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Strengthening the UN's Research Uptake

Conference Report

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Executive Summary

There is a significant demand for evidence-based research within the United Nations system to inform policymaking. Yet uptake of such research by the UN often faces considerable obstacles.

In an effort to help bridge the research-policy gap, the UN University and the Graduate Institute of International and Development Studies held a two-day roundtable event, titled 'Strengthening the UN's Research Uptake,' at the Palais des Nations, Geneva, in April 2016. Participants included senior representatives from UN research and policy units and from more than 50 leading research organizations from around the world.

The conference highlighted major knowledge gaps and research needs within the UN, assessed the barriers to research uptake by the UN, and identified good practices and recommendations that would help overcome those barriers.

Some of the UN's major research needs prominently include:

- Refined insights on the drivers and effects of violent conflict, in particular in light of the recent rise in the number of civil wars and the changing nature of conflict; better access to multi-disciplinary area expertise on conflict(-prone) countries; and deeper knowledge on the links between organized crime and conflict, and the drivers of extremist violence;
- In light of the rising number of displaced people around the world, improved understanding of the global, regional, national and local dimensions of migration, including in terms of its interrelations with other global phenomena such as climate change and health;
- Analysis on effective multilateral responses to issues that are likely to rise in importance on the UN's policy agenda, such as biosecurity, cybersecurity and urban fragility;
- Inter-disciplinary, systems-based research to inform effective implementation of the 2030 Agenda, focusing in particular on inter-linkages among the SDGs;
- Greater focus on assessing and evaluating the effectiveness of UN operations across all mandate areas to drive learning, adaptation and reform.

Major barriers that will need to be overcome to strengthen the UN's policy uptake include:

- Disincentives to closer collaboration within both the UN and academia, with academia insufficiently rewarding policy research in terms of professional advancement and UN staff often facing political, bureaucratic, and time constraints to engage with or contribute to research;
- Difficulties in securing funding for policy research in light of donor cutbacks and the preference of national scientific research funding schemes for long-term academic studies, rather than more short-term policy studies;
- Academia's preference for a presentational format and style as well as publication outlets that are difficult to access and digest for policymakers;
- Difficulties researchers face in navigating the UN's complicated bureaucracy and politics and in overcoming the UN's confidentiality constraints; this is compounded, especially for researchers from the global south, by geographic distance;
- The absence of a signaling mechanism for the UN to communicate its research needs to the academic community;
- Inadequate knowledge management systems within the UN to guide staff to relevant internal and external research;
- Safety and security risks that hinder research in fragile and conflict-affected locations;
- A disjuncture between the timeframes of academic research cycles and the UN's policymaking cycles.

Challenges notwithstanding, there are many examples of productive engagement between the UN and research communities, pointing to lessons and good practices:

- To ensure policy-relevance and research uptake, researchers will need to closely engage with UN policymakers throughout the research cycle, starting at the research design phase;
- Both groups should proactively seek out partnerships for collaboration which would help ensure that research is embedded in policy, and policy becomes an integral component of research programmes;
- The establishment of partnerships often depends on institutional gateways into the UN system that can be difficult to establish for researchers, especially those based in the global south;
- The most important "docking station" for the academic community to establish direct partnerships with the UN are policy units of different UN entities. In recent years, many UN policy units have developed innovative ways of engaging the world of research, with scope for these units to learn from each others' models of engagement;
- These models of engagement range from the establishment of academic advisory councils, academic networks, or expert stand-by teams composed of academics, to the launching of annual flagship reports drawing heavily on academic input;
- UN staff need to be given greater incentives to develop partnerships with the research community, which calls for a clear message from senior leadership that such collaboration is to be encouraged. The UN would also benefit from the expansion of its sabbatical leave programme and human resources reforms that would make it easier for staff to leave the UN for some time to work at research institutions;
- UN policy entities were encouraged to develop modalities that would allow them to communicate their policy research needs to the wider academic community;
- Effective dissemination approaches combine efforts to reach a broader audience through publication in widely-read policy journals or the op-ed pages of major newspapers and the smart use of social media, with targeted outreach directed towards key policy-makers and entrepreneurs;
- The UN will need to invest greater efforts to connect more effectively with policy researchers in the developing world, calling for active outreach to and greater donor support for think tanks in the global south, as well as the establishment of short-term fellowship opportunities for southern researchers within UN policy units.

Background & Approach

Michael Møller, Director-General of the United Nations Office at Geneva

There is significant demand for policy research within the United Nations (UN) system. Researchers in the academic and think tank community can help meet this demand by framing, mapping, raising, and answering questions pertinent to contemporary challenges facing UN policymakers. However, coordinated development and uptake of such research faces several obstacles including: the limited resources available to UN entities to identify, absorb, and apply new research findings to policy formulation; 'lost in translation' challenges for policymakers to digest research that is often presented in unwieldy ways; barriers for researchers to access and analyse information within the difficult to navigate UN bureaucracy; and the mismatches of long-term research timelines of researchers with the often short-term and fast-changing policy needs of the Organisation. These impediments have led research institutions inside and outside the UN to pursue research agendas that often did not respond adequately to the policy development needs of the UN system.

To address these challenges, the United Nations University Centre for Policy Research, Tokyo, and the Graduate Institute of International Development Studies, Geneva, convened a two-day roundtable event on 25-26 April, 2016 on 'Strengthening the UN's Research Uptake' at the Palais des Nations, Geneva. The aim was to examine ways UN-oriented research entities could more effectively inform major UN policy processes in peace and security, development, human rights, and humanitarian action.

The conference gathered over 100 participants, including more than 40 senior representatives from UN research and policy units, as well as representatives from over 50 leading think tanks and research organizations around the world. Conference organizers ensured a strong presence from academic institutions and think tanks from developing countries. The event benefitted from the explicit support of UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon and other senior UN leaders as well as the financial support of the Government of Switzerland.

In addition to addressing the obstacles to uptake mentioned, the event also sought to raise awareness among UN policy units of the research assets available to them in their

principal thematic areas of work; to foster increased interaction among the UN-focused research entities; and to potentially generate complementary research agendas useful to the UN system as a whole.

Following is a synthesis of the two-day conference elaborating on the central themes and important recommendations arising from the panel discussions and break-out sessions. The report begins with a section identifying the research needs and knowledge gaps within the UN today. It then goes on to describe the ongoing barriers preventing research uptake by UN policymakers before offering recommendations and pointing to good practices on how to improve the uptake of research into UN policy. Annex 1 at the end contains the list of participants.

Ambassador Alexandre Fasel, Permanent Representative of Switzerland to the United Nations Office and to the other International Organizations in Geneva

The UN's Knowledge Gaps & Research Needs

Participants at the conference first considered the UN's knowledge gaps and needs. They identified specific gaps which require further and new research while noting that there may be existing research of which UN policymakers are insufficiently aware.

Participants highlighted in particular knowledge gaps that arose from 1) the emergence of new threats and challenges, such as the changing nature of violence and mass-migration flows; 2) insufficient understanding of how to address interconnected challenges through integrated, interconnected responses, in particular with respect to the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development; and 3) the UN's growing need to draw on research-based evaluation of its past and ongoing operations in its effort to develop effective responses to contemporary challenges.

New challenges

Against the backdrop of an ambitious 2030 Agenda, the changing nature of armed violence,[1] the challenges of migration, demographic change, and climate change, the UN faces a range of daunting challenges which require further research over the next 10-15 years.

Participants noted that the UN was operating in a new landscape of insecurity, marked by a tripling in the number of major civil wars over the past decade, a 600% rise in battle deaths globally, over the last 6 years, as well as the fact that UN peace operations tend to be deployed more frequently in situations of high-intensity conflict – with mixed success. This development highlights that research focused on the causes and knock-on effects of civil war, and on the effectiveness of conflict prevention and management as well as development interventions in such contexts remains highly relevant to the UN.

Participants also noted that the UN, across its mandate areas, was struggling to understand the implications for its work on the change in the nature of armed violence due to the rise of non-state actors, as well as the spread of illicit trafficking, organised crime, violent extremism and terrorism. In order to adapt its security and development interventions accordingly, the UN needs to better understand fundamental dynamics such as the connections between crime and conflict or underlying drivers of extremist violence. Of significant operational relevance would be research into the question of how to identify elements among violent extremist groups that could potentially be engaged in mediation, peace and reconciliations processes, and how to "peel them away" from die-hard radicals.

In the context of the changing nature of violence, participants also called for greater emphasis on political economy analysis as well as greater country-specific research and conflict analysis. This, in turn, places a premium on further empirical field research, particularly in remote and challenging environments. The UN could greatly benefit from drawing more heavily on area experts, including anthropologists and historians, as well as engaging local researchers and think tanks, so as to better understand country- and local-level contexts. This is particularly relevant where Western researchers may not have the same access as researchers from the global south. To this end, participants encouraged greater support for research from the global south, and fostering exchanges between global southern scholars and the UN.

Migration was highlighted as another area in which policy research has failed to keep pace with the evolution of the challenges. Indeed, in spite of the rise in international migrants and those displaced by conflicts and disasters around the world, which now number 245 million and 65 million, respectively, migration was "understudied and underworked in the UN system." New research on this topic would need to take into account the global, regional, national and local dimensions of the phenomenon and could, inter alia, offer narratives that could bring to light the positive consequences of migration. Such research should not be done in isolation but also examine the links with other global phenomena such as health, climate change, demographics, and vulnerable groups including youth.

Migrants and refugees in the Balkans. Credit: UN Photo

One participant emphasised that research and knowledge transfer was intended to benefit the most vulnerable and poorest people. In this regard, 'youth' in particular were singled out as key stakeholders on whom more research is needed, particularly on how to involve youth in the implementation of the SDGs.

[1] von Einsiedel et al., 'Major Recent Trends in Violent Conflict,' Occasional Paper 1, United Nations University Centre for Policy Research, 2014

The Sustainable Development Goals projected on UN Headquarters. Credit: UN Photo

The conference also recognized that researchers had a role in identifying pressing challenges which were not yet high on the agenda of the UN system, or member states, but which likely would be so in the foreseeable future. Such research could help the UN and states frame and convene dialogues about issues such as cybersecurity, urbanization, and biotechnology/biosecurity.

As many contemporary challenges facing the UN are of both subnational and transnational nature, researchers could also help the UN think through how a state-centric organisation like itself could best address such challenges, while still maintaining the norms and values contained in the UN Charter.

Critical interconnections and the 2030 Agenda

Participants noted that all key UN reports and documents coming out of major recent policy review and summit processes[2] highlighted the inter-linkages between the UN's pillars of development, security, and human rights. This is particularly true for the UN's 2030 Agenda, adopted in September 2015, whose 17 Sustainable Development Goals and 169 targets are highly interconnected, and provide a hugely ambitious agenda that cuts across all of the UN's pillars. As one participant put it: "The SDGs are not a list of things but a web of interrelationships."

However, as much as the UN struggles to break down a "silo culture" that would help cross-pillar integration in operational terms, academic and policy research agendas, too, suffer from overspecialization and silo-ization, only insufficiently reflecting and exploring these inter-linkages. This was true as much across the security-development-humanitarian divide as it was within any one of those areas. With respect to food security, for instance, participants called both for greater exploration by researchers of the deeply interlinked relationship between peace and food security as well as the inter-linkages of nutrition, water, agriculture, and governance – areas which are treated by much of academia in isolation.

Participants agreed that there is an important role for the research community to help the UN and Member States in guiding efforts to implement the 2030 Agenda, including by identifying inter-linkages among the different SDGs and their targets that would allow for prioritization and sequencing of development interventions to ensure maximum positive "knock-on effects." One participant recalled in this context that the Millennium Development Goals' greatest success lay in driving progress in the health sector, not least thanks to research that showed pathways on how to tackle HIV/AIDS, malaria and tuberculosis. Participants thus called for researchers to build similar "investment cases" in other areas, for instance by advancing the understanding of what types of investments in education or technological development best promote quality employment, social mobility, and economic growth.

The conference also highlighted that the interconnected nature of the 2030 Agenda calls for innovative research that extends across diverse research agendas, sectors and

[2] Participants mentioned, inter alia, the World Bank's 2011 World Development Report, the 2015 High Level Independent Panel on Peace Operations report (HIPPO), the 2015 Review of the Peacebuilding Architecture, the 2016 World Humanitarian Summit, the 2030 Agenda, the 2015 Global Review of UNSCR 1325 and the 2015 Paris Climate Summit.

stakeholders, and for the employment of interdisciplinary, systems-based and mixed methods approaches.

The challenge of devising effective UN interventions in support of the 2030 Agenda – and in devising cost-effective ways to monitor its implementation – also highlights the importance of good quality data for evidence-based policy making. However, such data is generally in scarce supply, particularly in fragile and conflict-affected situations.[3] To address this challenge, researchers will need to further explore effective uses of proxy data while continuing to advocate for better local data generation, including through foreign aid investments into the strengthening of national statistical offices.

Big data, in particular, was noted as holding both promise and peril for researchers and policymakers. On the one hand, it has already opened up new areas of research such as the ability to track movements of people, and the use of data in epidemiological work, and has created opportunities to monitor the SDGs in a cost-effective manner. On the other hand, participants cautioned against excessive reliance on big data which raised problems associated with 1) reliability and integrity of data; 2) the difficulties of interpreting it correctly; and 3) data protection, calling for investment in human resources and protocol to ensure they do not negatively affect people's human rights. On the last point, one participant referred to a case of geospatial data gathered by partners of the UN being passed on to the UN only to leak and be used in targeting decisions by armed groups.

Research on the UN

Participants repeatedly highlighted the need for the UN to improve the ways it monitors and evaluates the effectiveness of its operations across all mandate areas in order to develop a better understanding of what works and what does not. However, the UN's own capacity to do so – in terms of staff time and methodological skills – is limited, highlighting the important role of researchers to fill the gap. One former senior UN staffer noted: "We have no idea whether programmes are working, not working or are having a negative effect."

With respect to peace and security, for instance, participants called for greater focus on evaluating the overall effectiveness of peace operations or conflict prevention efforts, as well as specific interventions in areas such as disarmament, demobilization and reintegration (DDR), or preventive diplomacy. (On the last point, one participant recalled that the Department of Political Affairs, in 2011, partnered with a New York-based think tank to develop a robust methodology, which, after having been successfully applied in a small number of "case studies" has fallen into disuse). Participants also suggested exploring in greater depth the impact of development and conflict management interventions on organized crime as well as the security and developmental impacts of counter-crime efforts.

In the area of development, participants highlighted the need to step up efforts to monitor and evaluate the UN system's development interventions in light of the ambitiousness of the 2030 Agenda, which in turn significantly depends on better availability of data. The conference also highlighted the need for policy researchers to focus on institutional "fitness-for-purpose" questions, and to contribute to policy discussions on how the UN needs to reform the ways in which it is governed, structured, and funded to allow for better implementation of the 2030 Agenda.

David Haeri, UN Department of Peacekeeping Operations

[3] Morten Jerven, Poor Numbers: How We are Misled by African Development Statistics and What to Do About It (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2013).

Barriers & Challenges to Research Uptake

As much as the conference reconfirmed the need for greater interaction between the research and policy-making communities at the UN, it also highlighted cultural, organizational, political and operational barriers hampering policy uptake of research. Some of these barriers mirror the research-policy divide which is well-known to many governments around the world, while others are specific to the UN.

(Dis-)incentives for research uptake

Participants identified divergent incentive structures within the UN community and academia which discourage greater cooperation.

Within the university-based scholarly community, the system of professional advancement encourages young scholars in tenure-track positions to focus on highly academic and theoretical research, which stands greater chance of being published in relevant scholarly journals. By contrast, policy research was frowned upon in large parts of academia. (This challenge, of course, does not apply to think tanks.) One study was cited which found that during the 1930s and 1940s, up to 20% of articles in the scholarly journal The American Political Science Review had policy recommendations, whereas by 2015 that figure had dropped to a meagre 0.3%.[4]

Weixiong Chen, Counter-Terrorism Committee Executive Directorate (CTED) and Pingfan Hong, UN Department of Social and Economic Affairs

Meanwhile, the UN community features its own disincentives for closer collaboration with the research community. Indeed, UN staff members often are not encouraged either to seek out or contribute themselves to research. Intense operational or crisis management demands leave little room for engaging with research. Policy units within UN entities, which frequently act as the "translators" of research findings into UN policy, can be distracted by servicing senior UN officials with talking points on cross-cutting issues and similar requests. Recent human resources reforms have increasingly shut the "revolving door" through which a significant number of staff have moved back and forth between think tanks and the UN.

Moreover, the "politics of policymaking" often discourages uptake of research findings that may be challenging positions of powerful Member States or questioning the dominant thinking and current way of operating. Indeed, research is often used selectively to support existing ideas, resulting in what one participant called "policy-based evidence-making" as opposed to "evidence-based policy-making".

A problem specific to inter-governmental policy-making processes at the UN is that the interests and priorities of 193 Member States need to be balanced, leading to research findings and evidence-based policy recommendations tending to be disregarded in light of political imperatives. For example, despite the strong evidence-based research produced by the High Level Panel of Eminent Persons on the Post-2015 Development Agenda, it appears little, if any, of this or other earlier research actually informed the final outcome document on the SDGs. Participants lamented the missed opportunity of having past research inform the SDGs rather than the SDGs now driving new research.

There was debate amongst participants regarding the value of the UN maintaining in-house research capacity versus outsourcing policy-relevant research to universities or think thanks. Entities – such as the International Labour Organization (ILO) or the UN Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) - which have substantial in-house research capacity pointed to the fact that their research outputs tended to be viewed by Member States as independent, unbiased and authoritative.

Resource constraints

Resource limitations and funding allocation methods were also identified as significant barriers to UN research uptake. The lasting effects of the 2008 economic crisis continue to be felt in the form of significant funding cutbacks for the policy-focused research community. This drought means UN entities and research institutions need to look for new funding models, beyond the prevailing triangular model, where a UN entity or international organization expresses interest in research, the research is conducted by a think tank or university, and funding is provided by a member state interested in the specific issue.

[4] Biswas, A.K & Kirchherr, J. (2015) "Prof, no one is reading you", The Straits Times, April 11, 2015, Available at http://www.straitstimes.com/opinion/prof-no-one-is-reading-you

Participants during a plenary session of the "Strengthening the UN's Research Uptake" conference

Participants also noted that the type of research to be conducted can affect funding decisions. National scientific research funding schemes, for example, do not usually support applied, short-term work which would be more relevant for policy-oriented research required by the UN, but rather favour more systematic, longer-term and academic-orientated projects. For the knowledge community, there are difficulties in obtaining funding for research that challenges, rather than supports, existing policy orthodoxy.

'Lost in Translation' problems

One major barrier to greater research uptake by UN policymakers is that the presentational format and language preferred by the research community (in particular the university-based one) tends to be indigestible to policymakers. Cloaked in scientific jargon, epic in length, published in journals that policymakers rarely consult, and lacking executive summaries, research outputs are rarely geared towards policymakers. One participant cited research according to which 1.5 million peer reviewed articles are produced every year, each of which has an average readership of only ten people and 80% of which are never cited.[5]

UN staff may at times also lack the necessary expertise or training required to properly interrogate data, particularly quantitative data. To get the attention of policymakers, research outputs need to be presented in ways that reach, speak to, and are of use to them.

Access barriers to data, knowledge and people

There are also barriers on both sides in terms of access to data and knowledge. Despite improvements over the past decade thanks to the establishment of guidance and learning units within a number of UN entities, many of them still lack proper knowledge management systems that would allow for ready staff access to internally generated knowledge products, let alone externally-produced studies. Indeed, in light of the prohibitive costs of subscription to academic journals, only a very limited number of staff have access to relevant academic publications.

Meanwhile, the research community faces even bigger access challenges. To produce policy-relevant research and ensure research uptake, researchers need to interact with relevant UN policymakers throughout the research cycle, from the design phase all the way to the dissemination phase. They need to do so in order to understand the knowledge gaps of policymakers, get their hands on relevant information, navigate complicated UN politics, and ensure research findings make it into the right hands.

> *"There are reasons why the research uptake by the policy side can be a difficult proposition: the timelines and research independence of the academic community, the needs of policy makers and decision makers for a quick turnaround, or their desire to only use research which confirms pre-existing policy positions."*
>
> David Haeri, United Nations Department of Peacekeeping Operations

However, many researchers find it exceedingly hard to interact in such intimate ways with the UN policy community for a number of reasons. First, the UN is a complicated bureaucracy with over 60 departments, funds, agencies and programmes. Often, a large number of these entities are actively involved on

[5] See: http://www.smithsonianmag.com/smart-news/half-academic-studies-are-never-read-more-three-people-180950222/

any given issue and it is highly difficult for outsiders to decipher who within any entity is responsible for what issue.
Second, there is a signalling problem in that there is no established mechanism in place – other than through direct client relationships – for UN policymakers to communicate their research needs to the wider academic community. As a result, even prominent UN experts outside the organisation find it difficult to know exactly what it is the UN may require from them in terms of policy-relevant research.

Third, while these UN entities produce a wealth of data and information, it is difficult for researchers to mine such information because relevant documents – whether code cables, internal reports, notes to the file, after-action or lessons learned reports – often remain confidential or hidden, sometimes, but not always, for legitimate reasons. Researchers will therefore need to rely on interviews with relevant staff (which are notoriously short on time) to fully understand UN responses to any given issue.

Fourth, access to UN personnel and information is also a function of geographic proximity. Research organisations based in New York and Geneva tend to have privileged access – often thanks to personal connections – to UN headquarters, agencies, funds and programmes. Meanwhile, researchers from the global south enjoy significantly less access to the UN – and vice versa. As a result, UN entities often fall back to engaging with a narrow circle of established partners. Although southern think tanks are occasionally invited to engage with the UN, this is usually to provide a 'southern' interpretation of any given issue rather than to generate actual research. Meanwhile, UN peace operations in the field face particular challenges in effectively linking to think tanks outside their mission area.

Another important access barrier to researchers lies in the safety and security risks inherent to conducting field work in the fragile and conflict-affected environments or areas with limited statehood in which many of the UN's operations are taking place, particularly for those who work in the fields of conflict, terrorism and crime.

Samson Bezabeh, Makarere Institute of Social Research

Timeline mismatches

Finally, there is a disjuncture between the timeframes of academic research cycles and the "policymaking cycles" determining the UN's research needs. Driven by political cycles and attention spans, policymakers operate within shorter timelines, usually expecting results within 6-12 months. As noted by one participant, policymakers need quick products and quick delivery, not quick knowledge. Conversely, the timelines for the production of scholarly output are much longer, often lasting 2-5 years, by which time their findings can become less relevant to the UN community.

Overcoming Barriers to Research Uptake - Good Practices and Recommendations

While the barriers to strengthening research uptake are real, workshop participants agreed they were not insurmountable. Indeed, participants provided a surprisingly rich panoply of examples of successful modes of engagement between the research and UN communities that has positively influenced policy formulation and that offer models of good practice.

Stakeholder engagement and partnerships

The central lesson emerging from the workshop was that in order to ensure policy uptake, the research community should ensure close engagement with UN policymakers, while both groups should proactively seek out partnerships for collaboration.

Most importantly, this means that policy researchers will have to involve policymakers throughout the research cycle, starting during the research design phase. Such partnerships would help ensure that research is embedded in policy, and policy becomes an integral component of research programmes. Early engagement with policymakers also increases the likelihood of research proposals securing funding from donors.

Researchers were encouraged to know not only what research needs policymakers have, but why they want this knowledge in order to better understand the context for the research. Researchers should also involve policymakers in analysis production, periodically checking in with them over the course of the project. This would help researchers identify changing priorities and make adjustments as necessary, while such communication would help build trust and understanding between the parties.

However, for UN entities, to enter into partnerships with academic institutions remains the exception rather than the rule and one participant noted the UN made it "unnecessarily tough" to partner with them as the organization "lacked the collaborative gene". At the same time, participants offered a number of examples of successful partnerships often involving, on the UN side, a "policy entrepreneur" who would drive an issue from within the UN system. Sometimes, such partnerships have involved interested governments, which helps ensure policy uptake and support on the intergovernmental side, including through funding.

One particularly productive example of this form of partnerships includes the engagement, over the course of the

Sanjeev Ahluwalia, Observer Research Foundation

past 16 years, of a group of researchers on the issue of targeted UN sanctions. This effort involved, in the early 2000s, the engagement by researchers of UN officials, government representatives and members of the business community in research-based multistakeholder processes that resulted in manuals offering practical guidance on the design and implementation of UN sanctions. These manuals were carried into the UN Security Council inter alia by practical simulations on how to use them. Many members of the research community who were involved in this effort continue to work on sanctions, most recently through the creation of the Targeted Sanctions Consortium (TSC), which produced policy briefings, a practitioner's guide, scholarly publications and a widely-used SanctionsApp,[6] to reach the policy world.

Minh-Thu Pham, United Nations Foundation

In some cases, such partnerships even amount to truly joint projects, in which think tanks enter into agreements with UN entities that guarantee, under certain conditions, access to staff for interviews as well as access to sensitive information in a number of cases.

The importance of partnerships notwithstanding, several participants cautioned that researchers would need to maintain the independence and rigour of their work, and accept that they may not always agree with policymakers on the conclusions reached, particularly where there may be conflicting analysis on issues. Participants from the research community also warned against being excessively driven by the demands of policymakers, which carried the risk of researchers becoming instrumentalized and of research that produced views that challenged conventions becoming further marginalized. As one participant put it, the role of think tanks was "to tease rather than please" policymakers.

Improving researchers' access to the UN: Gateways, networks, signalling

The establishment of partnerships often depends on institutional gateways into the UN system that can be difficult to establish for researchers, especially those based in the global south. The most important "docking station" for the academic community to establish such partnerships directly with the UN are policy or research units of different UN entities, part of whose mandate it is to liaise with relevant researchers.

In recent years, many UN policy units have developed innovative ways of engaging the world of research, and the conference revealed some scope for these units to learn from each others' models of engagement.

The Mediation Support Unit (MSU) of the UN Department of Political Affairs (DPA), for instance, has established a Standby Team of eight mediation experts, mostly drawn from the academic community, who rotate on an annual basis. This group has helped to ensure the UN's mediation practice as well as policy development around mediation is infused with the insights of research. DPA also maintains an Academic Advisory Council that is meant to formalize exchanges between academics and practitioners on conflict prevention and mediation.

Other policy units have also established academic networks from which they can draw on a regular basis. The Department of Economic and Social Affairs' (DESA) Development Policy and Analysis Division, for instance, has established various mechanisms to ensure systematic input of academics into its flagship reports. The International Telecommunications Union has developed a public/private model of engagement with academia bringing together over 700 industry representatives and more than 100 academic representatives to collaborate, including on building synergies and creating best practice models. The Security Council's Counter-terrorism Executive Directorate (CTED) has launched a global research network to share experiences with representatives of leading counter-terrorism think-tanks and research institutes on major international terrorism issues.

Another important gateway for researchers around the world to access UN decision-makers consists of a set of think tanks with well-established relationships with the UN, which have often served as a bridge between the worlds of policy and academia. These think tanks include – but are not limited to – the Center on International Cooperation (CIC), the International Peace Institute (IPI), the Conflict Prevention and Peace Forum (CPPF), and the UN Foundation (UNF) (all

[6] A mobile device application that distributes the TSC's research on the effectiveness of UN targeted sanctions and provides diplomats from the elected 10 members of the Security Council access to research findings. When designing the app, researchers met with Security Council members in New York to ask what kinds of features they would use. The app design took this 'market research' into account to ensure relevance and usability for policy practitioners designing and implementing sanctions. This is only one example of productive engagement cited at the conference and it should be noted that one of the conveners of the conference, Thomas Biersteker, was principal developer of the App.

four based in New York), as well as the Graduate Institute in Geneva. These and some other think tanks often engage researchers from around the world in research projects that are designed in close partnership with the UN. UNU, based in Tokyo but with over a dozen institutes around the world and an office in New York, is also increasingly playing a role as an interface for researchers to inform UN policymaking.

An interesting model of a think tank-based initiative to engage researchers worldwide around a common theme and connect them with UN policymakers is the Geneva Peacebuilding Platform, a joint project of five research/training institutions in Geneva.[7] The platform, which can draw upon as many as 3,000 peacebuilding professionals, fosters knowledge exchanges between researchers and policy practitioners by sharing data and encouraging analysis in a neutral setting.

Finally the Academic Council of the United Nations System (ACUNS), through its annual conferences, podcasts and workshops, provides a forum and network which could be further developed for bringing the research community closer to the UN.

For the UN to make better use of all these research networks and ensure their research is directed at issues of relevance to the UN, it was suggested that different UN policy entities could develop modalities that communicate their policy research needs and regularly issue (perhaps on an annual basis) brief notes (1-2 pages) outlining core interests and research needs.

Improving access for developing country think tanks

A key theme throughout the conference was a call for the UN, and UN-focused "gateway think tanks," to invest greater efforts to connect with researchers and think tanks in the developing world – not least as this is where much of the UN's operational activities in its mandate areas are taking place.

Kakoli Ghosh, Food and Agricultural Organisation

Strengthening productive partnerships with think tanks in the global south will require sustained investment over a number of years and stepped-up engagement from various sides. Donors were urged to shift a greater share of research funding towards research institutions in developing countries. UN-focused think tanks from developed countries were urged to seek more research partnerships with developing country think tanks, also as a means of capacity-building. And UN entities were called upon to reach out proactively to researchers in the global south.

To strengthen UN expertise among developing country researchers, one specific suggestion was for donor countries to work with UN entities to jointly establish six-month to one-year fellowship positions for researchers from the global south (or, for young scholars, paid internship positions) to be

[7] The Centre on Conflict, Development and Peacebuilding (CCDP), the Graduate Institute, the Geneva Centre for Security Policy (GCSP), Interpeace and the Quaker United Nations Office in Geneva

placed within UN policy units. This would not only assist developing country scholars to become more attuned to the needs of UN policymakers but would serve further to establish personal relationships and trust between them. Conversely, UN staff participating in the UN's sabbatical programme should be encouraged to spend their research time at developing country think tanks.

One participant from an African research institute highlighted the particular importance of taking African issues to the global debate and called for greater cooperation among African think tanks, lamenting their tendency to always work with Western partners.

Stephen Browne, ACUNS, during a session on sustainable development

Flagship Reports and High-level Panels

One particular mechanism that a number of entities have successfully used to channel research and academic knowledge into the UN system is the publication of regular flagship reports, the production of which relies heavily on scholarly input – or is sometimes even entirely outsourced to scholars.

The UN's most formidable effort to provide policymakers with academic expert input is probably the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC), set up in 1988 by two UN agencies[8] to provide regular assessments of the scientific basis of climate change and its consequences, whose reports are written by hundreds of scientists. Participants wondered whether the IPCC model, which helped make climate change a major global policy issue, could be replicated in other fields.

> *"There are lots of innovative ways for the various UN agencies to liaise with the research community, for example by working with local researchers who might have access to difficult areas that western researchers might not have access to, building knowledge that can benefit the UN."*
>
> Katia Papagianni, Centre for Humanitarian Dialogue

Another prominent example of a research-based flagship report is the annual Human Development Report, sponsored by UNDP which invites different scholars each year to participate and focus on a distinct thematic issue. Similarly, its influential spin-off, the Arab Human Development Reports have provided leading Arab scholars a platform through which to analyse the challenges and opportunities for human development in the Arab region. The World Bank's annual World Development Reports also rely heavily on input from scholars who are commissioned to generate cutting-edge background studies in the course of its production (which are made public on the World Bank's website).

For its World Economic Prospects Report, the UN Department of Economic and Social Affairs engages an academic consortium of 80 experts in model-based forecasting, and for its Global Sustainable Development Report it consults over 500 experts to contribute directly to the report, including through questionnaires. The UN Conference on Trade and Development (UNCTAD) relies on networks of researchers to produce its various flagship reports on issues such as trade, development, and investment. And UNODC, for its World Drug Report, sets up scientific advisory committees composed of academics which function as a sort of peer review.

Another interesting example is the Annual Reviews of Peace Operations, produced by Center on International Cooperation (CIC), in partnership with the UN Departments of Peacekeeping Operations and Political Affairs, drawing heavily on official data made available to CIC by these entities.

A well-tested mechanism channelling the latest research insights on any given issue into the UN bloodstream are blue-ribbon reform panels convened through the Secretary-General, the use of which has dramatically grown under Ban Ki-moon. The Secretariats for these panels are sometimes led by prominent academics (for instance in the case of the 2004 High-level Panel on Threats, Challenges and Change or the 2013 High-level Panel on the Post-2015 Development Agenda).

These and other panels, such as the 2014 High-level Independent Panel on Peace Operations (HIPPO), have engaged in systematic consultations with the academic community and invited contributions from researchers worldwide, often generating compelling macro-analysis, synthesizing key research findings from different fields and translating them into UN-relevant recommendations.

Creating incentives within the UN

Conference participants from both the UN and research communities highlighted the importance of providing UN staff beyond policy units with incentives to engage more actively with the world of research.

[8] The World Meteorological Organization (WMO) and the UN Environmental Programme (UNEP).

One such opportunity is provided through the UN's sabbatical leave programme, under which a small group of UN staff members are selected to pursue research or study projects for a period of up to four months. Participants agreed that this programme deserves to be significantly expanded.

However, even an expanded sabbatical programme would only benefit a very small number of staff members, and participants called for a deeper "cultural shift" within the UN that would incentivize individual staff members' engagement with relevant research. For instance, senior UN managers should encourage staff to participate in research projects and publish research under their own name, which is often actively discouraged out of sometimes misguided concerns about "political sensitivities" as well as by arcane staff rules governing the process for getting authorization for such publications.

Meanwhile, future UN human resources reforms should make it easier for UN staff to temporarily leave the organization to work at research institutions for several years, which, under current rules, is not possible without resigning from the organization.

Finally, further improvements in UN entities' knowledge management tools and planning capacities, which are the systems through which the UN often absorbs research, would go a long way in strengthening its research uptake.

More effective dissemination of research output

Several suggestions were made on how academics could better disseminate relevant research findings in ways that would help ensure policy uptake.

Very few policymakers will have the time to stay abreast of the latest literature published in peer-reviewed journals, as important as they are in terms of providing some reassurance on robustness of research findings. It is therefore essential that key research findings be "translated" into formats that are more digestible for policymakers. Publishing research findings in journals widely read in policy circles such as *Foreign Affairs* or *Foreign Policy* tends to ensure high-level attention, as does distilling research findings into op-ed format on the pages of *The New York Times*, *The Financial Times*, or *The Guardian*. Short policy briefs also have a much greater chance of being read by relevant policymakers than lengthy research papers or books. Smart use of social media such as Twitter or Facebook can significantly increase relevant readership.

However, conference participants warned that such a "spray and pray" approach to dissemination had limits, and the idea that simply translating a paper into a policy brief and providing a briefing would guarantee policy uptake, was deeply misguided.

In addition to such "broadcasting-approaches" to dissemination, researchers will therefore need to adopt more targeted strategies, "meet policymakers where they are", and engage them around their research outputs. As highlighted earlier, this makes getting policymakers' buy-in prior to dissemination essential, through their active engagement

Steven Glovinsky, UN Economic Commission for Africa

throughout the research cycle. During the dissemination phase, this is often achieved by convening conferences/ roundtables or retreats to create safe spaces for engagement between policymakers and experts under the Chatham House rule which facilitates open discussion and dialogue.

At the conference, UN policymakers also suggested that think tanks could be providing an invaluable service by regularly providing summaries of relevant academic journal publications with key take away points for the UN. This could be developed as a compendium of leading journal abstracts tailored for UN personnel, accessible to staff via an open repository.

In this vein, the UN Foundation, for instance, is providing monthly updates on key issues and themes related to UN work such as the SDGs, along with annotated bibliographies of "must reads," which have become a greatly appreciated resource in UN policymaking circles.

In brief, a combination of highly targeted and broad approaches to research dissemination was seen as essential for research uptake at the UN. Short, summary-style policy briefs, and social media can direct policy practitioners to new, more detailed research findings published on traditional platforms. Participants agreed that cooperation between researchers and policy practitioners should be fostered throughout the duration of research projects, to help scholars identify and understand target groups when disseminating research findings.

Overcoming timeline mismatches

Finally, the desire for quick reports by policymakers often conflicts with the needs of researchers to be thorough and conduct research over time. One suggestion to resolve this is for researchers to share preliminary findings with policy practitioners to provide early implications for policy. This should be done with caution as researchers are aware that preliminary findings can and often do change. Also, the quality of research may be affected if researchers are pressed to produce quick results.

Sue Eckert, Watson Institute for International Studies

Nevertheless, several areas of research were identified where long term academic studies can be beneficial to UN policy practitioners, such as: demographic projections, climate change, early warning system for natural disasters, how to take advantage of new technologies, and databases for sharing information about previous practices.

Looking Ahead

Participants agreed on the utility of a follow up conference, to foster continued dialogue, and encourage learning across different research domains. A future conference could also bring in experts on research dissemination, to offer practical suggestions on how best to leverage research findings in the policy world, bearing in mind that that "research uptake" should be treated as a serious field of research in its own right.

Participants reporting back from their break-out sessions

Annex 1: List of Participants

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Centre for Policy Research

THE GRADUATE INSTITUTE GENEVA
PROGRAMME FOR THE STUDY OF INTERNATIONAL GOVERNANCE

STRENGTHENING THE UN'S RESEARCH UPTAKE

25-26 April 2016, Geneva, Switzerland

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