

# Bridging research and policymaking to achieve the 2030 Agenda

## Report from a research and policy seminar held at DevRes 2022

### Summary

The SweDev network and the Ministry for Foreign Affairs organized a panel discussion on the interaction between research and policy to meet the 2030 Agenda at the Development Research Conference (DevRes). The panel concluded that co-creation, inter- and transdisciplinary approaches, long-term visions, communication and longer funding periods are essential to achieve policy impact from research. Ten conclusions, ideas and needs were identified in order to tackle some of the hindrances to future research-policy interaction.

### Introduction

On the 22nd August 2022, the Swedish Development Research Network (SweDev) and the Ministry for Foreign Affairs organized a session at the Development Research Conference 2022 about the research-policy interaction in the work towards the fulfilment of the 2030 Agenda. The seminar departed from the findings from two studies conducted by SweDev and invited a panel with representatives from Uppsala University, Karolinska Institute, the Swedish Research Council, the Swedish Government and Sida Advisory council. This report outlines the main takeaways from the discussion.

### Background

Evidence-based decision-making is highlighted as important in both the 2030 Agenda and Addis Ababa Action Agenda on Financing for Development. In the latest action agenda for implementation, a separate action area specifically addresses research and innovation. Its importance is further stressed in Sweden's new government strategy for research and development cooperation. It is argued that research findings are needed for innovations but also to help us understand why something succeeds or fails, and to explain policy implementation processes. Therefore, Sweden has committed, both in the international agreements as well as in the Swedish development policy platform, to build broad engagement and inclusive partnerships between actors in Sweden, including Swedish universities, higher education institutions and research institutions. These institutions should "possess knowledge of complex contexts and links that partly explain the varying causes of poverty and the forms it takes", stressing both the importance of possessing and developing knowledge, but also increasing partnerships and interaction with academia as well as building research capacity.

The question of how to bridge development research to policy is a fundamental component of SweDev, a network connecting development researchers and supporting interaction and knowledge sharing between researchers and practitioners. Two studies have guided SweDev's work and establishment: one mapping the Swedish research community ([Strand et al., 2020](#)), and one exploring how policymakers and practitioners perceive interaction and utilize research in their work ([Ioannou & Vähämäki, 2021](#)).

The studies find that the research-policy interaction in Sweden receives little engagement from both researchers and policymakers. Neither the Swedish research community nor Swedish policymakers are well updated on each other's current issues or agendas. Researchers are not aware of current policy questions and problems; policymakers do not know about the most recent research findings.

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Ioannou & Vähämäki, 2021

At the same time, both communities find the research-policy interaction to be important. Researchers place increased interaction with the policy-making community as the top priority in their work (Strand et al., 2020). 89 per cent of policymakers respond that they believe that integrating research is important. However, as much as 72 per cent perceive they do not have time to read or keep up with the research. The majority of them also state they do not know where to find Swedish researchers and research (Ioannou & Vähämäki, 2021).

This leads to the question of how and when research innovation actually arises. The studies find that knowledge sharing and co-creation of knowledge involving both researchers and policymakers is a precondition. This means more platforms for reciprocal dialogue as well as additional possibilities for researchers to be involved in concrete policy processes. However, the current financing system, procurement rules and incentive systems in both communities hinder these processes. Such hindrances must be addressed.

### **Panel discussion on 22 August 2022**

During the DevRes 2022 conference held in Uppsala in August 2022, SweDev and the Ministry for Foreign Affairs organized a session to further discuss research and policy in working towards fulfilling the 2030 Agenda with a focus on both the potentials as well as hindrances of research-policy interaction. Moderators Janet Vähämäki, representing SweDev, and Måns Felleson from the Ministry for Foreign Affairs, led the panel consisting of Ingrid Öborn, *Chair, Committee for Development Research (VR)*, Thomas Elmqvist, *Chair, Sida Scientific Advisory Board*, Anders Hagfeldt, *Vice-chancellor at Uppsala University*, Gabriel Wikström, *National Coordinator Agenda 2030, Swedish Government* and Ole Petter Ottersen, *President of Karolinska Institutet*.

The packed seminar room consisted of researchers and policymakers who, like the panel, agreed on the importance of bridging research and policy in implementing the 2030 Agenda. Ole Petter Ottersen emphasized that as a former chair of the Lancet commission on 'The political origins of health inequity: prospects for change', he had seen the need for "better integration of policy and science" also in the past. In other words, this issue has been present for a long time and is not settled yet. He was shocked by the results of the studies guided by SweDev and stressed the urgency of discussing the issue further.

### Co-creation is fundamental, but still lacking

The panellists agreed that one of the main problems is the lack of cooperation between policymakers and researchers. Anders Hagfeldt stated that "we are stuck in our boxes" when it comes to involving other parties, even though this is essential for the co-creation and implementation of the political process. Thomas Elmqvist emphasized that co-creation consists of the three parts of co-design, co-production and co-implementation and that the research community is mainly withdrawing from the latter. Efforts are being made in part to counteract this deficiency. According to Gabriel Wikström, there are examples of so-called policy labs, where actors work together on problems as well as solutions on the policy level at which they should be addressed and implemented. The Government of Sweden has also worked together with research institutes and municipalities in Sweden, where a model for fulfilling the goals of the 2030 Agenda was created together.

Not only researchers and policymakers need to work together, but the entire spectrum of actors. This includes global actors and partners such as local actors, among others. In Ole Petter Ottersen's opinion, the private sector is also part of both the problem and the solution and should not be neglected in the work to fulfil the 2030 Agenda. Ingrid Öborn stressed the importance of integrating communicators and policymakers into the research team, which, at the same time, requires more spending and thus more funding. Not least, she also said that policy must also take its point of departure from perspectives and in collaboration with national partners in low- and middle-income countries, as also noted in the new Government strategy.

The lack of cooperation between researchers and policymakers may also be an issue of incentives in the political community for scientific engagement. "Science is not high on the political agenda, to say the least," said Gabriel Wikström. Since policymakers are not rewarded for reading scientific papers and learning about new scientific findings, there are no incentives for this kind of engagement. The same incentives are lacking for researchers to engage in politics, and it is difficult for them to pursue a political career. Gabriel Wikström and Thomas Elmqvist, therefore, stressed that researchers should increasingly be employed in municipalities and governments.

### Impactful research requires alignment in timelines and long-term funding

Another obstacle to the interaction between research and policy is the different timelines. On the one hand, the panellists concurred about the short timeline for policymakers in the decision-making process, but on the other hand, there were different opinions about the timelines for researchers. For example, Ole Petter Ottersen argued that researchers have the privilege of long deadlines, while Ingrid Öborn replied that they are forced to think in three-year cycles due to their time-limited funding

Nevertheless, researchers need incentives for long-term goals and "slow science", which ideally ends in the implementation of research into policy making. Ole Petter Ottersen exemplified this with an initiative at Karolinska Institute, which is implementing a new mode of cooperation with other countries. In sub-Saharan Africa for example, Karolinska Institute has established a new Centre of Excellence for Sustainable Health together with Makerere University in Uganda. The virtual centre focuses on the need to have a long-term horizon. It encourages researchers to look beyond the first publication but instead ask how to go further and implement the research findings into policy.

### Smart approaches provide fruitful opportunities

The panel discussed good examples of research-policy interaction as well, especially regarding implementing the inter- and transdisciplinary approach in research. For example, students have for many years run a platform for sustainability issues at the Centre for Environment and Development Studies (CEMUS) at Uppsala University and the Swedish University of Agricultural Sciences. To strengthen and coordinate such activities is something the university is looking further into, said Anders Hagfeldt. He also added that other centres at Uppsala University, such as the Centre for Integrated Research on Culture and Society (CIRCUS), work with interdisciplinarity both in research and its promotion. These initiatives also provide opportunities to invite policymakers into the dialogue as a starting point.

Others agreed. Development research should break out of its comfort zone and work in an interdisciplinary way, said Ole Petter Ottersen. This is illustrated by the example of the Ebola epidemic which was mentioned during another panel at the conference: a disease cannot be cured if only the medical perspective is studied, but also the culture and tradition. Therefore, interdisciplinary research should be done to understand context-specific needs and possibilities – whether that be on local or global scales.

Thomas Elmqvist said that everything is a question of mindset and pointed to the concept of "framed creativity" as a solution. The concept involves giving actors a game plan, whilst allowing them to be freely creative within that framework. One example from Sida's Scientific Advisory Board is the development of the concept of One Health, which shows the link between planetary and human health, including all related disciplines. This concept could strengthen collaboration between scientists and at the same time make it politically relevant.

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Moving forward, the panellists advised researchers to think about the relevance of their work. At the beginning of their research project, researchers should ask themselves "What will it take to translate these results into a new policy?" and "What is the impact of this project and why is it relevant?".

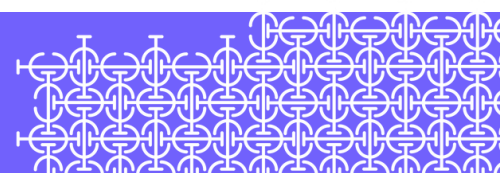
The relevance of the research to sustainable development, poverty reduction or alleviation is now an important part of the funding evaluation process, Ingrid Öborn explained. That's why, for the past year, the Research Council has also been asking these kinds of questions during the application process. Yet Ole Petter Ottersen has noticed that researchers still tend to elaborate more on what they are good at regarding their research. Instead, he thinks it is time to consider "what am I good for?".

### The way forward

While it was consensus among the panellists as well as the audience that the research-policy interaction in development research and practice is lacking, there are both good examples to draw from, and concrete actions to move forward with. A multistakeholder platform for Sweden, co-creation, long-term visions, communication and longer funding periods could be one way forward according to the discussion.

### Main needs and ideas identified by the panel and audience

1. Create a multi-stakeholder platform with researchers, policymakers, civil society and the private sector to discuss problems and solutions. This platform should be used to invite, engage and challenge the different stakeholders on local and global aspects addressed in either research or in policy implementation.
2. Funding and incentives are needed to bring in policy actors and communication experts early in the research projects, and more long-term funded research is needed.
3. Researchers need to identify the long-term impacts of their research and think about the feasibility of implementing research findings/ideas into practice.
4. Research needs to be higher on the political agenda and spreading research results needs to be valued and encouraged at the universities.
5. Policymakers should USE the research that already is available, and efforts should be made to increase "research literacy" among policymakers.
6. Engaging in policy processes as a researcher needs to be both funded and rewarded.
7. Researchers and policymakers should use "co-creation" (implementation research, embedded research etc.) approaches.
8. Secondments of researchers to development and decision-making bodies are needed and more researchers should be integrated/employed into governments and municipalities.
9. "Slow science" is essential for understanding the complex problems the world is facing today and should also be allowed.
10. Individual researchers might have a short-term vision for their own research, but every researcher should be part of a research community with long-term goals and visions.



## References

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## About SweDev

SweDev is an initiative with over 200 active network members in Sweden. The aim is to connect development researchers across Sweden to further strengthen collaboration between the research community, practitioners and policymakers. SweDev aims to support the use of research-based knowledge for efficient policymaking and practice among Swedish actors working for the 2030 Agenda.

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