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Bridging the gap between agri-food policy and science in Kenya

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Abstract

Policymakers do not always put research-based evidence to full use. The question of why this is the case has often been addressed conceptually with sparse efforts to collect real-world data from actors. This paper provides an in-depth analysis of the science-policy interface (SPI) in Kenya using key informant interviews with Kenyan policymakers, researchers, and private sector actors. The findings of this study have the potential to improve the use of research in policymaking in Kenya significantly. Several recommendations emerge on how Kenya can boost research impact by optimizing existing institutions, structures, and resources. Aligning policies across ministries and coordinating research activities can promote coherence and streamline research efforts. Implementing the National Agricultural Research System Policy for research coordination and Global Open Data for Agriculture and Nutrition for data can be leveraged to streamline collaboration. Public consultations, workshops, and conferences remain important mechanisms for researchers to engage policymakers and stakeholders throughout the policy cycle. Building technical capacity in ministries and training researchers for policy engagement can further support effective policy formulation and implementation. A collaborative research agenda co-created by government, researchers, and private sector actors is also recommended. To incentivize more engagement, universities and research institutes should value policy work more and allocate funds to support researchers in engaging with policymakers. Investing in data infrastructure is also critical: better data collection, storage, and dissemination systems, along with the creation of easily accessible data repositories. Clear data sharing protocols are needed between government, researchers, and the private sector.

Key Words: Agri-food, science, policy, interface, Kenya

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Introduction

Public demand for data and research in low- and middle-income countries (LMICs) is growing as economies become more complex and face unprecedented challenges and multiple crises. In the last decade many of these countries have faced a myriad of climate change related shocks such as droughts and floods, pests and disease outbreaks, as well as global shocks including conflicts. Global, regional and national efforts to address these multiple crises, which often occur in combination, have been accompanied by increased calls for evidence-based decision making. For example, at the African continental stage, the Comprehensive Africa Agricultural Development

Programme (CAADP) promotes evidence-based policymaking through the CAADP results framework (African Union Commission, 2015). In Kenya, the Agricultural Sector Transformation Strategy (AGSTS) takes an evidence-based approach and makes provisions for data-driven insights during the implementation of agricultural policies (Republic of Kenya, 2019). Fortunately, the availability of data and computing power has more than ever before equipped researchers with tools to respond to this demand. Yet, such calls have not seen a concomitant application of research evidence in policymaking. In other words, a wide chasm continues to exist between research evidence and its use in policymaking. The process of how evidence is integrated into policy is known as the Science-Policy Interface (SPI) (van den Hove, 2007). This study sought to understand how SPI plays out in a typical LMIC using Kenya as a case study. The objectives of the study were to understand how SPI in Kenyan food systems works, the challenges of integrating evidence into policy, and to provide recommendations on how researchers, policymakers and other actors could improve the process. The value of this study lies in the use of real-world data collected from actors as opposed to other studies that tend to address these issues conceptually. The findings of this study are significant as they provide a roadmap for improving the integration of research into policy, thereby enhancing the effectiveness of policymaking in the agricultural and food security sectors.

Methods

The study uses qualitative research methods to describe the SPI and assess the opportunities and constraints facing it. Data was collected from forty-two high-level officials in the national and county governments, senior staff of donor institutions, consultants to specific policies and strategies, representatives from private sector associations, and researchers from national and international organizations. A combination of purposive sampling and snowball sampling methods were used to identify and select thirty-two original and ten snowballed key informants. Semi-structured interview instruments were tailored to capture the contextual issues, structures, cultures, practices, and attitudes that affect the integration of research into policy from the different actors. A thematic analysis of the transcribed interviews was done using NVIVO, a software program designed for qualitative data analysis.

Results and discussion

Describing Science-Policy Interface in Kenya

The SPI in Kenya's food systems is multifaceted. The fragmented research and policy landscapes, donor influence, and changing policy environments make understanding how research is integrated into policy complex as observed by Hainzelin et al. (2021). While respondents indicated that research is integrated into most policies, it varies by the level of involvement, quality of research, and sustained engagement throughout the policy cycle (Table 1).

Table 1: Researchers and private sector level of involvement in policy development

Level of involvement	% Research institutions (91 policies/strategies)	% Private sector (26 policies/strategies)
Provided advice to drafters of the policy document during meetings and consultations	71.4%	73.1%
Provided written comments or reviewed the drafts	78.02%	61.5%
Participated during the validation workshops of the draft	78.02%	80.8%
Drafted a section or chapter of the policy document	62.6%	30.8%
Led the drafting of the policy document	55.0 %	27.0%
Carried out advocacy activities for the policy/strategy (Asked to private sector ONLY)	-	73.1%

Researchers and private sector actors involved in the SPI are diverse and they serve different clientele – governments, farmers and development partners. Researchers have a challenge deciding how to prioritize which stakeholders to engage – and often overlook some important actors, such as Parliament. In addition, engagement with bodies that work across administrative units (counties or countries) receives low prioritization from researchers.

Researchers and the private sector support policymaking through “hard” and “soft” knowledge services/products and by engaging through ‘open-door’ and ‘closed-door’ methods (Table 2).

Table 2: How research organizations and private sector engage with policy

Type of Engagement	Soft Knowledge	Hard Knowledge
Open-Door	Public consultations; advocacy	Written publications; webinars; Online engagement; conferences/workshops
Closed-Door	Expert opinion; rapid policy advice	Desk reviews; policy drafts; Ex-ante modelling; Impact evaluation

In Kenya’s agri-food system, research has been used to inform policymaking but can also serve a more sinister role of validating policy decisions ex-post. Respondents indicated that policymakers often employ research to substantiate their preconceived notions, interests, or ideas. Engagement with the private sector is similar – the private sector is occasionally included in policy formulation, but primarily as a means of legitimizing the process ex-post.

Kenya has a vibrant community of national and international research institutions. It can leverage several positive trends in improving the integration of research into policy, but researchers and policymakers remain critical of the current state of the SPI. Existing and draft policies such as the National Agricultural Research System Policy 2021 (NARSP) (Republic of Kenya, 2021) emphasize the importance of research and seek to enhance the integration of evidence into policymaking. However, research often remains a low priority among policymakers and some researchers feel policymakers undervalue their work. Researchers are perceived as wanting to be outside of the system and expecting policymakers to cater to them. On the other hand, researchers need to pay more attention to policymakers or make the effort to engage in policy debates. On a positive note, both researchers and policymakers are keen to strengthen the SPI in the country.

Challenges in using research for policy

The SPI in Kenya faces several systemic, resource-related, and data-related challenges that are mutually reinforcing. One of the most prominent hurdles is the issue of organizational structures, incentives, and culture. Policymakers often find themselves navigating complex bureaucratic systems that may hinder the effective integration of research into policy decisions. This can be attributed to the inherent nature of institutional structures, which may prioritize other considerations over research-based evidence. Policymakers also often grapple with limited budgets and staffing, which can impede their ability to engage with research fully. This can manifest in various ways, such as the inability to hire a reliable number of specialized staff to analyze and interpret research findings. Furthermore, the availability and quality of data pose a substantial challenge. Policymakers require accurate and up-to-date data to inform their decisions, but they often encounter hurdles in this regard. Issues such as data quality, availability, accessibility, and shareability can hinder the effective utilization of research. Policymakers may struggle to access relevant data or encounter difficulties in assessing its reliability, which can undermine the credibility and effectiveness of their policy decisions.

Conclusions and outlook

The challenges facing the SPI in Kenya are multi-faceted and mutually reinforcing. Therefore, SPI improvement must be addressed on several fronts. Improvement initiatives should not solely rely on researchers or policymakers; rather, collaborative efforts are essential. Enhancing institutional structures and fostering stronger relationships between researchers and policymakers are critical steps in overcoming these challenges. While addressing individual obstacles is important, transformative change requires policymakers and researchers to acknowledge the interconnected nature of these challenges and strive for overarching reforms. Encouragingly, progress is evident with the draft NARSP, which adopts a comprehensive approach. However, advancing these changes and prioritizing policy research for agri-food systems are imperative for the sustainable improvement of the SPI.

The study proposes the following recommendations for improving the SPI in Kenya.

- Policymakers and researchers need to address the issues within their institutions that drive low prioritization of policy and research, respectively.
- Policymakers, researchers, and the private sector must collaborate to create a joint research agenda with donor support.
- All stakeholders should collaborate to leverage existing frameworks to coordinate the research landscape. Implementing the NARSP presents an excellent opportunity to achieve this coordination.
- Make policymaking coherent and coordinated to enable policymakers and researchers to align their efforts.
- Reconsider incentives for researchers to reward them for policy engagement.
- Reconfigure donor relationships with researchers and policymakers so that research supported by donor funds can help inform policy decisions rather than support academic publications and reports shared solely with the donor.
- Streamline policy and research processes to quicken the processes of developing and completing them.
- Capacity build ministries for technical capacity and researchers for policy engagement.
- Invest in data infrastructure, particularly at the county level.
- Institute clear data-sharing protocols between government, researchers, and private sector
- Prioritize converting data into useable formats for policy analysts and research findings into understandable language for policymakers.

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