



Bridging the gap between research and policy through co-creation

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- This study explores whether research partnerships between academics and policymakers lead to greater evidence utilisation in programmatic decisions and highlights conditions under which such partnerships succeed in bringing policy change.
- Findings show that research projects designed and implemented with policymakers are 17-20% more likely to lead to a change in policy.
- The election cycle in the country where the research project is implemented strongly affects the timing of partnership formation and whether partnerships result in policy change.
- A window of opportunity for partnership formation and evidence uptake opens in the first two years of the term. This is especially true for researchers who are not in top economic departments, as they are the most affected by the election cycle.

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Introduction

The early 2000s marked a period of heightened emphasis on accountability and results in the administration and management of public policy in low- and middle-income countries. This trend was captured by a pivotal series of High Level Fora on Aid Effectiveness, set against the backdrop of the Millennium Development Goals. This shift towards evidence-based policymaking occurred concurrently with a transformative change in the field of development economics, characterised by a greater focus on impact evaluation research and the use of randomised controlled trials. However, merely producing research on potentially effective interventions does not ensure their use by policymakers due to well-known challenges, including information frictions, limited implementation capacity, or political constraints.

A new approach to research production and dissemination has gained traction among development economists to bridge the gap between research and policy. This approach, often termed “co-creation,” is characterised by close collaborations between policymakers and researchers in the design and implementation of research projects. The path from research partnerships to evidence uptake seems straightforward. On the one hand, academics are likely to engage in more policy-relevant projects as they gain insights into the interests of policymakers and access to exclusive sites and datasets. On the other, policymakers are exposed to relevant research outputs that not only include study findings but also crucial operational information on implementation.

Yet, the question remains: do these researcher-policymaker collaborations lead to tangible changes in policy decisions? When and by whom are these partnerships successfully formed? These questions are critical for guiding research production and dissemination, but they have been largely overlooked in the economic literature. This gap in empirical evidence stems from the lack of availability of data on the policy outcomes of research projects.

Overview of the project

This study aims to fill this empirical gap by investigating two key questions: first, whether research projects developed in partnership between researchers and policymakers are more likely to lead to policy change; and second, how political constraints affect the timing and success of these partnerships. The study is conducted in collaboration with the International Growth Centre (IGC), which has set up a comprehensive data collection infrastructure to monitor the policy developments resulting from the projects it has supported since its inception. Leveraging the organisation's internal records, a dataset comprising 511

research projects carried out from 2009 to 2019 was compiled, with measures of partnership and evidence uptake constructed at the project level.

A manual review of project proposals and implementation reports was conducted to list all entities involved in the project design and implementation and to identify “policymakers,” which predominantly consist of government bodies, public administrations, and some large NGOs and social enterprises. One-third of the projects were developed through researcher-policymaker partnerships or “co-created.” Regarding evidence uptake, the study entailed scrutinising policy impact reports produced by IGC and documenting every instance where the project led to an observable change in programmatic decisions, operational methods of a policymaker, or the initiation of new research. By this criterion, 9% of the projects in the sample demonstrated at least one occurrence of evidence uptake.

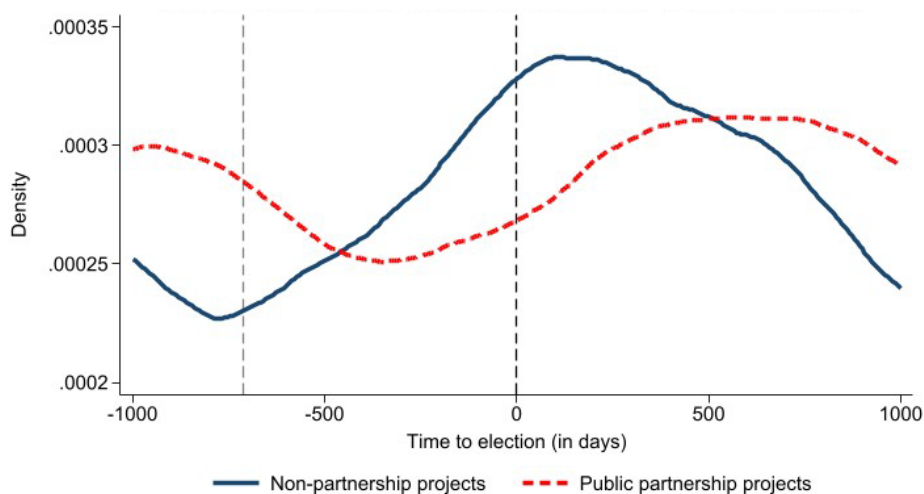
The sample was mostly comprised of impact evaluations, including RCTs and natural experiments, but also included other causal studies, lab-in-the-field experiments, and a few descriptive and qualitative studies. Most of the projects were conducted in South Asia, West Africa, and East Africa. Notably, the sample included a quarter of the RCTs referenced in a 2016 review paper by Abhijit Banerjee, Esther Duflo, and Michael Kremer, which discusses the significance of experimental studies in development economics research.

Key findings

A strong relationship exists between research partnerships and evidence uptake. Projects designed and implemented alongside policymakers are 17-20% more likely to lead to evidence utilisation, from an average of 3% among non-partnered projects. Importantly, projects conducted with policymakers are not less likely, on average, to lead to peer-reviewed publications, indicating that these collaborations do not sacrifice academic rigour for policy relevance.

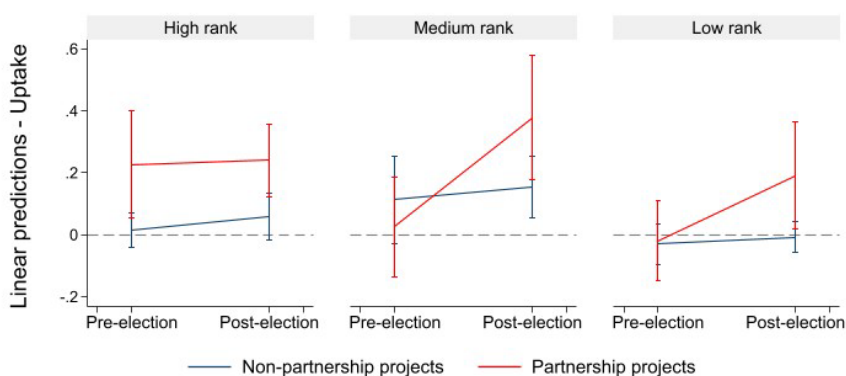
The timing of partnership formation and the effectiveness of partnership in yielding evidence utilisation are significantly influenced by the election cycle. Proposals submitted within two years of an election are about 10% less likely to form partnerships, a trend more pronounced in democracies, suggesting that the political climate discourages policymaker engagement with researchers due to heightened competition and uncertainty. Additionally, collaborations established during the pre-election period are 15% less likely to lead to evidence utilisation. This result is unchanged when restricting the analysis to elections, which did not result in party transitions, suggesting that the drop is not due to a shift in strategic priorities resulting from the introduction of a new administration.

FIGURE 1: Distribution of proposal submissions over the election cycle



Lastly, the affiliation of researchers appears to mitigate the adverse effects of political cycles on research partnerships. Academics from top economic departments are able to form productive partnerships all through the election cycle, while those from mid-ranked institutions see evidence uptake drop for partnership projects started before the election. Researchers from remaining institutions are less likely to form partnerships in the pre-election period, but they can engage in effective partnerships once the elections are concluded.

FIGURE 2: Partnership formation and the election cycle



Policy implications

While these results suggest that projects implemented in partnership are more likely to be directly utilised by policymakers, this does not imply that all researchers should aim to collaborate with policymakers. First, we lack

systematic empirical evidence on how to effectively initiate these partnerships, and undoubtedly their success is, to an extent, due to the characteristics of the researchers and policymakers who select this form of engagement.

Moreover, some projects – including those not implemented in partnership – may have a more indirect, yet substantial, impact on public policy by contributing to a shift in beliefs about how to tackle a given policy challenge.

Although this more indirect effect on public policy is not quantifiable and, therefore, not documented in this study, it should not be overlooked.

What this study reveals, however, is that the political cycle plays a crucial role in the timing and success of these partnerships. Engaging early in the term not only increases the likelihood of forming a partnership but also the probability that the research findings resulting from these projects will be utilised. For academics seeking to work with policymakers, these results point to the notion of a “window of opportunity” for partnership formation early in the term when political conditions are favourable for experimentation and reform.

A recommendation for organisations that fund and implement academic research is to invest in a robust data collection infrastructure that allows them to document the policy impact of these projects. This requires a dedicated monitoring and evaluation team, as well as regular follow-ups on engagement efforts by the principal investigators. The data infrastructure should be capable of monitoring key aspects of research production, dissemination, and stakeholder engagement, including the partners involved and local programmatic and operational changes observed after project completion.