Locating the power of in-between:
How research brokers and intermediaries support evidence-based pro-poor policy and practice

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June 2008 – DRAFT

About the Strategic Learning Initiative
The Strategic Learning Initiative (SLI) is an IDS programme that works collaboratively with IDS Knowledge Services, their peers and partner organisations.

SLI's purpose is to build understanding about the role information, especially research-based information, plays in stimulating positive social change and to help to apply that understanding in practical ways to strengthen knowledge, information and communication programmes, at IDS and across the sector.

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About this publication
This publication presents five hypotheses around intermediaries and their contribution to evidence based pro-poor policy and practice. It was produced as a background paper to frame discussions at the "Locating the power of in-between conference" held in South Africa in June 2008. An electronic version of this publication is available as a free download from www.ids.ac.uk/go/sli . It is a draft version - please send any comments or questions to sli@ids.ac.uk

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Abstract

This is a background paper for the conference "Locating the power of in-between: how research brokers and intermediaries support evidence-based pro-poor policy and practice" which took place in Centurion, Pretoria South Africa on 1-2 July 2008. The conference was co-organised by the Human Sciences Research Council (HSRC), South Africa and the Institute of Development Studies (IDS), UK. This paper was written by Catherine Fisher and Isabel Vogel of IDS and draws on previous work by that organisation. It does not seek to represent the perspectives of HSRC.

The aim of this background paper was to provide a framework for the conference discussions and to give a brief overview of the key concepts. It poses some hypotheses around intermediaries and their contribution to evidence based pro-poor policy and practice that were to be considered during the conference.

The paper begins by tackling the question What is pro-poor evidence-based policy and practice?, then explores the role of research brokers and intermediaries in this context - What do we mean by research brokers and intermediaries?, How do they affect evidence-based policy?, and What are the practical interventions that intermediaries use to promote change? In each section a hypothesis for discussion is presented, and the final section offers some conclusions and reflections. Ultimately, the goal of the conference and of this paper is to contribute to developing a better understanding of the hitherto overlooked 'power of in-between', where information and knowledge intermediaries play a unique and significant role in supporting pro-poor evidence-based policy and practice.

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Introduction

The starting point for this conference is the recognition that policy is a key driver for action to address the many issues surrounding poverty and injustice. Policymakers, civil society organisations, development practitioners and researchers are well known actor groups supporting evidence-based pro-poor policy and practice. Less well known are the research brokers and intermediaries that act 'in-between' these groups of development actors to facilitate information and communication flows. The goal of the conference is to develop a better understanding of the hitherto overlooked 'power of in-between', where intermediaries make a significant contribution to supporting pro-poor evidence-based policy and practice in their own right.

This new group of actors have largely been overlooked in analytical terms and many of the organisations and groups working as intermediaries do so in isolation from each other. This isolation and the lack of conceptual analysis around intermediaries and their work give us the focus of this conference, which is designed to raise the profile of this emerging sector. The conference will shine a spotlight on specific intermediaries and their roles as research brokers, knowledge and information intermediaries. The aim is to develop better conceptual and practical understanding of information and knowledge intermediaries, alongside a greater understanding of their potential contribution to development processes.

The conference will look at the specific role of intermediaries in supporting pro-poor evidence-based policy and practice, and attempt to discover a shared identity amongst them, to develop common concepts and to establish bases for sharing learning and collaboration. The conference will also seek to identify the distinctive value of the overlooked role of intermediaries by exploring how they relate to and differ from other information and communication programmes and processes, such as research-policy debates, access to information movements, knowledge management, and knowledge sharing networks. The conference enquiry is offered as a useful way to strengthen the contribution of the sector and to help intermediaries reach their full potential as development actors in their own right.

The aim of this background paper is to provide the framing for the conference discussions and to give a brief overview of the key concepts. The paper is organised into five sections, with a hypothesis for discussion presented in each. We start by discussing the debates around pro-poor evidence-based policy which are the context for the conference discussions. The second section then explores what we mean by intermediaries in this context. The third section examines the problems in information flows between actors in the research-policy environment, and the fourth section goes on to illustrate the ways that intermediaries aim to improve those flows. The final section offers some conclusions and reflections, and presents the final hypothesis.

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1. What is pro-poor evidence-based policy and practice?

'Evidence-based policy', and its extension to practice, offers a set of aspirations and approaches that strive to support objective, systematic and rational decision-making that draws on evidence (Sutcliffe and Court 2006). It is both a practice and a discourse that has been widely adopted by the international development agencies and increasingly by national policymaking actor-networks. However, it is a fuzzy, value-laden concept for which the authors of this paper found it difficult to identify exact definitions. It seems that it is open to different interpretations by different actors depending on their position and context, although it is always presented as a good practice to aspire to, as a means for creating a robust base for policy and practice decisions.

The core idea draws on two concepts, both of which have been an increasing focus of attention: 'evidence' and 'policy'. To take the first, whilst there are many potential sources of 'evidence' - for example based on intuition, personal experience, through to testimonial, anecdotal and scientific evidence - 'evidence' in this context is most often understood to be information generated through research, whether scientific or social. This 'evidence' is communicated through research-related formats: data, statistics, indicators, scientific studies, technical briefings and reviews, among others. Thus, 'evidence-based policy' is often understood and explored in terms of research-policy linkages, or the 'research-policy nexus', a term which hints at the complex social systems surrounding these linkages.

To take the second concept, 'policy', there are different theoretical views on how policies are made and implemented. Recent scholarship has supported a move away from simplified, linear models towards a more complex analysis of policy as a multi-actor, multi-dimensional, iterative process (Barnard et al 2007; IDS 2006; Court and Young 2003). This work highlights the importance of networks of formal and informal actors that influence how issues are conceived and solutions formulated, and the socio-political processes behind how 'knowledge' and 'evidence' about a particular policy position are arrived at.

There is a widespread belief that 'research can generate evidence that can make a vital difference if utilised in decision-making and practice, helping to save lives, reduce poverty and improve the quality of life' (Court and Young 2003, p 1). The value of research comes from it being a robust approach to understanding real-world situations: its theories, frameworks and methodologies offer a structured and rigorous way of gathering and analysing information about the world that can be tested and triangulated. This is reflected in the increasing flows of both national funds and development assistance to the generation, communication and application of research as a key strategy in realising pro-poor development objectives.

However, significant critical work has highlighted the underlying power dynamics in both 'policy' and 'evidence' generation. It is beyond the scope of this paper to fully explore this critical scholarship, but some key points from these critiques which are relevant for this conference include the following:

- Research should not be perceived as a neutral process or as representing 'objective reality', it is a subjective process of knowledge-creation. There are different types of research, each carrying intrinsic values, structures, practices, norms and authority which shape the knowledge constructed through it. Although aspiring to objectivity, these can

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create effective biases which can support existing positions, exclude certain actors and reinforce knowledge hierarchies, for example 'scientific expert' knowledge over 'experiential farmer' knowledge (Scoones and Thomson 1993). This is particularly true of research at an international level where the western structures and norms of research create biases against researchers in developing countries (Arunachalam 2003).

- Connections between research-policy should be seen in the context of the complex information environment in which social change agents such as policymakers are embedded, where multiple communication processes feed different perspectives and knowledge sources. The sense that is made of them and subsequent action depends on cognitive processes of reflection, learning and understanding, as well as the socio-political contexts in which the actor is operating.

Attempts to enable evidence-based policy have unsurprisingly focused on the relationships and connections between policymakers and researchers and or their research findings. Theory, and indeed practice, around research-policy linkages has moved on since the simplistic 'two worlds' models propounded by Caplan in the 1970s (Caplan 1979). Authors have highlighted the existence of many more than two communities and actor-networks around issues and disciplines that involve researchers, policymakers, lobbyists and practitioners (IDS 2006; Nielsen 2001; Stone and Maxwell 2001). However, despite this scholarship, narratives persist around 'bridging gaps' between the 'two worlds' of research and policy, perhaps because they offer a useful operational shorthand. Similarly, ideas around the 'supply' and 'demand' of research are still very much in currency and remain common metaphors for describing complex processes; useful as long as they are recognised as simplistic. In keeping with this, practical attempts to strengthen evidence-based policy have generally focused on the 'supply' end: strengthening the quantity and quality of research, strengthening the communication of research, often through new information technologies (Davies 1994).

But what makes policy 'pro-poor'? The simple answer is that the intention of the policymakers to in some way benefit poor people, to bring about improvements in their rights, entitlements and living conditions, would make policy pro-poor. However, this is another area of debate, characterised by different interpretations and different perspectives. Some of the work in this area suggests that there are unexpected correlations between different policy approaches and effects on poverty, for example counter-intuitive links between growth and pro-poor outcomes, among many others (White and Anderson 2001). The complex links and different perspectives involved need to be understood if policy is to be effectively 'pro-poor'.

We suggest that, in order to be 'pro-poor' orientated, policy formulation should be aiming to explore a wide range of evidence offering multiple perspectives on an issue, including non-research evidence and evidence which conveys realities as lived by poor people who are supposed to benefit. Given that 'evidence-based policy' is a flexible concept, the first hypothesis we offer to be considered at the conference is as follows:

Hypothesis 1: 'Evidence-based policy and practice' is more likely to be pro-poor if it is understood as a practice which encourages the inclusion of a wide range of evidence and perspectives in defining and understanding issues and formulating policies.

If 'pro-poor evidence-based policy and practice' is the overall framing for this conference, its focus is the hitherto overlooked role that research brokers and intermediaries play within it.

2. What do we mean by research brokers and intermediaries?

For the purpose of this conference we understand research brokers and intermediaries to be actors who are involved in processes of generating, interpreting, organising or communicating research based information for a particular purpose to particular social groups (amended from Wolfe 2006). This definition is based on an emerging understanding of the broader group of 'information and knowledge' intermediaries. We have also used the term 'research' intermediary to indicate the nature of the information that this subset of information and knowledge intermediaries focus on, although it does not to indicate that they are intermediaries in research processes.

Intermediaries and brokers are utilised in many contexts as conduits for different resources, for example money, materials, even drugs or guns. However we are focusing on those that are concerned with information. Intermediaries in this sense are specifically seeking to meet the perceived 'knowledge needs' of different social change agents, although these needs are not necessarily expressed. They capture and interpret information, adapting it to the context, adding to it, packaging it, communicating it, and they facilitate exchanges between other groups (Saywell and Cotton 1999).

The intermediary role can be played by different actors at different points within multi-directional exchanges and flows of information. From our work at IDS attempting to conceptualise intermediaries, we differentiate between information and knowledge intermediaries as follows: information intermediaries are primarily concerned with the accessibility, structuring, and packaging of information, while knowledge intermediaries are additionally concerned with interacting with their stakeholder groups to engage in the interpretation of information and to use it to co-create new knowledge (Vogel et al 2007).

Although some understanding in this area has developed, the role of the intermediary is not yet well conceptualised or understood in terms of the contribution to development objectives. It may be that the lack of specific analysis in literature is due to the sheer diversity of actors and modes in which this role is played. In its broadest sense, the intermediary role encompasses a whole spectrum of quite different bodies. Perhaps the best known information and communication mediator is the broadcast media, about which there is a large field of theory and empirical work. In the development context, probably most has been written about agricultural extension workers as intermediaries (Melkote and Steves 2001). But many other bodies can take on an intermediary role, from professional networks, activist movements, business trade associations and even diasporas, to trainers and libraries.

2.1 The conference focus: A new generation of information and knowledge intermediaries

The increasing prominence of agendas such as 'evidence-based policy and practice', together with the much-critiqued 'knowledge for development' agenda of the World Bank in the 1990s (Mehta 2001), have prioritised the role of social research in development. Coupled with rapid developments in information and communication technologies over the last decade, a specific type of intermediary programme response has arisen, prompting the creation of many organisations and programmes as dedicated intermediaries positioned in roles of 'bridging',

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'brokering' and 'promoting use' across policy, practice and research boundaries. We feel that this emerging sector constitutes a new, very active and innovative, generation of research intermediaries and research brokers.

New initiatives are emerging from different sectors with differing drivers, paradigms and logics - portals, gateways, resource centres, and 'one-stop shops' blend and hybridize traditions and approaches, from libraries to journalism (Fisher and Kunaratnam 2007). Whatever scepticism one might have about fashions and trends in development, the sheer range of initiatives, sector origins and funders suggests that there is clearly a significant role to be played here. We propose that, although these initiatives are diverse and may appear to be unconnected, closer examination highlights some commonality of purpose and approach.

The three common core elements that distinguish intermediaries as distinct from, for example, research communication, are:

- the purpose of mediation is deliberately to improve connections between multiple sources of research and people involved in policy and practice; it is focused on improving the process through which decisions are made by broadening the range of views and evidence that policymakers draw on, and by enriching the information environment in which decisions are made
- the fundamental focus on multiple sources is essential to achieving the intermediaries' purpose
- the structural and ongoing nature of the role is new; intermediaries create new structures in the information landscape that offer platforms, spaces and places for ongoing communication and engagement with research findings.

By focusing on improving the information environment of policy and practice decision-making, intermediaries contribute positively to enabling evidence-based policy. So our second hypothesis is as follows:

Hypothesis 2: Intermediaries represent a distinct, new communication structure that contributes to an enabling environment for the use of a broad range of evidence in policy and practice through multiple and hybrid communication and engagement channels.

Although intermediaries together represent a distinct new sector with common elements, their diversity and the lack of conceptual understanding of the intermediary role and its practice mean that many of these intermediaries are operating in isolation from each other and may not be realising their full potential. The purpose of this conference is to build a greater understanding of these issues, and so we now turn to examine more closely the roles that intermediaries and research brokers play in the context of evidence-based policy.

3. How do research brokers and intermediaries affect evidence-based policy?

Within the context of evidence-based policy, our starting point is that intermediaries focus on the information environment in which evidence-based policy is conceived, formulated, negotiated, and ultimately implemented. In their role as intermediaries they are not directly involved in the generation of research, nor in the process of designing and implementing policies. Instead, they aim to intervene in the complex web of information flows around these processes. As such they are 'in-between' actors, albeit in some cases closely connected to other actors and embedded in networks with them.

In order to understand the particular contribution that intermediaries make, we need to understand some of the perceived problems in evidence-based policy making. We have identified three sets of problems: those that arise around policy processes, those that arise from the structures and institutions around research, and those that arise from attempts to bring closer collaboration between the 'two worlds' of research and policy. These problems present and manifest themselves in different ways, depending on the context.

3.1 Evidence-based policy making and policy processes
The first set of policy-related problems arises from the multi-actor, multi-location nature of policy processes, explored in depth by IDS work in this area (IDS 2006; Chambers 1997). This analysis suggests that formal policies are the result of a complex, dynamic interplay between formal and informal actors, contestation over agendas and interpretations of situations which in turn form competing narratives, supported or resisted by actor networks. This takes place in multiple locations in national, regional and global contexts, involving national governments, regional alliances and international agencies. Equally, when policies are implemented (which can be thought of as the 'practice' side), there is much room for interpretation, negotiation and manoeuvre as different actors - from bureaucracies, civil society actors and individuals in communities - create a patchwork of organisational and programme policies and strategies through which to deliver the ultimate policy objectives.

In this complex picture, how do actors involved in policymaking, programme decision-making and practice, as well as research, come to know and learn more about the issues involved, to define problems and formulate potential solutions? What are the problems in terms of information flows in these uncertain and complex policy contexts?

We propose that the core problem arises in how development actors 'make sense' of development realities in order to base decisions and actions. The problem is that processes of policy formulation are too often characterised by partial knowledge building based on a narrow evidence-base (Leach and Fairhead 1994; Chambers 1992). Possible causes of this include:
- Policymakers often may not have direct experience of poverty-related issues, and so must rely on indirect interpretations of reality, conveyed through statistics, indicators, as well as interactions through networks and other means.
- Decision-makers' professional formation and training gives them an established body of knowledge, a worldview and a position within professional networks, which can act as a disincentive to engage with new sources of evidence.

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- Numerous pressures on policy makers, including political pressures, multiple demands and lack of time, help to keep them operating within their particular professional or disciplinary perspectives and oriented towards their stakeholders, actor-networks and strategies which are familiar and which have worked well in the past.

Other problems that flow from this include:
- Disciplinary, professional, actor-network and geographical boundaries prevent development policymakers and practitioners from engaging with and sharing information beyond their immediate peers
- Dominant narratives and knowledge sources that narrow the base of available evidence in mainstream debates are created
- Power relations perpetuate within knowledge hierarchies that crowd out alternative perspectives from mainstream debates
- Organisational and professional cultures discourage information use and knowledge-sharing
- Capacity to search for, evaluate and apply research evidence and information is constrained by a lack of political space for manoeuvre and other factors such as restrictions on time, cost, skills, access to technology, language and technical jargon (Fisher and Kunaratnam 2007).

3.2 Evidence-based policy making and research structures and institutions

The second set of problems in evidence-based policy making we have identified arise from the structures and institutions around research. As we observed previously, critical scholarship suggests that research knowledge is political and subjective; it is inevitably tied up with the values and intentions of who commissioned, funded, and conducted the research, and how it is intended to be used (Weiss 1991). This means that research and researchers speak to members of their own discipline and knowledge peer communities first, as it is from these that its verification, quality and authority is drawn, and it needs to be 'translated' to make it more suited to the needs of other audiences. Problems stemming from this include:
- Research may not respond to the needs of policy makers who may see it as irrelevant or answering the wrong questions, therefore they may not be willing and/or able to respond to policy recommendations
- Researchers might not be best placed in terms of skills, resources or motivation to communicate and 'translate' their findings effectively
- Conversely, competition between research producers skilled at communication may lead to a bombardment of messages: 'evidence-based policy' as 'my evidence, your policy'.

3.3 Evidence-based policy making and attempts to bring research and policy into closer collaboration

The third set of problems arises from approaches which have attempted to address some of these problems through creating better links between researchers and policymakers. Recommendations have included strengthening researchers' communication skills and aiming for 'closer collaboration between researchers and policymakers' and strengthening institutional policy capacity for the uptake of research (Hovland 2003). While better links are important, too close a relationship or too exclusive a network of researchers and policymakers becomes

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problematic if they close off 'policy spaces' where there is room for manoeuvre and negotiation take place, thus perpetuating a narrow evidence-base. Problems flowing from this include:

- The 'integrity' of research is compromised and may lead to charges of 'policy-based evidence-making'
- Important actors might be left out of tight networks, for example when research is commissioned from consultants that are familiar and known, which could result in foreign consultants being favoured over in-country researchers.

These are the some examples from the range of 'problems' that intermediaries aim to address through their work and unique position spanning boundaries between research, policy and practice. Of course, some policy actors may not necessarily recognise these as 'problems', as this is an oversimplification of complex social and knowledge processes, but they still represent a substantial arena for multiple interventions that intermediaries might make.

3.4   The contribution of knowledge and information intermediaries
The particular contribution of knowledge and information intermediaries comes from their ability to construct platforms, convene spaces, and to make a collection of multiple sources on issues easily accessible. Given the range of problems in information flows we have just discussed, no one intermediary or programme could address them all. Instead, intermediaries can be found performing a variety of roles and functions between suppliers and end users of research. Each intermediary aims to address certain aspects of the problems identified and to contribute in some way to more effective information flows between research, policy and practice.

This spectrum of roles and functions stretches from interventions that seek to lever access to research; signposting, acting as a repository of ideas and material, and organising information to help make a collection of sources more accessible. Other roles include summarising and synthesising a body of research on an issue, and creating new products and services that 'translate' research information into formats tailored to the needs of policy and practitioner audiences. More action-oriented roles for intermediaries include those that aim to raise awareness of overlooked issues or to advocate for perspectives on an issue to be included in policy agendas. Other interventions aim to facilitate dialogue and exchange between different stakeholder groups to 'connect knowledges', for example between scientific and activist communities or community and national groups. Yet others seek to enable action through specifically designed interventions to encourage decision-makers to engage with a plurality of researchers and evidence, for example by using information to create a platform for convening actors around an overlooked issue or debate (Fisher and Kunaratnam 2007).

How the work of intermediaries affects flows of information and perspectives within information environments is a crucial issue because they provide the palette of potential knowledge sources from which social change agents might draw to develop their understanding of an issue and to design their strategies for action. We have already discussed how drawing on a depth and breadth of evidence from multiple sources is important for supporting pro-poor policy and practice. We propose that intermediaries have a unique contribution to make in maintaining the richness and multiplicity of the information environment around development issues, which is a key contribution to achieving progressive development outcomes. So, our third hypothesis is as follows:

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Hypothesis 3: Intermediaries' unique contribution lies in their commitment to highlighting multiple perspectives that draw on a broad range of evidence sources to create a rich information environment to support evidence-based policymaking.

We complete our picture of the work of intermediaries by looking at the practical ways in which they do their work.

4. What are the practical interventions that intermediaries use to promote change?

As this programme area matures, slightly different roles and activities are emerging for intermediaries, in parallel with but different from research communicators. What are the specific roles and interventions that intermediaries are using to promote change? It might be helpful here to remind ourselves of the definitions we used earlier information intermediaries are primarily concerned with the accessibility, structuring and packaging of information, while knowledge intermediaries are additionally concerned with interacting with their stakeholder groups to engage in the interpretation of information and to use it to co-create new knowledge (Vogel et al 2007). These definitions suggest some of the different roles or combinations of roles that intermediaries can play.

How are these roles different to research communication by research organisations? In many contexts, there are direct and effective dialogues and ongoing processes of engagement between research producers and their policy and practice counterparts. We suggest that, broadly, research communication can be thought of as aiming to keep a dialogue open between researchers and policy actors as a means of adapting to changing realities through iterative exchanges, around specific issues and specific messages. Research communication processes are initiated close to the institutional source of the research, often involving the original researchers themselves. In some cases, research communication can in effect be thought of as generating the sources that intermediaries draw on.

By contrast, as discussed in the first section of this paper, intermediaries act at the level of the information environment, which is a substantially different process to research-policy interactions, although they might contribute to them. The intermediaries that this conference focuses on also aim to communicate research-based evidence, but by operating at the level of the information environment they can also see where issues and views have been overlooked and have the potential to raise their position and profile. In this way, intermediaries can add value by amplifying and extending the reach of research messages.

Intermediaries do this in a number of ways. They can gather specialist skills to package and communicate research information for specific audiences, and they can bring together a wide range of material into one place to provide coverage of a breadth and depth of perspectives on an issue. Intermediary programmes can establish a trusted platform for communicating the research of smaller organisations, as well as providing balanced analysis through multiple and diverse sources. Intermediaries can also present a traceable evolution of certain key debates through archiving, helping to avoid the re-invention of wheels and displaying continuity to balance the ebbs and flows of communication between research studies (Barnard et al 2007).

Whatever their combination of specific roles and functions, the majority of these intermediary programmes have been successful and are starting to become established as a distinct sector within their own right. Their common modes of operation, common challenges and the makings of a common identity will be explored further at the conference. Our fourth hypothesis is as follows:

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Hypothesis 4: Even when research communication is happening effectively, intermediaries add value by creating ongoing platforms, spaces and places to promote the engagement of policy and practice actors with a plurality of sources and perspectives.

What are the implications of all this for understanding the contribution that intermediaries make to pro-poor policy?

5. Conclusions and final hypothesis

The discussions above give us a backdrop to explore how intermediaries contribute to pro-poor outcomes. Attempts to trace actual and potential effects of intermediaries' work more extensively will require looking beyond their immediate practical work to see intermediary programmes as strategic interventions in the knowledge-building, information access and communication patterns of social change agents. As a first step, intermediaries might find it helpful to understand the whole 'problem chain' and to identify which link they are aiming to address with their work.

With our own knowledge and information services at IDS, we have found that this analysis needs to be extended through an explicit 'theory of change' framework which suggests pathways of links between information interventions and their contribution to the learning and new knowledge of social change agents, the possible actions that are decided upon, and the outcomes arising from those actions (Downie 2008). The many different bodies of literature analysing information, knowledge and communication suggest different pathways linking information to social change, although this is a discussion for a separate paper.

We have seen how intermediaries hold a lot of potentially positive power through their key roles in mediating information flows and maintaining the richness and multiplicity of the information environment around development issues. To conclude this discussion paper, the authors would like to offer conference participants a point for reflection. Our own experience as intermediaries at IDS suggests that the extent to which this power is exerted positively depends on intermediaries having an awareness of the underlying assumptions that shape their potential contribution.

A reflection on the roots of an intermediary's 'power of in-between' - their position, approach to information and knowledge, and underlying programme logic, among other things - suggests that if the underlying assumptions and values remain implicit, they can become problematic. Those playing an intermediary role may not be fully aware of how these assumptions and values are shaping day-to-day practices, such as editorial choices, or how their positioning may be affecting the range of perspectives they select and communicate which could be inadvertently reinforcing or marginalising certain positions or narratives.

For intermediaries wishing to better understand their contribution to progressive social change outcomes, we suggest that a good starting point is to understand and express their position, power, values and approach. How these might affect practice can then be explored. Therefore, our final hypothesis is as follows:

Hypothesis 5: Intermediaries' contribution is strengthened when they become aware of how their 'power of in-between' affects the flow of perspectives and sources of evidence into the research-policy environment.

Nevertheless, even having surfaced and examined underlying assumptions, providing insight into the contributions of intermediaries to pro-poor evidence-based policy and practice will remain a challenge. How to do this effectively, identifying which strategies are successful and

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which are less so, on what terms and in which contexts, we believe would strengthen the work of all groups involved in this emerging but key area. To support the work intermediaries as the sector develops and evolves, some key questions will need addressing: What does an 'enabling environment' for intermediaries mean? What are the possibilities of developing thinking and conceptualisation, as well as practice, in a diverse sector of different professions and approaches? What are good future directions to move towards together?

Our goal for this conference is to identify and explore these questions together, to use the conference as an enquiry space to spark debates and generate a deeper shared understanding of the intermediary role in evidence-based policy and practice.

Hypotheses summary

Hypothesis 1: 'Evidence-based policy and practice' is more likely to be pro-poor if it is understood as a practice which encourages the inclusion of a wide range of evidence and perspectives in defining and understanding issues and formulating policies.

Hypothesis 2: Intermediaries represent a distinct, new communication structure that contributes to an enabling environment for the use of a broad range of evidence in policy and practice through multiple and hybrid communication and engagement channels.

Hypothesis 3: Intermediaries' unique contribution lies in their commitment to highlighting multiple perspectives that draw on a broad range of evidence sources to create a rich information environment to support evidence-based policymaking.

Hypothesis 4: Even when research communication is happening effectively, intermediaries add value by creating ongoing platforms, spaces and places to promote the engagement of policy and practice actors with a plurality of sources and perspectives.

Hypothesis 5: Intermediaries' contribution is strengthened when they become aware of how their 'power of in-between' affects the flow of perspectives and sources of evidence into the research-policy environment.

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