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## ENGAGED EXCELLENCE

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# Choosing between Research Rigour or Support for Advocacy Movements, a False Dichotomy?

**Katherine Pittore, Dolf J.H. te Lintelo,  
James Georgalakis and Tumaini Mikindo**

**Abstract** Using the case study of the Hunger and Nutrition Commitment Index (HANCI), this article seeks to answer key questions relating to the conceptualisation and operationalisation of engaged excellence, exploring the tensions between research and policy advocacy. While the concept of 'engaged excellence' recognises that excellence can be constituted by high-quality research as well as by research that supports efforts to influence policy, it could be more specific in taking position on discussions that situate these to be mutually incompatible. Evidence from multiple contexts has shown that research is much more likely to influence policy if researchers engage with civil society. Research for international development, which explicitly aims to reduce inequalities, accelerate sustainability, and build more inclusive societies, can gain from active engagement with policy advocates. It is a false dichotomy to separate out research from research for advocacy, and there is much to be gained from such a collaboration.

**Keywords:** advocacy, policy engagement, civil society, hunger, nutrition.

In order for research to be engaged, researchers need to work with those whose lives will be impacted by the research. This definition of what the Institute of Development Studies (IDS) terms 'engaged excellence', however, fails to address the critical question of *how* this engagement will happen, and how the engagement process itself can strengthen research. There is an inherent tension around the role of researchers as advocates, and between policy-orientated research and evidence-based advocacy. Some of these tensions may arise from a belief that research is value-free. However, (policy) research is not neutral in its analysis. Even if exhibiting academic rigour and excellence, research is shaped by the political context in which it is produced and used to further the values of those who produce and commission it (Young and Quinn 2012). While one may accept that research is not value-free, deciding to actively engage with advocates and advocacy groups can be viewed with scepticism. Advocacy is viewed by some as an inappropriate activity for

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researchers as it is believed to undermine the neutrality of the research, and potentially to negatively affect research rigour. Some researchers have been more comfortable with a 'research uptake' model where researchers simply re-package research for non-academic audiences, believing this to be more neutral. However, this allows knowledge brokers and policymakers to cherry-pick the evidence that appears to support an existing position, and thus is no more neutral, and perhaps less rigorous, than engaging directly with advocates.

This tension around the role of researchers as advocates is illustrated by the UK government's plans to introduce an anti-advocacy clause into all grants which specifies that tax-payer money cannot be used to 'support activity intended to influence or attempt to influence Parliament, government or political parties... or attempting to influence legislative or regulatory action' (GOV.UK 2016a). This clause has been hugely controversial, especially within the research community. Initially, the government responded to these concerns by announcing that institutions of higher education would be excluded from the clause, eventually leading to a pause in its implementation in April 2016 (GOV.UK 2016b). This, however, raises the question that if research needs to be engaged, how, specifically will this engagement happen? And can this engagement also serve to enhance research rigour?

In attempting to explore the 'how' of engaged excellence, IDS has further defined engaged excellence to be about producing high-quality, methodologically sound research which, we argue, can be enhanced by engaging with advocacy partners who are experts in the local political realities. Partners are able to provide a necessary understanding of the context, improving the likelihood that research is accepted. Developing a structured process of engagement between researchers and partners ensures that methodological rigour can be maintained. Building strong and enduring partnerships is essential to facilitate use of evidence by partners over a longer time frame, allowing research evidence to become a core element of their strategy (IDS 2015). This definition of engaged excellence builds upon work by others such as the Overseas Development Institute (ODI) who have developed an insightful conceptual framework to better understand the links between research and policy. It includes three distinct elements: the context, including the politics and institutions; good quality research evidence, including effective policy engagement and dissemination; and finally, the links between the researchers, knowledge brokers and policymakers and their various influences on one another (Crewe and Young 2002). IDS has built upon and expanded this conceptual model in its definition of engaged excellence, focusing on the critical importance of partnerships to enable contextualisation of the research.

This article will use the case study of the Hunger and Nutrition Commitment Index (HANCI) to answer key questions relating to the conceptualisation and operationalisation of engaged excellence, exploring the tensions between research and policy advocacy; specifically exploring

how engagement can take place. This article argues that while the concept of ‘engaged excellence’ usefully recognises that excellence can be constituted by high-quality research as well as by research that supports efforts to influence policy, it could be more specific in taking position on discussions that situate these to be mutually incompatible. The debates about ‘research versus research for advocacy’ posit a false dichotomy. Rather researchers can fruitfully support evidence-based advocacy and strengthen civil society movements in their efforts to influence policy, without compromising the rigour and methodological robustness of the research. This analysis shows that where research is developed for the purpose of advocacy, and research evidence is critically examined by researchers together with policy advocates, its chances of usage, and social and policy relevance can be dramatically improved. Crucially, this can be achieved without compromising research rigour. As development is about fostering progressive change in the world, researchers cannot sit on the fence. While their research cannot be value-free, they must adhere to the disciplinary logics and norms for conducting rigorous research. As they do so, there is much to be gained in collaborating with advocacy groups that are better placed to influence public policy.

### **1 Navigating the research to policy advocacy nexus**

There is disagreement among researchers about the extent to which they should be involved in policy-influencing processes. Some researchers believe that those who take a public stance on a particular issue may be perceived to lack objectivity, which may have implications for the acceptability of their research (Brownson *et al.* 2006). The role which researchers can, or are willing, to play in the ‘advocacy’ space also depends on how advocacy is being defined, varying from raising awareness of an issue to communicating the findings of research to policymakers, to taking an active role in encouraging the adoption of a specific policy (Stoto *et al.* 2006). In some fields, researchers are expected to engage with advocacy. The American College of Epidemiology, for example, expects researchers to report findings in an understandable way and to serve as advocates for affected communities (Brownson *et al.* 2006). At the furthest end of the spectrum are researchers who actively support developing others’ capacity for engagement, moving from research for development to a process of research as development (Datta 2012). Recognising that ‘researchers no longer have a monopoly over knowledge production and communication’ (*ibid.*: 10), it is critical to support and actively engage with advocates and others working actively to affect change (Crewe and Young 2002; IDS 2015).

If researchers want to influence policy, they must engage others (Court and Maxwell 2005). While there are growing donor pressures for development research to demonstrate (policy) impact, it has long been known that there is rarely a direct linear relation between a piece of research and policy change (Petticrew 2004). Court and Young’s (2003) study of 50 case studies from around the world underwrites this argument, and finds that usually impact took place over time and required significant, strong, purposeful advocacy efforts. The

definition of policy advocacy, for the purpose of this article and the conceptualisation of engaged excellence, moves beyond the idea of simply communicating research findings to policymakers to a more encompassing definition:

[T]he process of negotiating and mediating a dialogue through which influential networks, opinion leaders and ultimately decision makers take ownership of your ideas, evidence and proposals and subsequently act on them (Young and Quinn 2012: 26).

However, there are inherent tensions between the worldview and motivations of researchers and policymakers. Researchers tend to focus on more theoretical concepts, often developing recommendations which are seen as impractical to actually implement and are conveyed through academic jargon. Policymakers tend to have a more pragmatic worldview which is shaped by budget or capacity restrictions, political will and budget cycles, and are much more concerned with politics and bureaucracy (Young and Quinn 2012). 'Knowledge brokers' or those who have personal relationships with both researchers and policymakers and understand both roles can be key to knowledge translation and exchange (Mitton *et al.* 2007). Policy advocates can be effective knowledge brokers, helping to bridge this divide, translating academic findings into something grounded in the local context and useful to policymakers. In turn, researchers can decide to focus their efforts more directly to be in the service of policy advocates. Multiple case studies from a number of sectors in India seeking to bridge the research policy divide found that 'some of the best examples of success have arisen when researchers and civil society work well together' (Saxena 2005). However, these types of linkages are not always common, as a result of a poorly developed theory of change on the part of the researcher, assuming, for example, that new evidence will automatically lead to policy change. This means that researchers often fail to cultivate support from key allies and networks, who can interpret the research evidence's uses within particular political, cultural and social contexts (Klugman 2011). In the following sections, we set out how researchers in the HANCI project have attempted to develop a specific strategy of engagement with such civil society networks working in the area of nutrition.

## **2 What is the Hunger and Nutrition Commitment Index (HANCI)?**

'Framing of undernutrition reduction as an apolitical issue is short sighted and self-defeating. Political calculations are at the basis of effective coordination between sectors, national and subnational levels, private sector engagement, resource mobilisation, and state accountability to its citizens.'

'The Politics of Reducing Malnutrition: Building Commitment and Accelerating Progress', *The Lancet* (Gillespie *et al.* 2013)

Over the last seven years, there has been a change in framing of hunger and undernutrition, from being purely about technical solutions to framing the problem as one of political will. In 2008, the Hunger Task

Force of Irish Aid identified food insecurity as being the result of the collective failures of governments at national and international levels to prioritise eradicating hunger (Hunger Task Force 2008). In 2010, the Hunger Reduction Commitment Index (precursor to HANCI) sought to quantify governments' political will to tackle hunger (te Lintelo *et al.* 2014b). Launched in 2010, the Scaling Up Nutrition (SUN) Movement aims to create an enabling environment for nutrition by developing strong in-country leadership and high-level commitment to addressing undernutrition (SUN 2012). However, in order for SUN to be successful in achieving and maintaining global reductions in undernutrition, sustained political and financial commitment to effective multi-sectoral action to address undernutrition will be required (Pelletier *et al.* 2013). A review of the literature undertaken by Gillespie *et al.* (2013) on building an enabling environment for nutrition found that political will can be generated through deliberate action. However, because governments are focused on short-term gains, real change requires constant pressure and advocacy from civil society (Saxena 2005). In the context of engaged excellence, this means that research to support creating an enabling environment for fighting hunger and undernutrition must be embedded in local political contexts and used continually to support ongoing advocacy work undertaken by civil society groups.

The HANCI builds metrics of political commitment to addressing hunger and undernutrition through a package of linked products and processes. The global HANCI ranks 45 high-burden countries on their political commitment to hunger and reducing undernutrition by looking at 22 indicators across three broad categories: laws, policies and spending. These indicators can be controlled by governments, unlike outcome indicators (e.g. the number of children under five years of age that are underweight), which may be affected by many factors beyond a government's control (te Lintelo *et al.* 2013b). To complement the index, which draws on secondary data, HANCI also includes expert perception surveys, which provide a deeper, country-context-sensitive analysis of political commitment to hunger reduction, and improving nutrition (te Lintelo and Lakshman 2015). This draws on structured surveys with key stakeholders from government, academia, development partners, private sector and civil society in five countries (Bangladesh, Malawi, Nepal, Tanzania and Zambia).

Hunger and undernutrition remain major development challenges: undernutrition is an underlying cause of 45 per cent of under-five deaths, one in four children under the age of five are stunted and 795 million people are not able to consume a diet adequate for a healthy and productive life (Black *et al.* 2013; FAO 2015). In 2008, the *Lancet* series on maternal and child undernutrition brought together the evidence on preventing and treating child undernutrition, which demonstrated that nutrition interventions were some of the most cost-effective development interventions, and provided a broad consensus around what needed to be done to address undernutrition (Copenhagen Consensus Center 2008). However, while there is consensus on the technical solutions to

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**Box 1 HANCI methodology**

In developing an index, decisions must be made about what indicators are included and how to weight each of these indicators. HANCI uses a theory-based approach to select indicators which adequately measure hunger, undernutrition and government commitment to tackling these, as they are imprecise concepts and require several variables to measure them adequately. Three guiding principles were used to choose indicators: (1) that the indicator covered major aspects necessary to reduce hunger and improve nutrition including food availability, food access and food utilisation; (2) that there were indicators which represented different types of nutrition interventions including nutrition-specific interventions, nutrition-sensitive interventions, and those related to measuring the enabling environment; and (3) that indicators are simple and easily understood by a wide variety of stakeholders. A total of 22 indicators spanning laws, policies and spending are included in the index.

Once indicators had been selected, they had to be normalised which ensures that specific indicators do not have a greater weight simply because of their unit of measurement. HANCI used the normalisation procedure developed by the Human Development Index of the United Nations Programme to produce values for all indicators in the [0,1] range.

Once the indicators were normalised they were aggregated in two steps: aggregation of indicators to form composite indicators around three key themes: laws, policies and spending, individually for both hunger and undernutrition, and a second level of aggregation of the thematic composite indicators (hunger and nutrition) to form an overall composite indicator that is HANCI. When aggregating, HANCI applied a theory-driven weighting scheme which gives equal weight to each of the sub-indices, hunger and nutrition; and each of the three themes: laws, policies and spending, within each of the sub-indices.

Finally, sensitivity analysis was carried out to check the robustness of the index. To do this, the index was also constructed using six different normalisation and weighting techniques. Spearman's<sup>1</sup> rank correlation coefficients were used to assess how similar ranks were to each other using different methods for constructing the index. A high Spearman's correlation is seen when there is a significant re-ranking using alternative index methodologies for weighting and normalisation. In all six alternative methodologies used to reconstruct HANCI the rank correlations are above 0.7, which demonstrates the robustness of the index (te Lintelo *et al.* 2013a).

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combat undernutrition, global rates of stunting, a common measure of chronic undernutrition, remain stubbornly high. If the world continues on its current trajectory, international stunting targets developed by the World Health Assembly for 2025 will not be reached until 2130 (IFPRI 2016). In terms of hunger, the world produces more than enough food for everyone, but unequal access to resources prevents people from being able to access adequate food for a healthy and productive life (FAO 2012). Why is it then that despite having the technical solutions to tackle undernutrition, and enough food to feed everyone in the world, that we still have such high levels of undernutrition and hunger? One key aspect is insufficient political will, which can be demonstrated through purposeful action around legislation, public policies and public spending to tackle these challenges (te Lintelo and Lakshman 2015).

The theory of change by which HANCI aims to increase political will and support an enabling environment for nutrition is set out in the first HANCI report:

(a) by credibly measuring commitment it will strengthen our ability to hold governments to account for their efforts in reducing undernutrition and hunger; (b) if civil society is better able to hold governments to account, it can apply pressure and ensure that hunger and undernutrition are put high on development agendas; (c) governments can hold themselves to account in their efforts to keep undernutrition high on the agenda: the index is constructed on the basis of performance in different areas (legal, policy expenditure); and (d) commitments can be linked to outcomes, to allow all to assess the ‘value added’ of different commitments and efforts (te Lintelo *et al.* 2013b: 1).

This article will specifically focus on how this theory of change is operationalised through the concept of engaged excellence, and how researchers have actively engaged with and supported civil society and governments to understand and use the evidence generated.

### **3 Producing high-quality research**

Engaged excellence is dependent on the production of high-quality research. This is reflected in the first step in HANCI’s theory of change, which identifies the need to credibly measure government commitment to addressing hunger and undernutrition. Credibility is central in getting policymakers to use research findings. ‘Policy research is not conducted in an ivory tower, and the legitimacy of the researcher and his/her organisation (not to mention the advocacy campaign itself) is dependent on the foundation of a sound research project’ (Young and Quinn 2012: 46). However, credibility is also bestowed by proxy, through the reputation of the research institute (Court and Young 2003). Within the context of HANCI, producing high-quality research is essential to facilitate the use of the evidence by partners and the utility of the research in supporting advocacy work. When presenting HANCI to policymakers, demonstration of its methodological rigour is essential as the methodology has to stand up to tough scrutiny (especially for countries

with low rankings in the index). This rigour is demonstrated by a strong research methodology (see Box 1) as well as publication in academic journals (e.g. te Lintelo *et al.* 2014b: 115–28). Overseas advocacy partners must also be convinced of the quality of the methodology and evidence base if they are to endorse and adopt these in their advocacy messages. They too, are closely scrutinised by governments, and poorly underpinned advocacy can have potentially serious reputational and existential consequences. Often being small organisations, advocacy partners seek to have carefully built relationships with policymakers and members of Parliament (MPs). Their ownership and say over how to present research findings is essential for sustaining such relationships.

Policy-focused research substantially benefits from an analysis of context at its start (Young *et al.* n.d.; Court and Young 2003; Young and Quinn 2012). Early engagement of policy advocacy groups helped to situate, translate and interpret global rankings within country contexts. Policy advocacy groups became knowledge intermediaries, and guided engagements with policymakers. In this respect, the expert surveys conducted by local consultants provided country-specific insights, enhancing acceptance of HANCI findings based on secondary data analysis by government officials and advocacy groups.

#### **4 Co-constructing and mobilising evidence for impact**

Another pillar of engaged excellence is concerned with the communication and mobilisation of co-produced evidence and knowledge. A recent World Bank study found that a third of the PDFs published on their website have never been downloaded (Doemeland and Trevino 2014). High-quality research may never be found, let alone influence policy, without explicit engagement and communication strategies. By working with advocates, who understand local political opportunities and challenges and who are able to regularly engage with policymakers over long time frames, researchers are much more likely to have their research inform policymakers. Working with advocates has the additional advantage of allowing the researcher not to become an advocate him/herself, but rather support the former to best understand and use the evidence. Engagement between researchers and those using the research can occur at differing levels of intensity, and at different stages throughout the research process, moving from a one-way communication of information to a process whereby practitioners are empowered to use information (Brandt *et al.* 2013). Moving from simple research communication to a more structured process of engagement necessitates careful planning to clarify intentions, decide who to engage with, how to engage and the best form for this engagement to take (Datta 2012).

HANCI project activities sought to achieve such engagement in various ways. In addition to the tailored programme of activities (discussed in Section 5), HANCI also included a package of communications activities, products and knowledge exchange designed to facilitate its use by policy stakeholders at national and international levels. HANCI reports were launched at strategic moments, such as before the British

government hosted the G8 and the Nutrition for Growth event in June 2013, and prior to the launch of the *Lancet Nutrition Series* in May 2013, in order to inform policy debates and attract increased media interest (te Lintelo *et al.* 2016). These launches included press releases and social media engagement, and led to significant international and local interest including televised and radio interviews (Al Jazeera, the BBC, Radio Moscow, Radio Netherlands) as well as articles in various newspapers and development blogs (see *Assessing the Policy Impact of 'Indicators': A Process-Tracing Study of the Hunger and Nutrition Commitment Index* (te Lintelo *et al.* 2016) for a full list).

Court and Maxwell (2005) identified regional networks as an increasingly influential and important way to share information and promote evidence-based policy. Accordingly, the HANCI project sought and received support from the SUN Network International Civil Society Coordinators to circulate communication products throughout the global SUN Network. Some of the local policy advocates were further supported with drawing up country-specific press releases. As the SUN movement seeks to reposition nutrition as being about political will, and given that research is much more likely to be used by policymakers if it supports existing framings of the issue (Court and Young 2003), part of the utility of HANCI (and its predecessor, the Hunger Reduction Commitment Index) has been to provide a systematic evidence base to support this framing.

HANCI's communication strategy includes several best communication practices identified by a recent review by the Alliance for Useful Evidence: telling stories, using social media, creating a recognisable and respected brand and using a combination of communication channels (Breckon and Dodson 2016). For instance, a short animated film<sup>2</sup> was commissioned which framed hunger and nutrition as an issue of political commitment. The video invested a potentially dry and theoretical topic with emotional appeal designed to inspire and mobilise advocates for better nutrition outcomes. Additionally, consistent branding of website, and research and knowledge products such as scorecards, has strengthened the recognition of the HANCI brand. Having a strong communications strategy built into the project from the start ensured that the research was able to reach a much wider audience than would have been possible through partnership alone. Unexpected results included the government of Guatemala using its number one ranking in HANCI to highlight key achievements towards its electorate (Government of Guatemala 2015).

### **5 Co-constructing evidence-based policy advocacy messages in partnerships**

The second part of HANCI's theory of change looks at the role civil society can play in holding government to account: '[I]f civil society is better able to hold governments to account, it can apply pressure and ensure that hunger and undernutrition are put high on development agendas' (te Lintelo *et al.* 2013b: 2). Co-constructing knowledge, and bringing in others to support research interpretation and translation into local contexts is a key element of engaged excellence. In order to do that, building strong partnerships with key civil society organisations

(CSOs) and federated networks working on hunger and nutrition were developed from early on in five countries: Tanzania, Malawi, Zambia, Bangladesh and Nepal. Multi-year collaborations allowed for personal and institutional relationships to develop between the researchers and civil society groups.

In each of the five countries, a multistage process of engagement with partners was followed. In each country,<sup>3</sup> an initial workshop was attended by participants from CSOs working in the area of advocacy around hunger and nutrition. It created a space where civil society could freely express different opinions, both about the index and topical and timely areas of advocacy. For instance, in Malawi, the civil society workshop provided a forum for discussing a key advocacy priority: the suggested move of the coordinating body for nutrition from the office of the president, back to the Ministry of Health, where it had previously been located. This was a critical issue for civil society groups in Malawi at the time, which was also supported by HANCI evidence which ranks Malawi highly for having a multisector, multi-stakeholder coordinating body for nutrition.

The workshops were designed to support partners and networked organisations to critically understand the index methodology, including trade-offs involved in weighting choices adopted, and in both its strengths as well as its weaknesses. The workshops further facilitated participants to construct three to four priority policy advocacy messages, supported by HANCI evidence, which would feed into an advocacy meeting with government actors the following day. At the end of each of the workshops, participants nominated someone who would present the agreed upon, evidence-based advocacy messages to a meeting with government officials.

This meeting comprised officials from all relevant ministries including health, agriculture, planning, nutrition, education and finance, etc. Here, researchers presented and explained the research and key findings, and the appointed member of civil society shared the key advocacy priorities, backed up by the research findings, which proved a powerful combination. Subsequent discussions provided opportunities for research findings to be backed up by personal testimonies, to enhance the chances of policy influencing (Stamatakis, McBride and Brownson 2010). For instance, in Malawi, which ranks second on the HANCI 2014 index, one of the highlighted areas for improvement was women's access to agricultural land. While Malawian law gives men and women equal rights, the index showed that in practice, laws are not enforced and discriminatory practices against women continue, which increases their vulnerability to hunger and undernutrition (te Lintelo *et al.* 2014a). At this meeting, a female farmer from the Coalition of Women Farmers spoke eloquently about how discriminatory practices affected her: 'The land bill should allow people to register land, but once a woman is married, the husband gets the land. I have five daughters, if my husband dies his side of the family will get all the land' (COWFA representative August 2014).<sup>4</sup> This combination of strong evidence, grounded in the local context, and the capability of the index to be deconstructed and cater to specific advocacy needs and

personal testimonies of partner organisations, has been essential in moving HANCI from simply a research product into an advocacy tool which can support the various ambitions and goals of partners.

For the researchers, this staged workshop process enabled the research findings to be shared in an accessible way, ensuring that any questions about the methodology or data could be answered. This reduced the likelihood that research findings were misinterpreted, oversimplified or distorted; an important challenge in translating research into effective policy messages (Court and Maxwell 2005). Researchers also had the opportunity to better understand the local context and current advocacy priorities of partners. For civil society, the workshops offered the opportunity to learn about new research findings which they could use to support their advocacy and to network with others working on similar issues. Additionally, partnering with a respected research institute provided legitimacy and enabled novel access to government officials and MPs, in part through financial support for such meetings.

The workshops also supported researchers with advice on how to best present research findings to government officials. For example, in Zambia, which occupied a low spot on the global commitment rankings, CSOs advised researchers to first present positive findings, and explain in detail all the indicators, to prevent government officials from dismissing the findings outright. Moreover, Zambian partners highlighted that government acceptance of findings would be higher if published government data was used. For instance, vitamin A supplementation coverage data from the government of Zambia would be deemed more legitimate than using others' (e.g. UNICEF) data. Zambian partners also devised a process through which government actors were informed about key findings, and given the opportunity to comment on and provide published data for the index, prior to its official release. This approach supported retaining a constructive relation with, and greater chances of influencing, the government.

Influencing policy is a complex, and time-consuming process, involving understanding, and using, a range of advocacy tools and processes and developing a long-term policy-influencing strategy, which researchers have neither the time, nor expertise nor the mandate to carry out by themselves (Morton, Shaxson and Greenland 2012). However, partners who were both research users and interpreters of evidence were well placed, with support from researchers, to identify which evidence had strategic value to their advocacy goals. This approach is markedly different to a 'research uptake' model where researchers are expected to package research for non-academic audiences which allows knowledge brokers and policymakers to cherry-pick the evidence that appears to support an existing position. Accordingly, CSO partnerships, an essential element of enabling engaged excellence, were critical for interpreting the value and significance of HANCI evidence within country-specific cultural, political and economic contexts, to enhance the likelihood of achieving policy impact (Court and Young 2003).

## 6 Using advocacy partnerships to effectively engage policy elites

The third part of the HANCI theory of change looks at how governments can hold themselves to account in their efforts to keep undernutrition high on the agenda (te Lintelo *et al.* 2013b). This section looks at the interplay between civil society, governments and researchers and how the index has been used by civil society to engage policy elites, to generate a dialogue around hunger and nutrition, inspiring policy elites to take action. This is where the multiple elements of engaged excellence come together, with rigorous research methodology and effective communications convincing policy advocates and others to use the research evidence in their advocacy, building upon existing relationships with the political elite.

In Zambia and Tanzania, policy advocacy groups and researchers worked with MPs to advocate on key nutrition issues.

In Tanzania, four HANCI-inspired advocacy messages were developed, which were presented by the Tanzanian partner (the Partnership for Nutrition in Tanzania, PANITA) to the Parliamentary Group (PG) on Nutrition, Food Security and Child Rights in November 2013. This informal caucus was formed in 2011 specifically to promote nutrition within Parliament (Seballos, te Lintelo and Pittore 2015). The advocacy message that resonated the most with the PG was the finding from the expert surveys which showed that nutrition and hunger did not feature in political party manifestos, which are influential in guiding future government policy. As a general election was due in October 2015, MPs recognised an opportunity to campaign for nutrition. PANITA secured funds to commission an independent consultant to develop a set of politically neutral nutrition recommendations, which were commented on by key development partners, before being reviewed by the PG. The nutrition recommendations were presented in the shape of a booklet, to inform political parties' electoral manifestos. The booklet was launched in Parliament in February 2015 and subsequently promoted by PG members to key party members, including MPs in various parliamentary committees and members of manifesto drafting committees (Seballos *et al.* 2015).

In Zambia, researchers joined the Civil Society Alliance for Nutrition in Zambia (CSO-SUN Zambia) to meet a group of parliamentarians who shared an interest in nutrition issues. Discussions at the meeting, held in August 2014, illustrate how an index can stimulate a debate within government, especially when faced with less favourable rankings than countries that they see as similar to themselves. One MP remarked: 'How are we doing worse than Ethiopia? Or Rwanda?', sparking a heated discussion, in which another MP defended the efforts of Rwanda, which was doing remarkably well even with almost half the budget for a similar-sized population (Zambian MP, August 2014).<sup>5</sup>

The process of partnership, involving the sharing of research findings with partners, debating the various indicators and carefully sharing

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## Box 2 Reflections from the Partnership for Nutrition in Tanzania (PANITA)

The Executive Director of PANITA, Tumaini Mikindo, reflects on the value of its partnership with IDS over the last four years. Mr Mikindo identifies four key areas where the collaboration with IDS has supported PANITA's work, both on specific projects as well as its development as an organisation.

- 1 Primary data collection to increase the acceptability of results for government:** The 2014 HANCI expert perception surveys data were gathered by a leading expert from the Sokoine University of Agriculture. The use of a local expert to collect primary data had two advantages: it reduced the perception that issues of hunger and undernutrition were donor-driven; and the expert perception survey increased the validity and credibility of the HANCI results for Tanzanian government officials.
- 2 Providing additional evidence and research capacity:** Many CSOs that conduct nutrition advocacy in Tanzania are quite new and have limited capacity to conduct rigorous research. HANCI evidence helped fill this research gap and also provided evidence and support that was essential for PANITA to have credible and meaningful collaborations with MPs, which has been essential for PANITA's long-term strategy.
- 3 Resource mobilisation:** The engagement between IDS and PANITA was important in terms of resource mobilisation, as PANITA had limited resources and would not have been able to carry out as full a programme of strategic advocacy with key decision-makers without financial support from IDS. The funding from IDS was important beyond assisting with specific activities as it also supported PANITA's growth as an organisation, allowing it to demonstrate its ability to manage finances, thus increasing the organisation's chances of attracting future funding.
- 4 A mutually supportive relationship was key for working to get nutrition recommendations included in political manifestos.** Without this collaboration with IDS, PANITA would not have been able to take a leading role in developing the set of nutrition manifesto recommendations and engaging MPs to encourage them to include these recommendations in their parties' manifestos.

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findings that were potentially inflammatory, helped to improve the research acceptance. Multiple reviews have shown the importance of personal relationships (developed over time) in getting research evidence used by policymakers (Innvær *et al.* 2002; Mitton *et al.* 2007). In this way, in-country partners are critical knowledge brokers, conveying HANCI evidence to decision-makers.

## 7 Conclusion

Research for international development, which explicitly aims to reduce inequalities, accelerate sustainability, and build more inclusive and safe societies, can gain from active engagement with policy advocates. It is a false dichotomy to separate out research from research for advocacy, and there is much to be gained from such a collaboration. Nevertheless, these types of linkages are not always common, with researchers assuming that a narrow 'research dissemination' model, focusing on sharing findings at the end of research, will bring about policy change and eventual impact, and avoiding engagement with advocates or advocacy processes. Research can inform policy, but this usually takes long-term engagement by policy advocates who understand the context, the politics and have relationships with key stakeholders.

Far from compromising on the objectivity of the research, researcher-advocacy partnership can stress-test the research methodology, ensuring that it can stand up to and persuade vocal critics in policy environments about its value. Engaging with advocates and advocacy groups in a structured way may eliminate some of the tensions for researchers, such as perceptions that they are no longer objective. They are able to leave the job of more applied 'advocacy' which aims to ultimately bring about changes in policy and practice to civil society advocates, who are well grounded in the local realities, and have the expertise, relationships and mandate to carry out such a role. Having a structured process for sharing, discussing, debating and ultimately using the evidence for policy advocacy may also reduce researcher fears that evidence is being used incorrectly and can provide support to CSOs who may not have the capacity to carry out research on their own.

The HANCI case study demonstrates how engaged excellence, delivering high-quality research which is co-constructed by partners, and delivered in a way that ensures research findings are communicated and mobilised effectively, can operate in practice. In marked contrast to other international indexes, from the outset, HANCI researchers sought to move beyond simply producing an index to supporting potential uses of the index to understand the evidence, debate the strengths and weaknesses of the evidence and decide if, and how, to use the evidence in their advocacy work (te Lintelo *et al.* 2016). Working with partners over multiple years, and guided by their own advocacy strategies and objectives, ensured that the research was grounded in local realities, to support longer-term goals of partners, such as advocating to include nutrition in political manifestos in Tanzania.

Development research, which is aiming to achieve change in people's lives, can legitimately and fruitfully influence policy processes, and must be allowed to do so, unimpeded by regulations such as the anti-advocacy clause which may reduce the use of evidence in policy. Research alone, without a strong emphasis on policy engagement and communication, and translation of that research into local contexts and for local audiences (including communities and policymakers), and a sensitivity to the complexity of the policy process is likely to have a slimmer chance of effecting change. HANCI presents an example of how this type of engagement can work, how this can benefit both the research and the advocates, without compromising on the social science standards of 'objective' research, and ultimately improving the quality of the research to policy process.

### Notes

- 1 Spearman's rank is a non-parametric measure of rank-correlation between two variables which is the statistical dependence/ association between the rankings of the two variables. Spearman's rank correlation between two variables is high if they are similarly ranked (if the two are identically ranked they will have a Spearman's rank correlation of 1). If the two variables are differently ranked Spearman's rank correlation will be low (or -1 if exactly opposite).
- 2 [www.youtube.com/watch?v=PKv6G0Zw4UI](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PKv6G0Zw4UI).
- 3 Except Bangladesh, which followed a different process based on the partner's own priorities.
- 4 Workshop notes.
- 5 Workshop notes.

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