Ask the Expert on Strengthening National Policy Systems: Bridging the Disconnect between the evidence and Action for Food Security

Presentation Transcript

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PRESENTERS

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April Thompson:	Hello, and welcome to today's Ask the Experts on Strengthening National Policy Systems, bridging the disconnect between the evidence and action for food security. This is a special event affiliated with Agrilinks Food Security Policy Month this June. My name is April Thompson. I'm the Knowledge Management Portfolio Manager here at the Knowledge-Driven Agricultural Development Project, which oversees Agrilinks among other knowledge-sharing platforms. I'm excited to be facilitating today's discussion featuring Suresh Babu, a senior fellow at IFPRI, along with Duncan Boughton from Michigan State University.
	Before I introduce our featured guest experts I'm just going to quickly go over how today's event will work. We've gotten a number of great questions already from our registrants, which I'll be reading out to Suresh along with a few questions of my own. We also encourage you to type in questions and comments in the chat box as our online facilitators will be selecting questions from there to also post throughout the event, provided we've got time to get through it all. This is a short format, so we will try to keep it to the half hour allotted.
	So, with that I'd like to introduce our featured expert Suresh Baba, a senior fellow and a program leader at the International Food Policy Research Institute in Washington, D.C. He is also a professor of agricultural economics at the University of Pretoria in South Africa. Previously a research economist at Cornell University, Suresh has published 20 books and monographs and over 90 peer-reviewed journal papers on food and agricultural policies in developing countries. He is currently engaged in research in strengthening agricultural policy, research, and extension institutions, and strengthening the capacity of the policy researchers and analysts in India, Myanmar, Bangladesh, Brazil, Malawi, and Nigeria. In fact, he just arrived from Malawi early last night.
	Also here to answer your questions in the chat box we've got Duncan Boughton, who is a professor at Michigan State University. Duncan directs the USAID Burma and LIFT-funded food security policy projects in collaboration with IFPRI. He has over 30 years' professional experience in agricultural research and technology transfer for smallholder farmers, value chain development, policy analysis, and outreach to host countries' senior government decision makers, and capacity building of local staff.
	Duncan and Suresh, welcome to Agrilinks and today's Ask the Expert. We're really happy to have you here. So, Suresh, just to dive into kind of a core question to our event today, which is why with so much research and analysis is the policymaking process so seldom evidence-based?
Suresh Babu:	First of all, let me thank you, April and Julie, for organizing this session. It's an important topic that people will want to have some answers, because researchers do research and publish in academic journals and many other ways and then they

wonder why their research is not taken up by the policymakers. And some are taken up by the policymakers, particularly when they are relevant for the decision making process, so that tells us something, that – if your research is relevant for policymaking and there is a demand for it. But if you conduct research that is not connected to the policymaking process or does not provide evidence to the policymaking system, then sometimes it is ignored because it's not the right time. Even with a particular research that is addressing a problem that the policymaker is facing it may not be the right stage of the policy process. That's why we say we should understand the policy process.

The research that we have been doing with IFPRI colleagues – International Food Policy Research Institute – Michigan State, and others, University of Pretoria, did look into how can we understand the policy process itself so that the research that we conduct can be made relevant for policymaking, not only in the whole policy reform process but also at every stage of the policymaking process?

April Thompson: Great. So, obviously, as you say, the research has to be relevant to be incorporated, but what are kind of some of the key constraints that policymakers face to incorporate evidence in decision making, assuming that the evidence they're being presented with is relevant?

Suresh Babu: Even if the policy research that we do is relevant for the policymaking process, sometimes policymakers face several constraints. The first constraint is the research itself used wide-ranging recommendations. Research methods differ, the data set differs to address the same question, so the research may not be really very specific in terms of the recommendation. That's one aspect of it.

Then, who is producing this research and evidence? The credibility of the people who produce the research and evidence is important. In some countries policymakers want the local research community to produce this research, and that is where the capacity constraint comes in. We do not have adequate human capacity or the institutional capacity to produce the local – research through the local. And the external collaboration with the people like us – IFPRI or MSU or the University of Pretoria – helps in that process, but eventually the credibility of the research as well as the capacity to produce local research that can be trusted by the policymakers is very important.

And in addition to that, there is always the political economy issue of policymaking. Even if the research is relevant, even if it produces the evidence that shows that taking action one, two, three is going to improve the economy or improve the welfare of the people, there is hesitation in terms of making that research useful for policymaking because the research usually comes up with the first, best solution, and research – and policymakers looking for not all the time the first, best solution but the second best or the third best, and sometimes we miss out on that process. And that's what we are finding out from our research on policy process.

And in addition to that there may be constraints in terms of who is losing, who is winning. Understanding that is important. And that helps the policymakers to see whether the evidence can be used in that particular point in time in the process, where they are in the policy process.

April Thompson: Great. Well, we had a question from a registrant that actually ties into something you were mentioning in terms of the trust and the research evidence itself, which can be a constraint. And this person wanted to know if there are practices which that can enhance policymaker confidence in research evidence, and can these help lead to more policy action changes?

Suresh Babu: That's wonderful. I mean, in order to build the confidence of policymakers on the research that we do it's not enough to publish the papers and write policy briefs and then send them so that it lands on the desk. It is important to connect with the policymakers as researchers or the people who produce evidence. We need to connect with the policymakers from the beginning of the policy process – right? – and even when the problem is being talked about, even before the problem comes into the policy agenda. We need to communicate and gain the confidence of the policymakers. That requires a lot of work. It is not just to fly in and collect the data and analyze the data and send the report; it is how do you sit with the policymakers, develop trust in the beginning, and show the credibility of your research in the past and how you have done that kind of research in other countries and what do you bring to the table in terms of working in that particular country, in that particular context in which they are facing the policy problem?

And what also helps is to work collaboratively with the local researchers to build their credibility and their capacity so that when you are done with the research, which may be of global interest, but the in-country capacity that is built through the research program – in all of our programs, we do that – is helpful in terms of taking the research and applying it in the local context so that they can be continuous advising the countries. And that sometimes is missing in large research programs because people don't have time to build local capacity. And that kind of research is sometimes – is not really taken seriously because it stays in the journal papers and publications and so on.

April Thompson: That's a great point in terms of the capacity building really needed to enhance the role of evidence and policymaking. What are some of those capacities and how can they be incorporated and built at the national level?

Suresh Babu: Okay. Some example of the capacity that we have been working on in the FSB Innovation Lab is to strengthen the national capacities for policy analysis. Say, for example, where Duncan, my colleague who is joining from Myanmar, we have been working in Myanmar to build a national capacity of the policy system as a whole, to be started with the Ministry of Agriculture, where we set up an

agriculture policy unit and identified the key policy analysts there in order to give them the exposure of various methods of policy analysis. That really helps when it comes for them to pick up the global results and convert that into really usable information for policymaking within the system.

And it's not enough to strengthen the policy – the capacity of the policy analysts. We need to look at the other actors and players in the policy process and policy system. For example, we have been working with the University of Pretoria to strengthen the capacity of the journalists in Malawi. What does it mean? The – when you strengthen the capacity of the journalists to understand the issues related to food security, issues related to climate change and resilience and so on, they are able to report based on the results that we have gotten, and take those results and report that in a way that is easily used by the policymaking system. So, you see the research results are assimilated in a very nice, simple English in the newspaper so it attracts the policymakers, parliamentarians, and it can create the debate within the policy system. So, not just policy analysts but also other actors and players in the policy system as well.

But policy communication is an important aspect of making things happen through policy research. It is not just publishing papers but how do you convert that into policy briefs, policy memos. Sometimes we need to train the local colleagues and collaborators that we work with to produce policy memos and policy briefs. Now we are into the modern age of social media. How do you connect with LinkedIn and Twitter and Instagram, and how do you reach policymakers to find what you have done in terms of using that research in the policymaking process?

But having said that, it is still important that one-on-one communication – researchers meeting the policymakers, researchers meeting the key actors and players in the policy system and strengthening their capacity to understand the policy – is fundamental for making policy impact on the ground.

April Thompson: Great. Well, I wonder in terms of facilitating, coordination – you have a good point. Across the system it isn't just the policymakers; it's journalists, et cetera, but in enacting one policy you may need to really coordinate among multiple authorities to really be effective. And any advice on how to go about that, to sort of influence policy outcomes by sort of breaking down those silos?

Suresh Babu: April, that's a – it's a great question, because several of the policy issues that we deal with doesn't squarely fit in one sector. I'll give an example. Take, for example, we want to address the nutrition, malnutrition problem – right? – whether it is overnutrition, undernutrition, micronutrients, malnutrition. We have been looking at the micronutrient policy process, for example, in Malawi and what has happened in the last 25 years and who are the key actors and players who have contributed to the policymaking in nutrition sectors. Malawi just released its multisectoral nutrition policy after several years of preparation. When we looked at that policy process what we find that it's not just the Ministry of Health, which is now hosting

the Department of Nutrition, but other ministries such as the agricultural sector, water sector, sanitation sector. They all have to come together in order to contribute to the nutrition goal.

But when you have one sector hosting nutrition as the subject matter it becomes difficult for multisector coordination. So, that is where an understanding of who are the actors and players in the policy practice, what authority they have, what convening power they have in terms of bringing the people together for open power and discussion, how do we enhance that capacity of convening through providing or empowering certain departments becomes important. And sometimes we ignore that aspect of institutional architecture, we ignore the aspect of institutional building, and we ignore the aspect of institutional coordination at the national level. And what amount of research we do then becomes not very effective in terms of making things happen on the ground because the coordination of the multisectoral challenges such as nutrition or climate change, for example, or resilience building, they are all multisectoral issues.

Now, we are talking about food system change for – and building resilience of the food system. That is inherently a multisectoral issue that involves production, it involves trade, it involves the drug management industry of the unit, and also food safety, value chains. They all have to come together in order to strengthen the resilience of the food system. But how are we going to bring that together? So, now we have to move away from the single sector approach to problem solving for policy to a multisectoral approach. That requires not just doing research on multisectoral issues but also strengthening the capacity for multisectoral leadership, strengthening the capacity for multisectoral understanding of the food system in this case, for example, and building the capacity in the country level so the context-specific food system approach to resilience, for example, can be understood and made into research evidence for policymaking.

April Thompson: I'm going to put you on the spot here and see if you have an example of where you think this has been done well.

Suresh Babu: Well, we are currently working – Duncan – so, Duncan Boughton is online – we have been working in Myanmar, for example, in the last four years trying to bring the public sector, private sector, and also the individual sector, which is growing in Myanmar under the program called LIFT, working with USAID colleagues there. And we find that it is important that we bring these people together in order to even develop the agricultural strategy collectively so that they understand.

Now, recently we have been looking at how the nutrition goals can be achieved through transformation of the food system, which inherently brings the Health Ministry, Trade Ministry – Health Ministry and agriculture and food safety issues into bearing. So, we brought people together and discussed about what are the investment priorities when you look at the food system as a whole, not just the production aspect of it, not just the irrigation aspect of it, not just the market aspect

of it. If you have to create an investment plan to address the multisectoral aspects of food system contribution to nutrition, how the investment plans should be different compared to the single sector investment plan. And how – who will contribute to that? Who are the actors and players who will come and do the implementation once you have the strategy?

And that's not been done in many countries. It's just – the operational issues have not been looked at seriously. We worry about the problem solving in terms of research. To some extent, we want to strengthen the capacity. But really, how do you operationalize the concept like a food system approach to resilience, or a food systems approach to nutrition problem solving in the national level is something that we need to research on, and we are working on it under this program.

April Thompson: Great. Thanks. Well, I want to turn to another question from one of our registrants, which – this person was wondering about how long on average it takes to get policy reform through these various stages to full and effective implementation.

Suresh Babu: Well, that's an interesting question, April, because some policies are made by the stroke of a pen. Okay? So, the prime minister wakes up one day and says, "I see this problem and I need to solve this problem, and all I can do is to just say that things have to change from today onwards." I mean, those are the policies that happen overnight, right? And some examples of the macropolicies such as exchange rate policies, demonetization kind of policies, solving the black money in the country, for example, those are the policies people really quickly make and they want to show the impact quickly on the ground. Right?

On the other hand, there are policies which are driven by the emergencies such as drought and floods and so on, and these are the policies that we call food crisis-related policies, and they push the policymakers to make policies. In the kaleidoscope model of policy process that we have been studying we also study what type of policy crisis or policy environment that pushes policymakers to make policies in different time frames. Right? So, there is this emergency-oriented policies – also short-term policies. I mean, there is this short-term to medium-term policies which is like federal subsidies. You can change them year by year, but also you can slowly phase them out in two to three, four years' time period. That requires a time period of two to five years, for example, if you have to work through that.

And there are long-term policies. Now we are talking about the SDGs. We are setting the goals for 2030, right? So, 17 sustainable goals. In order to achieve that you need to have a long-term structural transformation of the economy, and policies related to that take time. Transformation of the economy. And then – but then, those long-term policies can also result in what do we do in the next five years in terms of agricultural sector change?

And to give an example that we worked in Nigeria, colleagues with Nigeria, is that in Nigeria the previous government had this long-term economic transformation program. So, as a derivative of that, what would the agricultural sector do? So we had an agricultural transformation agenda and we worked on – with USAID funding and colleagues there, mission colleagues there, to identify the capacity needs for transformation of the agricultural sector. And then you work down to see what are the investment needs in order to get to that level of capacity and so the transformation can take off in different value chains that you are working on. That's an example of a medium-term policy delivered from a long-term policy and working on day-to-day investment plans and actors and players, strengthening themselves to contribute to that.

April Thompson: Great. I want to turn to a question that just came in from one of our participants, Chris Shepherd Pratt, who wants to know what are a couple of the most common misconceptions about getting countries to adopt and implement evidence-based policy, or otherwise put, mistakes that stakeholders make in advocating for evidence-based policy change? Is there anything that has sort of surprised you about the research that you've undertaken in this space?

Suresh Babu: Well, it's a great question because researchers and people who generate evidence in general, they assume that once you generate evidence and put it out there somebody will pick it up and use it. That's the largest, to me – it's a huge misconception about that, right? It's not going to be automatic and you need to be consciously working within the country to see what the actors and players who are interested in this policy reform – who are the opponents of the policy, who are the proponents of the policy, who are the policy champions, and how can we strengthen them if this policy, the evidence that we have is going to help? Either way, whether to bring down a bad policy – right? – and there may be opponents and policy champions maybe working on that, or there may be a set of champions working on a positive policy to change the policy in the positive.

Both require evidence. And understanding the – not just who are the actors and the players, but what are the capacities, how are they connected to policymaking systems. And we rarely do this kind of analysis as researchers. And that's why the research that we did under this FSB program on kaleidoscope modelling of policy process really – the case studies that we produce helped us to understand what are the capacity weaknesses of these people and how can we feed this information to them?

The other misconception is that this local capacity is always there to translate what you do at the global level. It is not – we assume that the capacity is there, local institutions are just waiting for us to give the results to them. Right? And it's not happening because they are in the policy process, whatever they have to do and they run their own meetings and their own workshops and so on, and they don't even

have some time to sit down and convert the research that you do into a policy memo for the minister. So, that's where we need to target what we call *strategic policy communication*. Send them that communication skill that is not there in the local level in order to take the research that we do.

The third misconception is that we are now into social media, and we say, "Ho, if we can print this, and the minister there is going to get it" – first of all, he is not following you, and probably he is not even on Twitter or Facebook or whatever social media you are using, right? Or LinkedIn. But we need to identify what are the methods in which the policymakers are absorbing the information. It's not journal articles, for sure. But what is a policy memo that we can write, policy blogs that we can write, and how do we get it to the table, and how do we get the attention of the policymakers for the research that you have done so that the information that you have produced as evidence can get into the policymaking process.

April Thompson: Okay. So, you've talked a little about capacity and communications and the importance of that, but – and this is a question from someone in the audience here – what are some of the other capacities? Are you talking about technical capacity only? Are we talking administrative or financial capacity as well? Maybe you can kind of go into some of those core competencies that you see as important to translate this evidence into.

Suresh Babu: Wonderful. I think the higher education institutions in the developing countries that we are working with have a larger role to play in strengthening the policy system. And we have not effectively used them, partly because they don't themselves have the capacity to connect to the policymakers. And sometimes the quality of research that they do is not up to the mark, so the policymakers within their own countries do not take the policy researchers who do the research in their own countries seriously. So, you have the issue of not only increasing the quantity of policy analysts and researchers in the national system, but also strengthening the capacity to produce quality outputs.

So, what are the incentives for them to produce quality output? And how are we going to recognize them for that? And that's by working jointly with them collaboratively to strengthen the capacity in the long run. Sometimes we see the capacity development as a short-term kind of effort solution and it is not. It's a long-term, 20-year, 30-year process in order to build a national system capacity for policy research and analysis, and that is converted into – through that credibility into policymaking.

For example, we don't go build capacity in Korea and Japan and those countries which have already adequate capacity in terms of policy analysts and researchers. And why? Because the local researchers have the credibility to connect their research with the policymakers. So, in some of the countries that we work with the capacity is there but they are not connected to policymaking systems, mainly

because they have not shown their credibility, and sometimes they run their own – do consultancies and the quality of the consultancies is not enough to take that as a serious policy material for evidence.

So, we need to bridge that gap in terms of bringing that – what capacity we have in terms of quality, how can we improve through collaboration? So, collaborative research capacity building is a key component for long-term capacity impact as well as policy impact on the ground.

April Thompson: So, what happens when you have short-term administration changes and here you've been working to build a policy and then you have a regime change? What then?

Suresh Babu: Absolutely. That's where the political economy issues come in in understanding. Sometimes we don't fully understand the political economy issues and the drivers of political economy that contributes to policymaking. And that also brings us to the issue of policy continuity or policy discontinuity. The more disruptions there are in terms of the political systems and the new government comes in and then ignores the old policies and comes up with a new policy, there is always going to be policy disruptions.

But in order to understand these disruptions and expect those kinds of disruptions we need to be prepared with policy research as well as analysis. It's not that you do the research after the fact that policy is introduced. That is important to evaluate the impact and learn from the policy, but also it is important that we understand the political economy of the policymaking from different ideologies and a different set of policy players in the country as the government changes. We need to anticipate and start producing the results from – either from the past research and also – or from the current research to guide the policymaking process.

So, true, it is important that we recognize the policy – political economy issues, but also the past research that we have done. For example, in famine research – we have been doing research on famine for several decades now and we have solid evidence of what works, what doesn't work in the relief programs. But now, the recent effort is to convert that relief into resilience, and resilience into long-term development. That requires understanding the political economy of how the various governments, when they come in, treat the issues of emergencies – so, that's the long-term development. Understanding that, we can provide the policy, material policy research from the past research to guide the policy process.

April Thompson: Okay, great. We had another question come in – and I want to flag too that we're unfortunately running out of time, so we are going to move to our exit polls here while we kind of answer a few last questions. So, Biniam Iyob had a couple of questions, one being your suggestions to enforce the implementation of existing policies and related metrics of success. What suggestion do you have for enforcement and metrics of success? And if you can give any specific examples?

Suresh Babu:	Very good question, right? Implementation, as you will see in the kaleidoscope model that we have been researching on using the model, is one of the stages of policy process. So – and very little researched in terms of what happens to the process of implementation. And when you actually take the policy, policy is written in paper and it is there, and you see there is no results on the ground, mainly because – sometimes because you have not followed through the implementation process. And in the implementation process there are several weakness. For example, capacity is a major weakness. And what is the incentive for the people to take the policy that is on the paper, convert that into programs and projects, and support that with the investment that is needed, the budget that is needed, and monitor who's doing what? And how are they doing in terms of attaining the goals that you set for yourself through the strategy of the policy development is very critical.
	An example of that is the national agricultural investment plans that we have been helping the countries to put in place. And that gives a clear roadmap on what are the things that we want to achieve, what are the indicators of the policy goals that we want to achieve, and what are the stages of implementation in which these things can happen, and who will do that. So, these are the metrics that we need to put in place through a roadmap like the national agricultural investment plan, under the CAADP, for example. And it has been very useful and effective in terms of tracing the implementation challenges.
	But overall, we have done less work on understanding the implementation process and the difficulties in that process and fixing the process compared to the policy research and analysis itself. So, more and more, as we move on to implementing policies we need to kind of get our hands dirty in understanding the implementation challenges and what capacities are needed there, and how we can improve the governance accountability in that process so that we can hold people accountable for what has happened through the policy change on the ground and what needs to be fixed in the implementation process.
April Thompson:	Suresh, I'm – we're at time. I'm going to ask you one last tough question that came in from _____, which is that government authorities tend to reject research-generated evidence that can be interpreted as indicators of their own failure. How do we deal with a problem like that?
Suresh Babu:	Again, it relates to the political economy issue we talked about. Of course, if you point out things have not worked, the policymakers are not going to be happy because they are facing election next year or the year after that. So, it is a key issue. But evidence is evidence. Researchers should seek the truth and you have to present what you find out. And maybe you can present in a way, in a polite manner and not a confrontational manner. But researchers are out there to find the truth and we can't amend the truth for pleasing the policymakers – right? – even if there is an election coming up.

	But that is the role of researchers, to find the evidence. And to the extent that we apply the right models, the right data, and bring out the policy options and what has happened because of the policy change, what has not happened, it is going to be useful for the policymakers. It may not be the person who is running for election who is in the position right now, power right now, but maybe for the next who comes to the power, for example, to take a look at it and say what went right, what went wrong, and why. That is the fundamental objective of research in terms of assessing the impact of whether it is pleasing to the policymakers – politicians or not. We as researchers have to provide the evidence and seek the truth.
April Thompson:	I think that's a great place to stop. And unfortunately, we are out of time, but I really want to thank you for sharing all your wisdom on evidence-driven policymaking today and for the great engagement we've had online. I want to make a couple quick announcements here. We do have another Ask the Experts this Thursday, June 28th, on food security policy in fragile states, featuring Jeff Hill, who is the Director of the Office of Economic Growth and Agriculture in USAID South Sudan. That will be held at 10:00 AM EST. Also, please join Agrilinks and continue the conversation on food security policy this June. And in July also we'll be talking about the enabling market for agricultural market systems. So, thank you everyone for tuning in. Thanks again, Suresh.
Suresh Babu:	Thank you.
April Thompson:	Thanks, Duncan also, for the engagement online. And see you at the next one.
Suresh Babu:	Thank you.

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