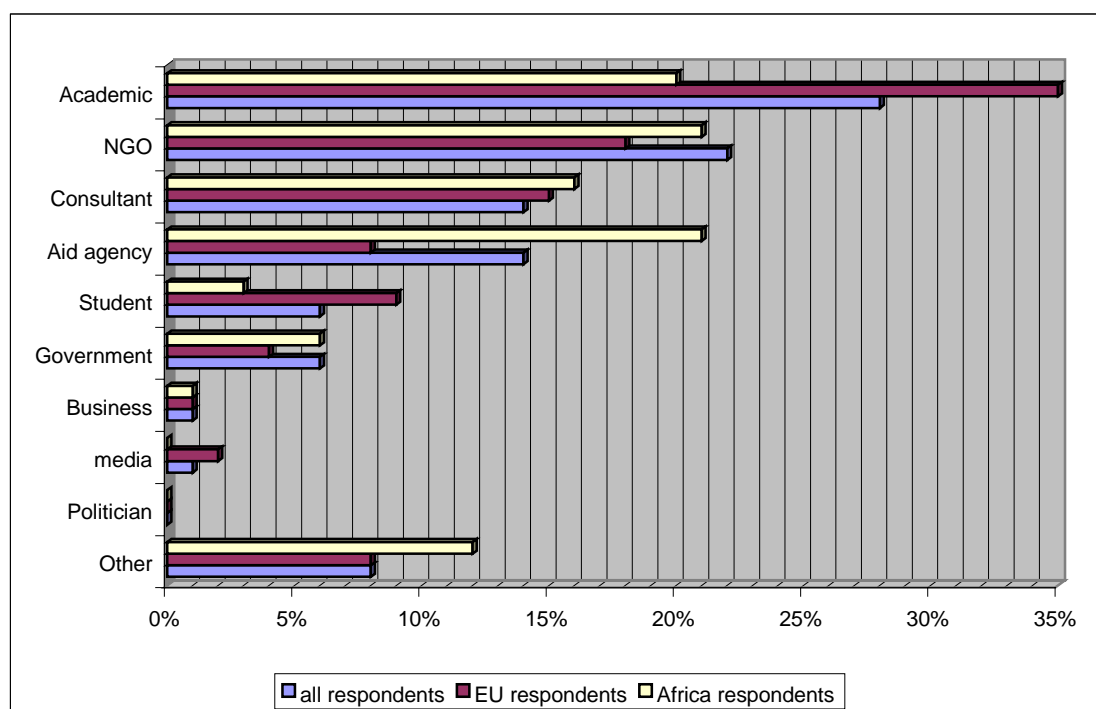


## 4.04.3 audiences

id21 identifies its target users as including:

- advisors in international or intergovernmental development agencies and donor bodies
- functionaries attached to national ministries of health, education, labour and the like
- policy reformers, campaigning private voluntary organisations and pressure groups
- financial journalists and social affairs correspondents in print and broadcast media
- field managers in non governmental rural and urban development or care agencies
- commercial developers, trade unionists, corporate lawyers and investment funds

Somewhat in contrast, id21's actual users comprise the following:<sup>9</sup>



#### 4.04.4 exploring researchers' target audiences

Of those who have had research posted on the id21 website who responded to an id21 survey, almost nine out of ten stated that policy makers and/or practitioners formed at least part of their target audience:

##### researchers citing their target audiences (% of those who specified)

policy makers/practitioners	88.5%
Academics	62.3%
NGOs	26.2%
donors	11.5%
Activists	6.6%
other	9.8%

And yet, even within this group, there seem to be some questions about the extent to which follow up on their research is perceived as a diversion, rather than an integrated part of their work.

77% of researchers said that they had been contacted by id21 users who were seeking to gain further information on their research findings. Up to two thirds of these contacts were from outside Europe and North America,<sup>10</sup> the majority of whom, it is reasonable to extrapolate, were not academics [see above section for a breakdown of users by profession] and are likely to have been somewhere further along the various chains that link researchers with policy makers.

Some researchers in the survey were positive about the results: "*id21 clearly reaches a much greater audience than research published in academic journals. Following id21 dissemination, I have had a good number of people write to ask for the full paper. The enquiries have come from academics,*

<sup>9</sup> from id21 users questionnaire

<sup>10</sup> Europe and North America accounted for 35% of contacts; a further 9% were from international organisations

research students, development practitioners and sometimes, from NGOs and journalists”. And, “it is a good thing to know people want to read what you have written before it is even published – when often no-one bothers even after”.

Yet only 54% of researchers responding to the survey felt that this interaction had produced benefit for their own work. Some even questioned the validity of dissemination at all as it “increases workload and most academics (in my experience) are vastly overworked already. Dissemination is not a clearly attractive activity any longer”. Others had not welcomed requests from students for assistance with course work.

There were some positive specific examples of dissemination helping academics make links with fellow researchers, of exchanging information, of moving towards collaboration, and of being invited to conferences – “id21 seems to be very effective in putting people in contact with one another. It ...helps to generate ideas about issues and ideas which are helpful in taking projects forward”.

In general researchers seem to recognise that id21 “has a wider audience and readership than many single print journals and is more likely to be accessed by those making and influencing policy” but there is a paucity of examples of direct impact on policy making.

#### 4.04.5 researchers' locations

Currently, featured researchers are dominantly, though not exclusively, UK-based:

##### researchers' country [source: researchers survey]

UK	49
USA	3
Brazil	2
Malawi	2
South Africa	2
Africa	1
Bangladesh	1
Germany	1
Hong Kong	1
India	1
New Zealand	1
Uganda	1
	65

We met a number of representatives from organisations overseas who felt that, “id21 would be an ideal vehicle for disseminating our own research and we don’t understand the UK funded focus. Our research is valid and unique – we would like to give it a wider audience”. In particular, it was suggested that id21 could operate as a forum for the dissemination of research on behalf organisations without existing presence on the web and to make valuable research (that is not UK funded) more accessible.

“To some extent it bothers me that it’s UK-only research. I wanted to put something on the site and could only do so because there was a UK link ... and it would have been a shame to lose id21 as an outlet as it was so relevant to so many people”.

“My research is potentially very valuable to other countries. We have recently completed a country-wide study that showed that, contrary to common opinion, anaemia does not only affect vulnerable groups like pregnant women and pre school kids, in fact 85% adolescent girls suffer from it. There are huge implications for their performance at school, home, work etc. This is something others in the world would be interested in – it is a shame that id21 only posts UK research on their site”.

Some responses to the researchers' survey indicated that they had similar difficulties with the apparently non-sensical exclusion of non-UK research.

## 4.05 id21 and impact

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### 4.05.1 problems with attribution

Obviously, interventions within the research-to-practice dynamic do not take place in isolation - from the activities of others, from the local contexts and from the macro-economic, political and informational environments in which they operate. Attributing change to the influence of specific interventions is a notoriously difficult pursuit. Within some areas – such as the medico-technical field - attribution may be easier to track, but even within apparently straightforward cases, disentangling cause and effect can be deceptively complex.

Even having accepted the theoretical notion that research influences policy, it is typically problematic to attribute changed policy thinking to **specific pieces of research**; instead, it would be more legitimate to contend that a range of research inputs feed into and help shape the thinking. As we have seen, id21's function invariably tends to be a contributory one, adding to the debate, providing context and secondary evidence, rather than acting as a sole source. One consequence of this is to make it yet harder to track and pin down evidence of direct impact.

In any case, the methodology of this evaluation is not one of pure impact assessment, we have not attempted to conduct a “*systematic analysis of the lasting or significant changes – positive or negative, intended or not – in people's lives brought about by a given action or series of actions*”.<sup>11</sup> The focus has been on garnering impressionistic data, rather than systematically seeking evidence of impact. In this pursuit, a small number of examples have surfaced that point to the roles that id21 may be said to play within the wider research-to-policy-and-practice processes.

### 4.05.2 id21 as a proxy credibility generator

We heard a number of examples where organisations had used id21 to establish a solid reputation as credible source of research information.

An organisation in Uganda, with little experience of policy work “*were called upon to do policy-related work - to engage with government, donors and other big organisations. We were at a loss as we had no expertise in policy work so we needed information on what was going on at a national and international level - we found id21 and were able to download some excellent information which we presented at a workshop. Then the Ministry of Gender came to us as they saw that we had current information (which we had only downloaded from the id21 website!) As a result of id21 the Ministry of Gender started to take us very seriously and we are now fully engaged in policy formulation*”.

Another interviewee from a national NGO described how id21 had contributed to their organisation's “*boosted image*” with ministers and officials by providing them with current research. id21 is therefore enhancing the credibility of intermediaries in the policy making process by providing the information which improves the status of organisations which do not have the experience or the capacity to commission their own research.

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<sup>11</sup> this definition is taken from Roche (99)

### 4.05.3 disseminating disseminated information

Without a systematic and dedicated commitment to follow the trail of information beyond the point at which it is acquired by id21 users, no picture of id21's overall impact would be possible. id21 users are only the primary users, some of whom routinely passed id21 information on to others.

*“When I get an alert I forward it via email to approximately eight or ten others, about five in my own organisation and five in government departments ... I get the occasional email back saying they are useful. There was research on 'Evaluating Safe Motherhood in Indonesia' and one addressing whether Nepal needs better health facilities. This is a very topical debate - whether simply building more health centres is the answer or whether it is more ingrained issues of access and choice”. Others made similar comments. “The Principle Secretary of Health in an Indian State copied me in on an email to id21 asking to be put on the list (after I had given her the initial information about id21). We send the id21 information to around 20 or 30 key counterparts in the government of India, Health Ministry and in the four partner states in India, also to the UN agencies”.*

*“I am an advisor to the Planning Commission in India (this is a very influential body that meets to decide on policy issues). The Planning Commission is a very interesting process and acts as a think-tank providing the technical expertise to the policy making it uses expert advisors from outside to do so. I am a regular user of id21 and use the summaries to send to my boss in the Planning Commission who then takes them up to Board level. I recently used summaries on Joint Forestry Management and the Role of the Voluntary Sector in Conflict Resolution (papers from Manchester and Bradford). I passed these as usual to colleagues and also onto academics in some universities”.*

Some users make bilateral contact with the researchers, even inviting them to meet ministers and officials to present and discuss their findings *“If I like the approach to an issue in a piece of research I have found on the id21 site I can invite someone from that institute (even if overseas) to meet Indian officials and hold a lecture or meeting to educate them”.*

These are some of the ways in which id21 is burrowing into the various influence routes outlined in section 3.05. Not only is the actual audience larger than the initial hits on the site, but more importantly the prospects for influence - bubbling up somewhere in the system - grow exponentially. In most cases, presumably, id21 would not know that they had been an instrument in this link up.

### 4.05.4 logical impact

From the information we have gathered, it is reasonable to infer effect beyond these limited examples, by drawing a conclusion from two premises:

1. disseminated research forms a part of the policy process (albeit one that is tricky to nail down definitively);
2. id21 deploys what could be said to be (and is widely considered to be) a legitimate dissemination methodology;
3. therefore, it's reasonable to assume that id21 is a contributory player in various relevant policy development fora

This statement of quasi-syllogistic (or virtual) impact does of course leave open questions about actual impact [see section 5.05].

## PART 5 RECOMMENDED NEXT STEPS

### 5.01 research selection criteria

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#### 5.01.1 questioning the uk-funded criterion

Section 4.04.5 makes clear that the requirement that featured research be UK-funded was widely criticised as being unnecessarily constraining.

##### recommendation

To maintain credibility with target audience and policy makers it is necessary to review the UK-funded criterion of research posted on the id21 website. id21 should develop criteria for accepting international research as this would remove a stumbling block to achieving greater impact. (It would also necessitate a change in id21's stated goal.)

#### 5.01.2 utility

Whilst we do not believe that id21 should be purely utilitarian within its research selection process, we do believe that id21 should be more consumer oriented and goal focused. In other words, greater consideration should be given to user-relevance and the potential to impact on policy. This focus will give greater value to the service, and help id21 move towards its stated goal.

##### recommendation

Within the selection process, id21 should give explicit consideration to the anticipated scale of relevance of pieces of research under consideration for inclusion. As a first step, id21 should categorise research types and then track usage of samples of research posted on the site, to enable comparisons to be made between different research categories. On the basis of evidence gathered, id21 could begin to prioritise the types of research that would most usefully be promoted through the service.

#### 5.01.3 promoting dialogue

Researchers who have their work displayed on the website should be prepared to engage with the users of the website. id21's goal is to have impact on policy and, as we have learnt, interaction with policy makers (and those who influence policy) is key to this process. It would therefore seem logical that anyone who has research posted on the site must also be committed to dialogue with users. Although, according to the survey of researchers, many found the most attractive aspect of id21 to be the lack of dissemination effort required on their part, continuing dialogue with users and policy makers is the most likely route from research to policy impact.

Many researchers stated in the survey that their use of id21 was prompted by dissemination being a requirement of DFID funding for research (id21 being one of DFID's recommended routes of research dissemination). A further condition of DFID research funding could be commitment to dialogue with users. This would further buttress the effectiveness of attempts to promote dialogue.

##### recommendation

A contract should be drawn up with researchers that would specifically require researchers to notify id21 of any contact with users. id21 would then be able to follow up selected contacts to assess how research is

being used. This should initially be done on a trial basis with selected researchers.

## 5.02 marketing

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*“the most important thing for id21 is to become more widely known”.*

We met a number of people who would have expected to come across id21 but had not. Those who used the site also indicated that *“not many people know about id21- they should publicise themselves more”*. The interviewees who were only alerted to the id21 by our visits were impressed by the service offered. Some of the researchers surveyed were also uncertain as to the numbers of people who had accessed their research through id21.

### recommendations

- develop strategies to maximise generic reach (e.g. by reviewing hyperlink system, search pick-ups, etc.);
- engage in targeted marketing by setting up a rolling project to identify key players (maybe a couple of dozen people in each field in each target country) and promote id21 to them. It may be possible to identify people or institutions who are prepared to be advocates for id21 within existing networks who would themselves be prepared to act as recruiters.

## 5.03 targeting & topicality

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It is important that the right mix of people are using the id21 service if it is to move towards its goal of disseminating research to impact on policy. At the moment there is a preponderance of academics and a distinct lack of policy makers. There is clearly a group of people who act as intermediaries in transmitting research from academics to policy makers. A vast range of those who were interviewed played such an intermediate role in transmitting research findings from academics to ministers and other key policy formers. These include NGOs (both indigenous and international), in-country staff of foreign governmental development ministries and other international bodies, civil servants, businesses, journalists and members of parliament.

It is also apparent that some pieces of research will have more resonance with policy makers at particular times than others. They will be more receptive to research recommendations which are relevant to their current concerns. The difficulty is to identify what these concerns are and to market particular pieces of research to particular audiences at a particular time. By introducing such topicality it is possible that id21 can disseminate research which has greater propensity to feed into policy making.

### recommendations

1. Refocus on key target audiences, by:
  - moving away incrementally from researchers (academics, etc.) to focus on *intermediaries* in the policy process
  - building, over time, an increased proportion of Southern users;
2. Disseminate relevant research on the theme of a selected conference to attendees and interested parties. This could either be done in advance of the conference and/or as a follow-up. A pilot project could be run to test the effectiveness of this approach in influencing the outcome and/or long-term impact of the conference;
3. Environment scan to identify key themes which policy makers are addressing at a global, regional or national level on which id21 has



relevant research. This research could then be highlighted on the site. The current principle of ordering research purely chronologically without taking into account relevancy to current preoccupations of policy makers should be re-examined.

## 5.04 product positioning

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### 5.04.1 audience led

Positioning should flow from target audience needs; id21 should do more to find out what these needs are. The internet provides the opportunity of creating an ongoing interface with subscribers. Interviewees were very receptive to face-to-face contact and keen to engage in dialogue. It is notoriously difficult to get similar responses from email and questionnaires, but if id21 is to further develop its service and to move towards its goal, it needs to test ways of eliciting response from current users and the target audience. At the moment, id21 periodically collects quantitative data and has garnered some suggestions for improvements to the service through other requests for feedback. However more could be done to generate feedback. There is also a need to enhance data collection so that id21 is proactively seeking comments on research posted on the site.

#### recommendation

id21 should pilot inclusion of a "right to reply" at the end of each summary. Further, id21 should consider setting up a user panel made up of a representative sample of target users who will assist developing the site so that its content and style fits with target audience needs.

### 5.04.2 improving the site

Some interviewees made specific suggestions that would increase their use of the site. It is possible that others would also find such suggested improvements attractive and would increase the level of trust and thus propensity to use the site.

- *"I find the presentation of the site confusing – if I need to find a specific piece of research it sometimes takes a long time"*
- *"I would like to know more about the methodologies used by researchers – this information is often missing".*
- *"who are your summarisers? Where do they come from? I would like to know".*
- *"Very often however, on looking at the full piece, I would have picked out different points to include in the summary. This is because I am from the 'third world' and they find that research is done to international agendas and not so much local trends"*
- *"if a facility was provided to encompass abstracts from elsewhere, I would find it very useful"*
- *"the search engine doesn't work very well".*

#### recommendations

id21 should:

- consider periodically providing a backlist of research covered
- monitor the use of summarisers in terms of country of origin, gender and ethnicity to ensure a diversity of perspectives on research
- ensure that summaries include reference to what has been left out: 'This paper also looks at ...' and an outline of methodologies used
  - consider providing an abstracts service by having a separate links page specifically dedicated to relevant abstract providers.
  - ensure that the search engine is constantly updated to make use of recent technological advances

### 5.04.3 breadth and depth

According to general perceptions, id21 currently provides a “*broad overview ... [it] covers wide a range relatively superficially*”.

Perhaps unsurprisingly, users are looking both for more breadth and more depth

- *"I would love it if - rather than going fishing among 5000 search results - I knew that if I went to a particular site I could get a synthesis of all the useful information on a particular subject ...that is something I could pay for actually!"*
- *“What I feel is missing is an overview ... for people in my position it is much more useful to have a synthesis - it is not easy to come across this sort of information”.*
- *“The summaries are aimed at an international global audience but I would find more local-specific information useful on a practical level for running education programmes on a national level and for community”.*
- *“the service is suitable for generalists ... but it may not always be sufficiently relevant to country-specific issues and research priorities”.*

id21 needs to continue to find a way of providing both a general service that includes summaries of research conclusions, an overview of issues and a specific service which meets specific needs.

#### recommendations

- the summary article of Insights already provides an overview of the particular subject covered (e.g. pensions) but access to these is not immediately obvious from the home page – a direct link from the home page to the last four summary articles should be installed.
- id21 should consider commissioning researchers to provide an occasional summary/overview of key developments in a specific field
- id21 should develop further the categorisation of research posted on the site to ensure that the specific needs of users and target audience are being met.

## 5.05 building capacity

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id21 should consider moving beyond relatively passive function of dissemination, towards more proactive engagement, networking, support and capacity building.

### 5.05.1 developing networks

*“id21 would be even better if it ... helped to build networks of people with similar interests. It could also target people in a particular research area”.* As our interviews revealed one of the most effective ways of disseminating research is through existing networks, id21 must engage actively in supporting existing networks and building new ones. The service is held in high regard by people who use it – now, through networking, id21 must do more to reach its target audience.

#### recommendations

- Build more formal links with existing networks, initially by seeking out partners in specific countries where there is potential for mutually beneficial arrangements for research dissemination;
- Facilitate the setting up of face-to-face dialogue between researchers and policy-makers with local intermediaries to test potential impact of research on policy;
- Consider linking with partners who can provide cascading dissemination (e.g. Insights could be mailed out from India).

## 5.05.2 tracking policy initiatives

Most policy makers want to know implications of research in terms of policy solutions. They want to know how research has been translated into policy in other contexts. They need to know about resource implications, the likelihood of success and the possible pitfalls.

### recommendation

id 21's brief could be expanded to include policy information about how research influenced particular policies, how they were formulated, and what lessons were learnt during the implementation of the policy. Case studies would be particularly useful in illustrating the routes of influence from research to policy. By seeking contributions from users, id21 could accumulate a body of evidence that will be useful to others and help id21 in progressing towards its goal.

## 5.06 conclusion

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Though summative evaluations such as this one can be valuable, tracking impact requires the design of ongoing monitoring and evaluation systems. This report must be seen as only the first step in helping id21 move towards its goal **“to establish means by which the influence of UK development research on policy can be increased in a way that creates significant, lasting and (if possible) measurable impact”**.

It is reasonable to suggest that id21 is already having impact. This report finds that id21 is well positioned to move further towards its goal. It is now possible for id21 both to refocus its own efforts and to make an innovative contribution to developing understanding of how the dissemination of research has impact on policy formulation.

Individually, the recommendations we made in this paper have resource implications. Taken together, they would amount to a realignment of id21's programme, with a much clearer drive towards impact. Clearly, these recommendations will need to be assessed against resource parameters. Their adoption will need to be assessed to discern if they conflict with, or overstep, id21's core purposes. Our view is that id21 should be prepared to look at building on its good work to date by considering options that involve mobilising resources differently. DFID and other key stakeholders would need to be involved in any such process.

Overall, a coherent and integrated response will require that id21 develops a management plan with objectives and routes to achieving them clearly delineated. Any plan should build in testing of the various approaches outlined in the recommendations incrementally, starting off with pilot initiatives, so that change, and its resource implications, can be properly managed.

Most importantly, impact-driven systems of monitoring and evaluation should be designed and put in place. Without this, it will remain uncertain as to the level and type of impact that id21 is having.

### recommendation

id21 should draw up a business plan outlining how the recommendations will be implemented and, crucially, what mechanisms, systems, processes and indicators will be in place for monitoring and evaluation progress, measured against increased impact.

## appendix: references

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*This report is not intended to be a theoretical study of the research-policy dynamic; but to provide context for our findings, we have drawn on the following sources:*

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