UNESCO
United Nations
Educational, Scientific and
Cultural Organization

MOST2
Management of
Social Transformations
Programme

Online Policy Research Tool

This UNESCO project aims to support good governance standards and evidence-based policymaking, using the best of current technology for knowledge management.

The "Policy Research Tool" is modeled on a classic legislative research service to perform policy-oriented information research, analysis, processing and custom writing. It aims to be an interactive "one stop shop" for policy-relevant knowledge, delivered in comparative context.

The Tool offers a model for how to contribute to the realization of effective policy through structured knowledge management, and for structured international exchange of knowledge and experiences.
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Why was this project started? Who will it serve?

The online Policy Research Tool simplifies public policy decision-makers' task of developing background and proposals. It culls relevant material from the depths of research reports (not just word-searching web pages as Google can do) to create "policy briefs". With a few clicks, different countries' experiences are made comparable. And because it is a free online multilingual service, and offered in the context of UNESCO's work with developing countries, the tool also *provides opportunities* for publishing quality relevant material that is least likely to be published elsewhere.

The tool is primarily targeted towards policy-makers (decision-making actors and technical teams in national and local governments) and IGO actors. It is also particularly relevant to civil society, NGO, advocacy actors and researchers, and may be of special interest to students and to the society at large. Its content is simply policy-relevant comparative information, including social science research reports and reports of policy experiences.

It is a tool made for those users who need instant customized replies to complex questions. For instance, in the domain of health policies: "*How can my government develop palliative care systems?*"; "*How can my communications policies on HIV/AIDS-risk reach out to hard-to-reach populations?*"; or "*Which populations are newly at risk or are likely to be next?*"; etc.

The content covers a wide range of areas related to social change. Sources will evolve: current material originates from UNESCO and its close affiliates; within a short time national governments and other national-level sources, as well as non-governmental academic networks will be the main contributors.

When it is fully operational with content from many countries, this tool will provide a high level of comparison between countries and experiences. This is intended to help countries share experience across borders: to highlight successful practices that have high-potential for replication, as well as risks and drawbacks. More broadly, this is intended to support high-quality public policy to strengthen social development.

What does this Tool aim to do?

The tool is being developed in the context of UNESCO's Management of Social Transformations (MOST) inter-governmental scientific programme, and as such is linked to ongoing work supporting Ministerial-level international gatherings for exchange on policy practice.

The tool is modeled on a classic legislative research service to perform policy-oriented information research, analysis, processing and custom writing. Such services indeed exist and work well in most of the industrialized countries, for example in the United States (the Library of Congress Research Service), the United Kingdom and the Nordic European Countries.

Needless to say, most of the less developed countries simply cannot afford to implement such services at present, given other priorities. Another problem is that even if existing research services were shared without subscriptions, each tends to be nationally-focused; cross-comparisons are thus not easily made. In this sense, even good research services are limited.

At the same time, in the field of knowledge management the greater part of current R&D is for applications in business and industry, and these do not yet sufficiently address policymaking needs. And, public policy in many countries is evolving under pressures to better integrate the latest research results and to demonstrate impact. How "evidence-based policy making" can best be done remains a central question.

The Policy Research Tool is a response. It aims to be an interactive "one stop shop" for policy-relevant knowledge, delivered in comparative context. It offers a model for how to contribute to the realization of effective policy through structured knowledge management, and for structured international exchange of knowledge and experiences.

The tool should become a publisher of choice for new research generated in least-served countries (making more knowledge available), while providing a high degree of organization and comparability for available knowledge at low cost (and without a fee for users). From the perspective of a researcher, it will cover "grey literature" not covered in Google Scholar or other services; moreover, it will provide cross-comparison facilities not available in other services.

Because it targets a specific underserved set of communities (policy development communities in developing countries), and because it is developed in the context of UNESCO's work with Ministers, it can also in the longer term support a new transnational community of research-for-improved-policymaking.

The technical aspects: How? And what's next?

The design for the Tool directly originates from research conduced at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (USA) aimed at developing and implementing a policy-specific next-generation knowledge networking strategy. Ten major knowledge systems in the area of international development were analyzed in terms of institutional activities and systems objectives, knowledge framework characteristics, access and retrieval mechanisms, and search-engines outcomes.

The "version 1" of the Policy Research Tool (basic functionality) was launched in December 2007 with an initial collection of 50 documents for a single theme. The version 1 can be accessed on the MOST Programme website (www.unesco.org/shs/most), where a background paper (explaining design methodology and application) and a user-guide are also available.

Next developments will aim at addressing challenges specific to governance such as: scanning high volumes of dissimilar texts to identify common themes (for example, to facilitate public comment procedures); generating menus of options, generating estimations of impacts for impact assessment exercises, continuously searching for replicable and transferable practice options.

In its next phase, the following needs are foreseen:
- Technically, the tool will need to evolve in order to remain simple for users to get results while handling larger volumes of heterogeneous (and unstructured) data. This means that the tool's functionality needs to evolve in terms of data aggregation (quantitative indicators and news feeds), data mining and visualization (after that, modeling).
- The tool needs to maintain appeal as a publisher-of-choice for new materials from developing countries. It needs to grow by publishing new materials not available elsewhere, in order to remain a first choice for finding otherwise hard-to-find (unpublished) knowledge. How? Multilingualism, simple submission procedures, visibility via cross-referencing with quality material from many countries, and free public access attracting wide audiences. This needs to be reinforced by the tool being used by public policy makers, which UNESCO does already encourage via its networks of Ministers.
- The tool needs increasingly decentralized management of the database, with built-in procedural safeguards of content quality. Content partners will increasingly play an important role as content managers.

In the immediate future, it is likely that the tool will be applied first by UNESCO and affiliates, with some variation on its Version 1 format. These applications will generally be on themes of sustainable development and social development including education and health. Specifically, they may include:

Conference Reporting
- The reporting method was first tested at two major UNESCO conferences in 2006. Participants and speakers have expressed great satisfaction with this system, which they have commended as both very rigorous and efficient.
- The Conference Reporting System works by making available rapporteurs' reports and other documentation on each workshop of a conference. Different types of syntheses (daily, thematic, cross-cutting) can be generated, and – as soon as the rapporteurs input their reports-- users can obtain a condensed summary. Individual records produced for

each activity are archived and indexed, which enables to quickly and efficiently extract, to analyze particular outcomes or themes and to identify and select relevant materials for publication.

Comparing available data from different sources to provide new information
- In April 2006, the Kenyan government adopted a Community-Based Health Information System (developed by a network of universities called "UNISOL") as the national model for health information systems, to be expanded to other districts; it has since also been implemented in neighboring districts in Uganda and Tanzania.
- UNISOL-CBHIS is designed to compare and integrate known social and health data (collected separately by communities and by health services) to help public administrations treat public health issues. Data is disaggregated so that relationships are known (at household and even individual levels), while patterns relating to public health requirements are recognizable. The goal is to allow decentralized districts hospitals and local governments target their initiatives. The integration of data sets such as these is a further application that could be foreseen for the tool.

United Nations programs and various affiliated programs provide innumerable small-scale applications for knowledge management; but the tool is intended for uses outside of the gambit of these international organizations. The large-scale application depend on national-level content-producers choosing online publication through this Tool (a pilot is to begin with South Africa's Human Sciences Research Council, and others – India, Brazil -- are expected in the near future, organized under the aegis of UNESCO).

Introducing a critical mass of content, through partnerships with national-level producers, will permit the unique comparative functions of the Policy Research Tool to be demonstrated; and as it grows, the tool should become a low-cost solution to knowledge management for governance.

Conclusions

UNESCO is a public intergovernmental organization committed to bettering the lives of people around the world, by working in cooperation with organizations and governments to invent and innovate for peaceful and sustainable development.

This project is developed aiming to support good governance standards and evidence-based policymaking, using the best of current technology for knowledge management.

If you would like more information about this project or would like to become a tester or partner –for example for content or technical aspects -- please indicate your interests by contacting the UNESCO Secretariat unit responsible for this project at the email indicated on page 1. As a public agency, UNESCO will make available the technology and can offer support for applications that are in the public interest and consistent with the aims of the project. To learn more, contact us.