



# Are health researchers policy advocates?

## INSTITUTIONALIZING RESEARCH-TO-POLICY TRANSLATION COMPETENCIES FOR RESEARCHERS

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### POLICY BRIEF

#### KEY MESSAGES

- An effective evidence-based policy formation requires the **provision of scientifically sound, relevant, and easy-to-understand information to policymakers.**
- Many **researchers struggle to identify and relay actionable messages to policymakers** and to select advocates or other intermediaries to communicate these messages.
- **Effective research-to-policy translation requires researchers to combine technical expertise with policy navigation, strategic communication, stakeholder collaboration, and intrinsic motivation** to drive meaningful impact.
- **Institutional support is needed to enhance research-to-policy translation competencies among researchers**, including funding, capacity building, collaboration, stakeholder engagement, and awareness.

To improve the uptake of research in policy decision-making processes, evidence should be structured and packaged in a way that is actionable and relevant for policymakers, including information on local contexts and institutional mandates. Many researchers struggle to identify and relay actionable messages to policymakers and to select advocates or other intermediaries to communicate these messages. This policy brief discusses the experiences and insights of researchers, policymakers, and stakeholders regarding research-to-policy translation competencies. Based on the key findings of a study that examined the barriers and facilitators of research-to-policy translation, as well as a competency framework, this paper recommends ways for the government and research stakeholders to institutionalize research-to-policy translation competencies among researchers. It also proposes interventions to improve researchers' research-to-policy translation competencies by strengthening institutional support, enhancing capacity-building, and fostering collaboration with policymakers and stakeholders.

#### Statement of Health Policy Issue

Although efforts have been made to improve the uptake of evidence in the development of public health policy, much remains to be done, especially in low- and middle-income countries (LMICs), including the Philippines. To improve the uptake of research in policy decision-making processes, evidence should be structured and packaged in a way that is actionable and relevant to policymakers, including information on local contexts and institutional mandates (Topp et al., 2018). Many researchers struggle to identify and relay actionable messages to policymakers and to select advocates or other intermediaries to communicate these messages (Damba, Mtshali & Chimbari, 2022). The significance of interfaces between research producers and users is that research is more likely to be used when there is interaction across this interface (Hanney et al., 2003). Researchers themselves were

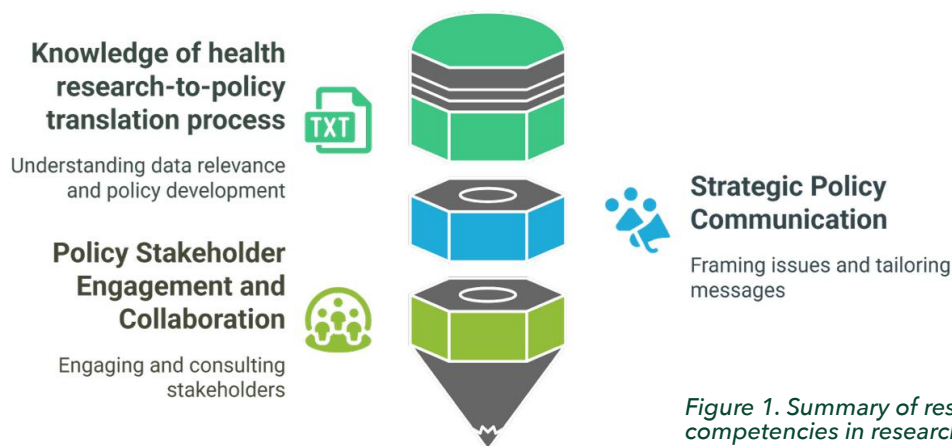
described as factors affecting the uptake of their research. Several scholars have argued that one crucial element is the researcher's knowledge translation competencies, including knowledge, skills, and attitudes, as well as their ability to translate research into policy recommendations (Hinchcliff et al., 2010).

The Philippine government has committed to fostering a culture where evidence directly informs policy and practice, and diverse stakeholders participate in the decision-making process in the health sector (PNHRS, 2022). For instance, as articulated in the National Unified Health Research Agenda (NUHRA) 2023-2028, health governance and policies under the Health systems strengthening towards UHC theme is part of the priority research agendas. Many interventions have also been developed to support research-to-policy translation, such as funding, training,

and a 3-minute policy pitch competition. Despite several programs designed to promote research-to-policy activity among researchers in the Philippines, such as training and funding, enabling systems to proactively harness research-to-policy translation remain inadequate. Lastly, the lack of clear and practical research-to-policy translation competencies for researchers contributes to an insufficient understanding of the needs and capacity of Filipino health researchers.

### **Proposed researchers' competencies in research-to-policy translation**

Successful translation of health research into policy requires diverse competencies beyond research methodological expertise. Based on the current research project, researchers must generate high-quality evidence, navigate complex policy processes, communicate effectively with stakeholders, and build sustainable collaborations. Through key informant interviews and focus group discussions, this study identified three major competency categories: comprehensive knowledge of the research-to-policy translation process, strategic policy communication, and policy stakeholder engagement and collaboration. **Figure 1** illustrates these three key categories and their role in strengthening research-to-policy translation.



*Figure 1. Summary of researchers' competencies in research-to-policy translation.*

A comprehensive understanding of the health research-to-policy translation process is essential for researchers to navigate the complexities of policymaking effectively. Awareness of the steps involved in policy development, from drafting to submission, is crucial in ensuring that research findings align with policymakers' needs and priorities. Researchers also must consider the procedural requirements and identify the appropriate audiences to maximize the impact of their findings on policy decisions. A good understanding of the policy process and the context surrounding policy priorities supported the uptake of research (Hinchcliff et al., 2010). One crucial knowledge translation competency is the researcher's understanding of the policy and institutional context: the pragmatic understanding of organizational practices and knowing "how things really work" in specific organizational settings and/or local healthcare systems (Bowen & Martens, 2005). This competency encompasses knowledge of practical environments that influence the application of new knowledge and skills.

Strategic communication helps health researchers to present findings that resonate with government stakeholders. Knowledge translation simplifies technical studies into accessible formats, such as policy briefs or summaries, to promote broader understanding. Finally, researchers must cultivate strong relationship-building and partnership management skills to foster trust and sustain meaningful collaborations. Networking and collaborative learning were noted as key enablers for effectively engaging stakeholders and creating opportunities for shared learning.

### **Facilitators and barriers to research-to-policy translation competencies**

The current study found several factors that contributed to the improvement of research-to-policy translation competencies among researchers (**Table 1**). Institutional initiative and support, such as capacity building and funding, were considered critical facilitators to help researchers improve their knowledge and skills. Specifically, institutional initiatives that provided an avenue for researchers to engage policymakers through formal partnerships and regular interaction were commonly stated facilitators. These mechanisms and structures provide direction and establish an institutional "push" that facilitates the translation of research into policy activities, encouraging the uptake of the practice among researchers.



Strategic collaboration with policymakers, local government units (LGUs), and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) ensures that research findings have an impact on decision-making processes. Lastly, effective communication through policy briefs, dialogues, and knowledge translation tools enhances accessibility and stakeholder engagement, making research more actionable for policymakers.

*Table 1. Facilitators of research-to-policy translation competency*

| Facilitators   | Specific Examples   |
|--|---|
| <b>Institutional push through organizational guidelines and structures</b>         | <p>Agency support for policy proposals</p> <p>PCHRD policy grant</p> <p>Inclusion of policies in the PCHRD's 6Ps project output</p> |
| <b>Provision of institutional support to researchers</b>                           | <p>Training support (e.g., policy brief writing, strategic communication, etc.)</p>   |
| <b>Building strategic partnerships through stakeholder engagement and advocacy</b> | <p>Strong researcher network with relevant policy-makers</p> <p>Collaboration with NGOs, LGUs, and advocacy groups</p>              |

Several barriers hinder the translation of research into policy (**Table 2**). Limited resources, lack of dedicated personnel, and insufficient training prevent researchers from effectively engaging in policymaking. Training gaps further restrict researchers' ability to develop policy-relevant outputs, while communication barriers, such as technical language and low stakeholder engagement, reduce the research's impact. Without strong advocacy and structured support, research struggles to inform policy decisions.

Furthermore, university norms, such as criteria for academic promotion, also pose a challenge in moving research from scholarly journals and universities to policymakers. Most researchers are evaluated by the number of articles they publish, not by the number of policies they influence.

*Table 2. Barriers to research-to-policy translation competency*

| Barriers                                 | Specific Examples  |
|--|--|
| <b>Institutional Barriers</b>            | <p>Leadership transitions impacting policy continuity</p> <p>Misalignment of research priorities with policy needs</p> <p>Institutional focus on academic metrics over policy impact</p> |
| <b>Resource and Capacity Constraints</b> | <p>Insufficient staff dedicated to policy translation</p> <p>Limited funding for policy translation initiatives</p>  |
| <b>Training and Capacity Gaps</b>        | <p>Gap in awareness of the research-to-policy process among researchers</p> <p>Lack of training in policy writing and stakeholder engagement</p>   |



## Policy Recommendations

This project proposes the following key policy and program recommendations to improve and institutionalize research-to-policy translation competencies for researchers, based on the project's key findings. The specific recommendations can be found in **Table 3**.

### POLICY DEVELOPMENT AND INSTITUTIONALIZATION

Strengthening research-to-policy translation competency requires a policy support to create an environment where research can inform policy, both researchers and decision makers must collaborate and jointly invest in the process of bringing evidence to policy—by creating incentives for researchers to consider or discuss policy implications and for policymakers to seek out research results or to help shape research agendas.

At the national level, institutionalizing frameworks such as a research-to-policy translation competency framework and a centralized repository of research findings, along with sustained funding for policy translation and strategic communication, is essential to provide policymakers with timely, evidence-based insights.

A significant limitation observed in research-to-policy translation efforts is that many researchers only consider policy implications after the research is completed. To improve policy uptake, policy considerations should be embedded at the research design stage. This means that before a study begins, researchers should conduct consultations with relevant policymakers, government agencies, and community stakeholders to ensure that their research aligns with current policy needs and national health priorities.

Lastly, to encourage researchers to prioritize policy translation for projects with policy implications, funding agencies should offer funding support to those who actively engage in policy-related activities, such as the PCHRD's Policy Translation Grant (POLISEE). This model can be expanded and adopted by other funding agencies and regional consortia. This funding support may include additional research grants for dissemination efforts, travel grants for policy conferences, and awards for outstanding projects that translate research into policy.

### CAPACITY BUILDING AND TRAINING

Sustained financial support from government agencies beyond the Department of Science and Technology - Philippine Council for Health Research and Development (DOST-PCHRD) is essential to fund research-to-policy translation training and dissemination efforts. Expanding financial resources will also ensure that researchers and institutions have adequate support to engage in research translation activities. Additionally, institutionalizing a national pool of policy communicators will enhance the dissemination of research findings to policymakers and the public, improving the visibility and utilization of health research in policy development.

A key strategy is the implementation of structured, long-term capacity-building programs to equip researchers with the necessary skills for policy advocacy. These structured programs will provide sustained learning opportunities, allowing researchers to develop expertise in policy engagement over time. Furthermore, strengthening policy communication training will improve researchers' ability to present findings in a manner that is accessible and actionable for policymakers, increasing the likelihood of research uptake in policy formulation.



**Effective research-to-policy translation requires researchers to combine technical expertise with policy navigation, strategic communication, stakeholder collaboration, and intrinsic motivation to drive meaningful impact.**







Table 3. Specific recommendations on policy, training, and collaboration at the national, consortia, and stakeholder levels

|   | National-Level (PNHRS)  | Consortia-Level   | Institution-Level  |
|---|---|---|--|
| POLICY DEVELOPMENT AND INSTITUTIONALIZATION | Institutionalize research-to-policy translation competency tool   | Establish formal mechanisms for direct collaboration between research consortia, coordinating bodies, and policymakers.                       | Establish a focal person/liaison to enhance research-to-policy communication   |
|   | Establish a centralized national repository for health research to improve accessibility and evidence utilization.                            | Advocate for amendments in institutional policies to provide protected time for researchers engaging in research translation.                 | Involve policymakers and funding agencies in prioritizing and supporting research translation efforts                                      |
|   | Develop a national inventory of policies derived from research to enhance policy transparency and accountability                              | Ensure dedicated funding for research dissemination, including policy brief development and presentation of findings.                         |  |
| CAPACITY BUILDING AND TRAINING              | Allocate sustained financial support from government agencies beyond DOST-PCHRD for research-to-policy translation training and dissemination | Implement structured, long-term capacity building programs (e.g., six-month weekend courses) to equip researchers with policy advocacy skills | Integrate research-to-policy translation training into the organization's capacity-building program for researchers and staff.             |
|   | Institutionalize a national pool of policy communicators to enhance research dissemination to policymakers and the public                     | Strengthen policy communication training for researchers to improve the accessibility of research outputs                                     |  |
| COLLABORATION AND STAKEHOLDER ENGAGEMENT    | Conduct regular research-to-policy events to facilitate knowledge exchange and showcase best practices.                                       | Facilitate knowledge-sharing platforms between consortia and policymakers   | Engage local governments and communities in research projects, from data gathering to sustainability planning, to improve policy relevance |

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