

Reaching Policy Makers

Carol J. Pierce Colfer
Center for International Forestry Research
(c.colfer@cgiar.org)

I write as an anthropologist and previous program leader for a multi-year, complex, international research program that has included a great deal of anthropological expertise and leadership, at the Center for International Forestry Research (headquartered in Bogor, Indonesia). The program is called “Local People, Devolution and Adaptive Collaborative Management of Forests” (also called ACM). We have been conducting participatory action research, among other things, in eleven countries (30 sites), beginning in 1999. We have also been concerned, from the beginning, that policymakers listen to what we were learning.

These are some of the approaches we have taken:

1. At the beginning of our research, we created steering committees in each of the countries where we work. These committees were composed of people we considered likely to affect policy (government officials, academics, NGO staff, project personnel), and who could also guide us in research directions that would respond to current policy concerns. These committees met 2-4 times a year. They listened to updates from field staff, held discussions of important issues, and critiqued our work. They have been very useful, in most countries, in extending our results.
2. We also constituted an international steering committee. This included three respected experts in relevant fields (Don Gilmour, Irene Guijt, and Peter Frost) plus a representative from three of the national committees. The purpose of this committee was most essentially to provide us scientific critique and guidance; but we also anticipated that their involvement would serve to make our findings more widely accessible to others (including policymakers). The committee met once or twice a year.
3. We wrote policy briefs---short documents (1-5 pages)---that addressed particularly pertinent policy concerns, based on findings from our research. These were emailed, and photocopied and distributed, either to policymakers or to local communities.
4. In some sites, we worked with local communities to publish local newsletters. These built on community experience, addressed local issues, provided information about new national policies and the effects of national policies in other areas, legal education, and so on. Some policymakers found these newsletters useful.
5. We published a program newsletter every quarter (*ACM News*) on the web. Initially intended as an internal sharing mechanism, it soon expanded to serve a wider audience of others interested in our findings, including policymakers, NGOs, academics, and project personnel (available from r.koesnadi@cgiar.org).

6. We have routinely attended professional meetings and policy forums, and written brief articles for newsletters and Porex (a CIFOR-based listserv that targets consultants and others who directly affect policymakers), reporting on our various findings.
7. We write articles, reports and books to make our findings available. Sometimes these make their way into the hands of policymakers.

We are not yet satisfied with our success at influencing policy, but we do feel we've had some successes. We have come to several conclusions, based on these efforts to influence policy. These are

1. Policymakers do not have time to read the kinds of long accounts that anthropologists typically produce. They tend to consider us "wordy." I see two approaches to dealing with this. First, we should try to summarize our main points in a few bullet points on a page. Second, when we write long analyses, we should take the next step of writing out, as briefly and clearly as possible, the policy implications of our findings. Anthropologists avoid doing this a) because we think the policy implications are obvious (they are not); or b) we are afraid we may be wrong (with more information on the subjects we study, we are more likely to be right than policymakers' other sources of information). Such practical, policy implications can be abstracted from longer documents and shared with the relevant policymakers.
2. Many anthropologists enter the policy context from a very critical stance. What appears in some cases to be "knee jerk" criticism reduces our ability to influence policymakers. Many feel that they must always be on the defensive when dealing with us. A strategy that views policymakers and their views as subject to ethnographic analysis, one that recognizes the constraints under which they operate and the difficulty of making decisions in complex, changing circumstances, is more effective if we want to have influence. This does not mean we should whitewash what we are learning, but rather that we should use diplomatic, understanding ways of communicating our observations.
3. Direct involvement of policymakers in field work is an effective way to strengthen their ability to understand the complexities we typically want to portray. Many proponents of RRA and PRA have noted the advantages of involving policymakers in fieldwork; and we have found this to be a very direct way to change policymakers' views. This is also an excellent way for researchers to strengthen their own ability to address relevant policy concerns.
4. Timeliness is a critical element in influencing policymakers. Policy contexts change with remarkable speed, and policymakers are unable to wait for our long term studies to be complete. Involving them directly in our research is one way of keeping them up to date on our ongoing findings, and also allowing us to tailor our research to their concerns. We are often learning things that are very important for policymakers, but because of our own ignorance of policy issues at a given time, we do not share knowledge that could be crucial, in a timely fashion.
5. Real attempts to reach policymakers take time---more than we expected, and I suspect more than many anthropologists will be prepared to give.