

## BRIDGING THE GAP BETWEEN POLICYMAKERS AND RESEARCH AND ADVOCACY ORGANIZATIONS [RAOs]: THE CHALLENGES FACING RAOs.

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### INTRODUCTION

Research and advocacy organizations (RAOs) serve a useful function of linking policy makers, who are primarily politicians, with society's needs, aspirations, problems and their possible solutions. In order to design policies and programmes to improve societal wellbeing, policymakers need access to good information about the problems, their causes and solutions. Yet the work of RAOs is sometimes not fully appreciated by policymakers. This is partly because researchers do not fully understand the policy process and how to communicate effectively their research findings to policymakers. The communication gap between RAOs and policymakers also contributes to misunderstanding of, misplaced priorities and inadequate financial and other material support to RAOs from the national government. In Ghana, RAOs tend to receive the bulk of

their funding from overseas donors rather than the national government.

RAOs play an important role in the development of any country. These organisations strengthen the research capacities of political parties, promote the welfare of the vulnerable and less endowed, analyse major economic and social issues and fill the gap in policy making. There has been a lot of research findings and recommendations by RAOs on many development problems faced by Ghana. So the question is why is the nation still suffering from some of these pertinent problems almost 50 years after independence?

Policymaking in Ghana remains ad hoc and does not fully use research-based information. Experience has shown that policies tend to be more successful when they are based on research findings. For

instance, better utilization of policy recommendations by RAOs can help save lives, reduce poverty and improve the quality of life of many people in Ghana. However, policymakers sometimes disregard the research reports they are given or simply fail to read them. Further, important work of RAOs may sometimes not reach policymakers at all.

The work of RAOs in evaluating policy alternatives and communicating these alternatives to policymakers does not necessarily result in or guarantee the appropriate choice of policy (Sutton, 1999). Furthermore, the information generated through policy research is only one input in the process of policy decision-making. Research should therefore be followed by active policy advocacy to ensure that research findings are used by policymakers for the benefit of all. Research, advocacy and policy making, though different from each other are clearly interlinked if the ultimate purpose is the socio-economic advancement of citizens.

The rest of this paper is organized as follows: In the next section, the reasons for the gaps between the RAOs and policymakers are discussed. This is followed by the challenges facing RAOs that involve defined groups within the country. The concluding section of the paper is devoted to a discussion of methods that can be used to bridge the gap between RAOs and policymakers.

## **WHY THE GAP BETWEEN RAOs AND POLICYMAKERS**

There is a gap between the intended beneficiaries of research and the people who commission and carry out research. There has been limited systematic understanding of when, how and why evidence informs policy making. A major challenge in achieving national growth in any given

country is the issue of addressing the dichotomy between academic research and policy decision-making. The work that researchers conduct and activities of advocacy organizations often do not reach policymakers because of inadequate and inappropriate communication techniques. The information from RAOs to policy makers should have the ideal attributes. These attributes include timeliness, ease of understanding, accuracy, frequency and ethical soundness.

Researchers and policymakers have different roles and spheres of influence. The relationship between policymakers and researchers is not always an easy one. There are important occupational differences between the two (Graham, 2004). These two groups may have unrealistic expectations of one another. Members of RAOs may sometimes feel that policymakers do not listen attentively to their suggestions. Policymakers may also feel that suggestions of RAOs may not be credible or lack the important attributes of good information mentioned above. Thus policymakers may assert that findings of RAOs may not be timely or are inaccurate or may not be easily understood. In such a situation the link between RAOs and policymakers can remain weak thus creating a persistent gap between these two groups.

The world of RAOs is generally rational, objective and always open to new ideas. Members of RAOs are also interested in evidence and new ideas. On the other hand, the policymaker's world is action oriented. Policy makers are interested in initiatives of RAOs that can be sold to the voting public. However these initiatives may often have relatively short-term planning horizons. Researchers are accountable to the community for the validity of their methods and the truth of their studies. However, policymakers see themselves as being

accountable to the voting public in a democratic dispensation. Therefore policymakers have to consider public opinion, political climate, financial implications and the actions of interest groups in decision-making.

### SPECIFIC CHALLENGES FACING RAOs

Some studies have sought to understand the factors that affect the influence of research on policy (for example, refer to Dunn, 1994; Hoffman, 1995 and Ryan, 1999). These studies identify a common set of issues and challenges of RAOs and the need to examine these challenges for long-run sustainability. Challenges of RAOs can be analyzed from the view point of the media, policymakers and state organizations, RAOs themselves and their donors. This paper makes an attempt to discuss some of these challenges based on experiences gained by RAOs in their work in Ghana.

#### RAOs and the Mass Media

The electronic and print media play a very important role in the dissemination of research findings to policymakers and are able to convey issues of national interest to civil society faster than other means. Once the mass media take up an issue, the likelihood that policymakers will become interested in it increases. In general, RAOs do not receive the needed media attention. More often than not media personnel invited to cover programmes of RAOs come too late when all the useful discussions have been made. So they do not get the right message to both civil society and the state. Other times, they come early but the media are only interested in what the Ministers of State and Guests of Honour have to say, and so as soon as these "big personalities" finish delivering their speeches, the media personnel leave prematurely. This does not allow them to listen to the various issues discussed by

RAOs which will benefit civil society enormously. A factor responsible for the limited coverage of RAOs by the mass media is the relatively limited resources available to the media in terms of machines, equipment and personnel. These limited resources tend to be spread out all over the country to cover various programmes.

#### RAOs and Bureaucrats of State Organizations

Knowledge on the policymaking process in Ghana is generally scanty among the public. However, by the nature of their work, civil servants are expected to understand more clearly the policymaking process especially its limitations. However the working culture in which civil servants function generally does not allow them to stay current with latest research findings pertaining to their duties and functions. So, many civil servants are not interested in discussing and disseminating policy recommendations to their top management. Unless Ministers of State are relentless in pushing their subordinate civil servants to collect relevant research findings and information, more likely than not, civil servants will not take the necessary steps to collect such information for policymakers. A major reason is the low salary of civil servants in Ghana.

Policymakers are usually very busy people who have a lot of tasks to deal with. Therefore they do not have time to read and evaluate findings of research. They skim through executive summaries of reports and if they do not find anything interesting they put them aside. Therefore suggestions by RAOs may never get to policymakers. Policymakers work within a political context and will therefore read or listen to reports of RAOs which may advance their political agenda. Other reports that do not advance their political agenda may be seen as less useful.

The structure of local government, including the appointment of all District Chief Executives (DCEs) directly by the President, tends to place less value on the potential of work from RAOs in accelerating economic development of districts. The authoritative and non-democratic nature of DCEs makes them less accountable to the people. Research findings and work from RAOs concerning particular districts that tend to conflict with entrenched positions of DCEs are more likely to be discarded. Policymakers are sometimes so determined to secure votes during election periods that they will not listen to policy suggestions because it may take a long time to implement them. They rather want to implement a policy that in the short run the results of which civil society will see immediately, even if such a policy will be detrimental in the long run. Again, recommendations by RAOs may contradict ongoing policies, creating resistance on the side of the decision-makers.

### **The Challenge within RAOs**

The aim of policy research and advocacy is to improve policies by creating, assessing and communicating policy-relevant knowledge to both policymakers and civil society. Efforts to design research agenda depend on how RAOs are able to describe the policy problem, understand the presumed causes, and comprehend the larger policy domain. Most RAOs are not able to get the requisite data for their analysis quickly and so much time is wasted on one study and therefore the policy recommendation of the study may lose its significance when it finally gets to the policymaker. Very often, when research results are published, policymakers find them indigestible because they contain too much information and/or the reports are unattractive and are full of technical jargons. Also research results from RAOs can be perceived as reinforcements of already

made choices and therefore such results are not given much attention.

Again, RAOs may fail to recognize the values and objectives of those who use the research findings to formulate policy. Large sums of money are sometimes used to organize workshops and fora to disseminate these findings. However invited policymakers may not attend such functions due to lack of interest. The opportunity cost concept applies clearly when the policymakers compare the value of such seminars and fora of RAOs with other possible activities of policymakers and leisure activities such as playing golf or watching soccer on television. The challenge for RAOs is to recognize the opportunity cost principle and present their findings in seminars during periods that can attract the attention of many policymakers.

RAOs are also not able to take in account the politicization of their research and advocacy work, including the threat from counter studies that lessen the intrinsic value of their findings. Sometimes RAOs produce work that gives little guidance on how policy should be implemented. Hence such work may not be useful for both policymakers and civil society. There is also the lack of effective follow up and networking between RAOs themselves as RAOs engage in fierce competition for the limited financial resources of donors. A challenge to RAOs is to coordinate their activities and engage in joint projects to optimize the use of scarce resources.

### **RAOs and Donor Funding**

Most RAOs rely heavily on international donors for funding and these donor funds sometimes come with conditionalities as to the type of research or advocacy programmes that can be done. This prevents some RAOs from researching into important issues which are of more concern for civil



society. RAOs generally lack funds for their research work and especially for the dissemination of research findings. For example they are not able to motivate their staff and also the media to ensure policies get to policymakers and also get feedback from civil society. Donor-driven research agenda may contradict national research priorities. There is also the tendency for research by RAOs supported by international donors to be presented at international conferences at which local policymakers are not invited to attend. RAOs in Ghana need to undertake research activities meeting national priorities that do not require considerable resources necessary to engage donors. For example, some modest amount of research can be undertaken in social science based on secondary data from government statistical services and central banks. Donor funds can then be sought for more complex and demanding research projects with budget requirements beyond the levels of RAOs.

### **BRIDGING THE GAP BETWEEN RAOs AND POLICYMAKERS**

Policymakers can use research findings only if they know about them. A variety of groups, such as the media, local programme administrators and advocacy groups, help to interpret research findings and communicate them to the attention of policymakers. From the lessons learnt so far, it is evident that to have a free flow of information from civil society to the state, and vice versa through RAOs, gaps between RAOs and policymakers must be bridged. We suggest several ways for bridging these gaps.

- RAOs must be non-partisan, they should be as independent as possible in the way they present their research output and advocacy techniques to ensure objectivity in the discussion of issues. It will also make them

reach out to all political parties to know their views about development. Policymakers are likely to accept and implement non-partisan policy recommendations.

- Research and advocacy have the most impact on policy when it is topically relevant to the pressing policy issue of the day and it is operationally useful. RAOs should therefore ensure that their findings are relevant to the present issues in the country to satisfy the needs of civil society and also arouse the interest of policymakers.
- RAOs which effectively present their findings to the media will find it easier to convince policymakers of the importance of their work. The media should therefore be seen as partners and they should be encouraged and motivated to properly disseminate the right information to the right people. Therefore RAOs may need to employ public relation officers who can effectively deal with the mass media in presentation of their work including research findings.
- When required, RAOs should involve policymakers early in the research process so that policymakers can also claim ownership of the process.
- Research findings must be concise and well interpreted to bring out the relevant and usable policy recommendations.
- Policymakers should make time for public fora and workshops organized by RAOs to help in the fruitful discussions of national issues. They must also take keen interest in

reading and digesting findings that are important for policy making.

- Research and advocacy funding agencies should develop policies and framework conditions including the necessary financial prerequisites that allow the active involvement of local government in all steps of the research process and facilitate local implementation.
- Local government, the national networks and the professional bodies serving local government, should actively encourage the use of research outputs in policy making and implementation.
- RAOs need to develop a position of being a 'critical friend' to government, providing reflective analyses of problems alongside an understanding of the political, economic and social complexities of government policy making process.
- Good research findings lead to good governance. To this end, research must be based on sound ethical values, and RAOs must feel the responsibility to serve their nation. It is important that RAOs better understand the challenges and needs of local authorities in order to make research and advocacy programmes more effective.
- There should be a very efficient and effective network between all RAOs for a better flow of information to both policymakers and the general public. Policymakers listen to advocacy and professional organisations because they represent

a defined part of the electorate. Researchers should be encouraged to use advocacy groups to disseminate their work, because these groups are an excellent avenue for that sort of activity. Specific policy recommendations from research should be given to a particular advocacy group in that field of study, while advocacy groups should also send issues of national interest to research institutes for scientific studies to be done.

## CONCLUSIONS

The main objective of the paper was to address why a gap exists between RAOs and policymakers, what challenges RAOs face in performing their duties and proposing ways of bridging the existing gap between RAOs and policymakers. Research findings and activities of RAOs often do not reach policymakers because of inadequate and inappropriate communication techniques. Generally the flow of information lacks the ideal attributes of timeliness, ease of understanding, accuracy and frequency. The paper lists some challenges faced by RAOs as poor coverage of their activities by the mass media, bureaucratic nature of the civil servants' organizational structure and unhealthy competition among RAOs. We suggest that to bridge the gap between RAOs and policymakers, RAOs must be non-partisan. The research and advocacy issues should be topically relevant for policy formulation, research findings should also be concise and easy for the policymakers to read and digest. There must be a good working relation between RAOs and the mass media and also an effective and efficient network should be created among the RAOs.

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