Independence or Influence: 
Tradeoffs in Development Policy Research

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'Most policy research on African agriculture is irrelevant to agricultural and overall economic policy in Africa’ – Steve Were Omamo, (2003) p.ix.

Introduction

In the social sciences policy based research is generally understood to mean research that is explicitly designed to inform and usually to change public policy. As a “discipline” policy research in both developed and developing countries has been much studied. In the field of development there is a vast literature on the conceptual basis of policy research and on how to design it, how to do it, how to evaluate it and on the tools, drawn from many branches of the social sciences, that should be deployed in doing so (Global Development Network 2013; ODI 2004). Within this literature much is said about maximizing the influence of policy research by ensuring that it is relevant.

But how is relevance best secured? And to whom is it relevant? Some commentators emphasize the value of conducting research in a patron-client relationship, whereby the researcher delivers answers to questions posed by the government or some other public agency. This, for example is the process followed by the International Growth Centre (IGC). Others advocate generating policy results and lessons that have wide international relevance – international public goods (IPGs) – that enable policy consumers to make more

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1 According to Broadbent (2012) research use has a political nature and political context is key to understanding the role of research based policy in Africa. In examining what is meant by policy based research he also presents a critique of the largely un-examined nature of the concept. For the purposes of this paper “policy” is taken to mean an action or set of actions intended to make practical a strategy, plan or other defined objective(s).

2 Relevance in this context should be understood to mean that “the research is more likely to contribute to policy if; the evidence fits within the political and institutional limits and pressures of policy makers and resonates with their assumptions or sufficient pressure is exerted to challenge these assumptions. The evidence is credible and convincing, provides practical solutions to pressing policy problems, and is packaged to attract policy makers’ interest, and if researchers and policy makers share common networks, trust each other, and communicate effectively” (Harris 2012 p.2, citing Court and Young 2006). ODI emphasizes that policy influence is affected by topical relevance and the operational usefulness of an idea (ODI 2004).
informed choices. This is the approach used by many research centres with large geographic mandates, including IFPRI and some other member institutions of the Consultative Group on International Agricultural Research (CGIAR). Others, notably think tanks, organizations like FAO and contract research institutions in OECD countries, pursue a more normative approach and undertake research in the quest for more and better knowledge and pay scant attention to whether it is applicable beyond a specific circumstance.³ Major donors such as the World Bank seek policy relevance by directly supporting policy research in public institutions, as well as by conducting their own evidence-based policy research. Yet others seek to identify gaps in public policy knowledge that are amenable to investigation and thus, when filled, are likely to be relevant to specific situations.⁴ The BMGF has funded several attempts to do this.⁵

In writing about these alternative approaches few if any commentators have addressed the advantages and disadvantages of different ways of organizing policy research so as to maximize relevance. Thus it is difficult to discern whether experience to date suggests that one way is better than another or that a particular organizational model is optimal. While few commentators fail to mention the critical role played by collaboration between the producers and consumers of policy research,⁶ the absence of a

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³ This raises concerns about the relevance of such research and the ease of access to the results. ODI (2004).
⁴ Most of these approaches can avoid the Weberian injunction that researchers in the social sciences should avoid imposing their own value judgments. Other ways of conducting policy research may less easily sidestep this challenge. See Kolavalli, Keefe and Birner (2012).
⁵ The extensive donor support of policy based research (around US$3.0 billion annually) in developing countries is a direct response to a severe market failure in most developing counties. See Stone (2009), Jones and Young (2007). But extensive donor support also affects the ownership of policy recommendations (ODI 2004; Ohemeng 2005; Keijzer, Spierings and Heirman 2011).
⁶ Various authors consider the role of collaboration through distant – commonly virtual – means or through close physical proximity (Hovland 2003; Ryan and Garrett 2003; O’Neill 2005). Others emphasise that collaboration should be for the long term (Saxena 2005). National and international networks of researchers, and to a lesser degree policy users, intended to foster collaboration and mutual understanding have risen in
comprehensive analysis of the efficacy of organisational forms also means that the risks of collaboration tend to be under-researched.  

What are these risks? In collaborative, objective policy research centred on proximity to decision-makers, the key risk is that of "capture." Capture will be used in this essay to denote a situation in which consumers of policy research unduly distort the conduct of independent analysis by researchers and, by extension, the setting of institutional research priorities. Such distortions may take the form of constraints imposed on the identification of relevant researchable topics; on the acquisition of necessary data; on the use of certain analytical methods; or on the dissemination of scientific results and policy findings.  

By this definition, capture is a matter of degree. Further, we may postulate that the degree to which an institution is captured matters: the greater the extent of capture the lower the likelihood that research will generate first-best solutions to policy problems and, correspondingly, the greater the likelihood of delivering sub-optimal policy advice. This risk may become very serious in situations where the openness of the policy arena is constrained and the freedom of expression restricted by a prevailing political or economic ideology. In such situations there are explicit trade-offs to be made that balance the goal of objectively identifying first best outcomes against political judgments about relevance, influence and priority. First-best solutions are sometimes simply impossible absent, inter alia, a supporting institutional structure. In Ethiopia IFPRI's focus on creating institutions
may be seen as a “backdoor” or indirect route to increasing the chances that first best solutions might ultimately be attainable.

In this essay we consider these issues associated with the efficacy of collaborative policy research through the lens of IFPRI’s experience conducting policy research in Ethiopia between 1995 and 2010. From 1995 to 2004, nearly all of IFPRI’s Ethiopia work was undertaken by Washington-based research teams working on specific themes under various “global research programs.” This changed in 2004 with the establishment of IFPRI’s Ethiopia Strategy Support Program (ESSP). The ESSP was set up to provide direct support to the Government of Ethiopia in the design and implementation of its national agricultural development strategy.

We compare both the design and influence of IFPRI’s research activities under these two distinct approaches to policy research. We find that the establishment of the ESSP rendered IFPRI much more of an “insider” in Ethiopia’s policy making process than had previously been the case. This had profound effects on the composition and influence of IFPRI’s research. We argue that the ESSP enhanced the relevance of IFPRI’s work – particularly its contribution to institutional change in Ethiopia – but at the cost of partial capture by a government whose prevailing ideological position is inimical to the use of free markets as a means of allocating resources, particularly in agriculture and rural development. We note further that the partial capture of the ESSP is likely to be an inevitable “cost of doing business” within Ethiopia’s policymaking milieu, and that the effectiveness of the ESSP has depended to a large degree on the idiosyncratic efforts of ESSP Program Directors.
IFPRI’s Approach to Policy Research

IFPRI was incorporated as a tax-exempt corporation in Washington, DC in 1975. In 1980 it began its association with the CGIAR becoming a full member in 1984. Its initial mandate focused its work on the policies needed to increase food production in developing countries, as well as trade and aid in foodstuffs. With time this mandate has been expanded to allow coverage of most aspects of rural development and the relations between agricultural and rural development policy and macro economic policy, although there has been a relative decline in the emphasis on trade and aid. Early on there was also a clear emphasis on building policy research capacity in developing countries through collaborative activity.

During its first decade of operation, even as its staff grew in number and diversity, IFPRI’s primary modus operandi was via research projects anchored in Washington DC with some short term deployment of staff to countries where empirical work was undertaken. When the leadership changed in 1992 (Per Pinstrup-Andersen replaced John Mellor) the search for international public goods (IPG’s) became an explicit objective of IFPRI’s research. The search for IPGs was based on similar and simultaneous forms of investigation in several countries in the hope that there would be strong commonalities in the findings and policy conclusions such that their value to others would be self-evident and widespread. The earliest long-term outpostings of IFPRI staff also took place at about this time and networks of policy researchers and policy users were built to further...
foster the cross-country exchange of policy knowledge. These approaches (the search for IPGs and networking) have dominated IFPRI’s research since although there seems to have been a reduction in the emphasis on the search for IPG’s in recent years. These changes were accompanied by an increase in targeted policy support to selected nations particularly in Africa.

By the end of Pinstrup-Andersen’s tenure as Director-General in 2002, IFPRI’s thinking had developed to the point where explicit plans for supporting policy development in specific countries were being articulated. These plans included multiple studies intended to help countries devise coherent policy frameworks and well thought-through strategies for rural poverty reduction and increased agricultural production. This approach was fully consistent with the strong push by the donor community (in the light of the MDG’s) to get each developing country to prepare its own comprehensive Poverty Reduction Strategy Programme (PRSP).

IFPRI also decided to launch a series of Strategy Support Programmes (SSP’s) that would help selected countries improve their rural policy frameworks as well as their

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13 A recent example of these IFPRI networks is the Regional Strategic Analysis and Knowledge Support System (ReSAKSS) established in 2006 to provide readily available analysis, data, and tools of the highest quality to encourage evidence-based decision making, improve awareness of the role of agriculture for development in Africa, fill knowledge gaps, promote dialogue, and facilitate the benchmarking and review processes associated with the Comprehensive Africa Agriculture Development Programme (IFPRI 2013). However, the ways in which the ReSAKKS would deliver these ambitions remained ill-defined, leading to concerns in a 2007 external review of IFPRI’s DGSD (the responsible division) that its role and functions should be reconsidered (Bromley and Thompson 2007).

14 This thinking was well summarized by Bromley and Thompson (2007, p. 7): "In...the absence of clarity about why development has stalled in particular countries, and then what strategies seem most efficacious in getting development underway in the light of those impediments... (i)t is doubtful that this issue can be comprehensively addressed by conducting cross-country studies of what has "worked" and what has "not worked" in a group of countries. The difficulty lies in the contested causal structure in such studies. That is, econometric analysis of such relations cannot reveal the causal processes in the development arena. This means that ex post econometric research must be complemented by careful diagnostics if research is to provide widely disparate countries with plausible strategies for development.”

15 This thinking was greatly influenced by the widely acknowledged success of an ad hoc IFPRI research team stationed in Dacca, Bangladesh from 1989-94 that undertook highly influential research on wheat and rice markets, food rationing and other aspects of food policy.
capacity to undertake their own policy research.\textsuperscript{16} These SSP’s were to be collaborative in nature and would involve posting IFPRI staff to work alongside local researchers and research institutions in the selected countries. They were also intended to have finite lives – “to have worked themselves out of a job” in the words one IFPRI researcher. In this way work in a given country could be scaled down and eventually ended while a new SSP was built up in another country. The first of these SSP’s turned out to be Ethiopia, where an IFPRI policy research unit was established in 2004.\textsuperscript{17}

**IFPRI’s Policy Research Experience in Ethiopia**

As one of the poorest, most populous, and largest countries in Africa, Ethiopia’s development challenges – and the policies pursued to address those challenges – have long been the focus of attention by researchers, development policy analysts and donors. From 1995 to 2004, almost all of IFPRI’s work in Ethiopia was undertaken by Washington-based research teams pursuing specific themes under various “global research programs.” In each case Ethiopia was just one of several countries in a larger multi-country study. This was in line with IFPRI’s prevailing modus operandi of pursuing rigorous empirical research capable of contributing to a broader understanding of economic development processes. The international public goods (IPGs) generated in this way included peer-reviewed published outputs (books, monographs, journal articles, and discussion papers); collaborative research with both domestic and international researchers; and the building

\textsuperscript{16} From the outset the SSPs were intended to have a direct impact on poverty and food security in selected countries by (a) strengthening applied policy research on a broad range of food policy and development strategy issues; (b) enhancing the national capacity to undertake policy research; (c) strengthening the policy dialogue by providing better information and communication; (d) providing an institutional framework within which IFPRI’s research teams can undertake country case study research as part of their international research portfolios; and (e) providing a listening and learning environment in relation to national food policy issues for IFPRI staff (IFPRI internal memorandum 2006.)

\textsuperscript{17} A regional technical assistance unit based in Costa Rica was set up in 2005 as well as a long distance (non-resident) programme with China. Other SSPs were set up in Ghana, Nigeria and Uganda shortly thereafter.
of national capacity for policy research through workshops, formal training programs and knowledge networks.

IFPRI entered into a different kind of relationship with Ethiopia in 2004 when the Ethiopia Strategy Support Programme (ESSP) was set up to provide well researched policy advice to support to the Government of Ethiopia (GoE) in the design and implementation of its national agricultural development strategy and on other agricultural and rural development (ARD) policy matters. The ESSP involved placing a small team of IFPRI researchers in Addis to work with the Ethiopian Development Research Institute (EDRI) and other national counterparts on policy analysis, capacity development and communications. However, the Addis-based ESSP team has always been backstopped by researchers based in Washington DC.

The ESSP programme was designed with the explicit intent of increasing the influence and impact of IFPRI’s policy research, without sacrificing the analytical rigour and intellectual independence of the investigators. The research agenda was to be collaboratively determined. The key distinguishing features of the ESSP model compared with IFPRI’s prior mode of operation in Ethiopia was the posting of a core of researchers to Addis Ababa who were to work very closely with domestic partners in the local policy establishment – government officials, academics, and quasi-independent researchers – on the design and conduct of the research. It was foreseen that the resulting “demand-led” research produced by the ESSP would enhance the relevance and impact of its outputs, increase domestic research capacity and lead to greater policy relevance and impact.

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18 Taken at face value IFPRI was invited into Ethiopia by the GoE. However, IFPRI had already surveyed the scene and noted that the infrastructure for public information and policy analysis was quite rudimentary, and that policy debates in particular were not keenly sought either by public or public sector authorities (Rahmato 2008).
An Ideological Divide
At the outset, we note the existence of an ideological divide between the Government of Ethiopia (GoE) and key donors, a divide that has an important bearing on the research that “outsiders” (like IFPRI) could undertake if they wished to influence policy decisions.19 Throughout our period of review the GoE maintained a distinctive ideological position reflecting its antecedents in the Tigrean Peoples Liberation Front, a movement that had Marxist foundations and drew heavily on Leninist and Stalinist thinking. But over time the prevailing political and economic ideology in Ethiopia took on a more purely African form, the roots of which can be traced to the 1967 Arusha Declaration. That declaration argued that to ensure economic justice the State must have effective control over the principal means of production; and that it is the responsibility of the State to intervene actively in the economic life of the nation to prevent the exploitation of one person by another or one group by another (Nyerere 1968, p. 391). Thinking of this kind is widely said to have informed the policy positions of the late Prime Minister Meles Zenawi Ethiopia’s Prime Minister who, throughout the period covered by this study, was the driver of government policy in all spheres, especially the economic.

In the agriculture sector this thinking, according to several informed commentators, finds its clearest expression in a deep suspicion of free markets on the grounds that they are both exploitative and corrupt – a belief graphically described by one commentator as “traders are thieves.” This viewpoint has lead to a policy bias in favour of state-sanctioned or state-owned marketing bodies, amongst which cooperatives are the long-standing

19 This situation is not unique to Ethiopia. An antithetical political culture has long been cited as a barrier to the influence of policy research (Kingdon 1984; Court and Young 2003), as well as the growth and power of civil society organisations of all types (Rahmato, 2008).
favourites and the very recent Ethiopian Commodity Exchange the most visible. It has also lead to the neglect of policy reform in domestic input and output markets for agriculture. For many years the GOE, in its dialogue with donors, has proven to be very sensitive to any change that seemed to promote private sector commercial expansion – despite the idea of “agricultural development-led industrialisation” having been the GOE’s stated objective for two or more decades. Competition is moderated, if not resisted, at every opportunity.

These comments should not however be taken to imply that that Meles Zenawi’s government has been unsuccessful. From the beginning the government and the Prime Minister have advocated "pro-poor" domestic policies and have emphasized social inclusion and equity. According to the World Bank the Ethiopian government ranks number one in Africa on spending as a share of GDP going to pro-poor sectors. The administration has also sought to decentralize and to devolve power, creating self-governing regional development organizations. Even though Zenawi’s administration inherited one of the worst performing economies in the world, Ethiopia’s economy grew steadily throughout his time in office. Over much of the past decade Ethiopia’s GDP is said to have grown at about 9 percent a year, reflecting broadly successful “structural policies” and improving public sector management and institutions.

Nevertheless, the ideological leanings of the GoE during the years spanned by this study may be fairly characterized as being highly suspicious of—even hostile to—letting markets work as a means of allocating resources. This ethos is diametrically opposed to the core idea of neoclassical economics that reliance on sensibly regulated, but essentially free markets is the best means of promoting allocative efficiency and maximizing material well-being among the largest number of people. Also, there seem to be clear limits to GoE's
acceptance of policy messages (and the research that underpins them) that are based on “first-best,” free-market solutions.

Most governments (and hence most donors) reflect some underlying ideology of either the left or the right. Thus, the GoE’s left-leaning position is not unusual among developing countries, although it seems to have been held more consistently than in many others. In contrast, and despite the fact that IFPRI’s work in Ethiopia and elsewhere reflects a more heterodox approach to finding middle ground between state-centered and market-based policies than might be adopted by many other institutions within the donor community (e.g., the World Bank), the great bulk of IFPRI research (and the training of its research staff) is rooted in neo-classical economics. The upshot of all this is that a significant share of IFPRI’s research in Ethiopia may be fairly characterized as seeking (second-best) solutions to problems created by market failures, while another large share is directed towards the creation and operation of institutions as a possible prelude to first-best solutions.

In addition, and perhaps as a consequence of this ideological mismatch, Ethiopian policy makers seem to display a resistance to “outside advice” from independent domestic sources such as Economic Policy Research Institute (EPRI) and from the donor community that is greater than in most other places. This view was expressed by a broad

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20 According to Rahmato (2008, p. 2) "...the close of the 1980s saw the emergence of what were called a "new generation" of African leaders who promised to renounce the tradition of authoritarian rule, and who committed themselves to responsible government and free elections. Uganda, Congo, Ethiopia, Malawi, and even Zimbabwe were included in this category. However, it was not long before these promises were conveniently ignored, and progress towards democratic government was stalled or altogether derailed. At present, in many of these countries, the authoritarian tradition is once again making itself strongly felt, and there is disregard for the rule of law, massive corruption, and lack of administrative accountability.”

21 EPRI is the research arm of the Ethiopian Economic Association (a professional society).

22 According to Rahmato (2008, p. 9) "...the policy-making tradition in Ethiopia has not been friendly to independent opinion and the decision-making process remains essentially closed to public scrutiny. Parliament has always been a pliant institution and traditionally rubber-stamps the government's initiatives. Policy is commonly drafted by a small group of trusted individuals who are often close to the power-holders. There is no attempt to consult stakeholders or professionals outside government, or to solicit public
range of knowledgeable informants interviewed during this study. These informants cogently argued that this resistance has had several very important effects on the influence of IFPRI's research (and economic research in Ethiopia more generally) and on how that research influences policy. First, it greatly lengthens the gestation period during which research-based policy ideas are transformed into specific policy changes. Some see these lags as being the result of key policy makers buying time to consider what is being offered—time during which the origins of the advice may become obscured. Thus, outright rejection of clear and convincing policy advice is rare, and in some cases change does (eventually) come. Second, and paradoxically, the GoE has an additional tendency to become “overly exuberant” with some policy changes. Third, it renders more difficult than usual the attribution of specific policy changes to specific research outputs.

The net result is a policy arena in which both the determination of research issues and the acceptance of research findings are matters requiring unusual delicacy on the part of IFPRI researchers. This attentiveness to the politics of policymaking is highly relevant to our interests here insofar as it tends to influence both research design and the presentation of research results.

**Outputs and Outcomes**

In this section we summarize the influences that IFPRI's research efforts have had on the way agricultural policies are determined in Ethiopian. The pathway whereby a policy research institution such as IFPRI can produce positive impacts is often characterized as follows (Gardner 2008): a policy problem or issue justifies the outlay of money and

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opinion...Quite frequently, policy planners are inaccessible to the public and their efforts are shrouded in secrecy.”
manpower on a set of research activities. This leads to outputs (research papers, etc.) that are ingredients in an interactive (and iterative) process involving many stakeholders that in turn produces outcomes in the form of a consensus for change and the legal steps, institutional steps, or both necessary to give effect to the new or changed policy. Last, those outcomes deliver impact in the form of net welfare gains—both to a defined population of beneficiaries and to non-targeted groups (in the form of knowledge or welfare spillovers).

The immediacy in this simple model is not always found in practice. In particular, the process whereby policy-research outputs contribute to policy outcomes may depend on a host of variables affecting the formation of “advocacy coalitions” around a particular policy issue (Weible, Sabatier, and McQueen 2009). But in Ethiopia such coalitions, especially those involving civil society organizations, have been only weakly present since the Civil War. By far the strongest agent of policy change has been the Prime Minister’s office.23

In Ethiopia, decision making is highly concentrated and, if policy research by an institution like IFPRI is persuasive, consequent policy change may be directly attributable to its work. However, such influence is not likely to be openly acknowledged in Ethiopia. Moreover, deficits in local capacity for both policy interpretation and implementation may require substantial efforts to first be directed at augmenting human capital and then enhancing (or creating) the local institutions within which that human capital is employed. For this reason and others, there may well be long time gaps in the final stages of delivering policy change and achieving welfare gains. With this as a backdrop, we next briefly summarize the outputs, outcomes, and influences of IFPRI’s policy research in Ethiopia.

23 In Ethiopia, decision making authority is concentrated within the executive branch of the government, overwhelmingly in the Prime Minister’s office. Inputs from the Parliament and other Ministries (with the partial exception of the Ministry of Finance) are modest at best and institutions for collective action at the local, regional, and national levels are largely absent under the current political system.
Outputs

IFPRI’s research in Ethiopia since 1995 falls under four main research themes: (1) Market Development; (2) Poverty and Food Security; (3) Public Investment; and (4) Sustainable Land Management (SLM). Taken as a whole, IFPRI’s research output in Ethiopia has been prodigious - 324 publications since 1995. Approximately one-fifth of these (62) were peer-reviewed journal articles; and an additional 47 were externally reviewed books, book chapters, and research monographs (Renkow and Slade 2013).

Figure 1 shows the number of publications by thematic area produced annually by IFPRI research in Ethiopia over the period of analysis (there were no reported publications prior to 1997). Two trends stand out. First, the annual output of publications has grown steadily with time, peaking in 2009 when 43 papers were released. Second, the composition of the research has changed substantially since 1997. Between 1997 and 2006, the largest share of published output was in the area of land management. Subsequently, the salience of land management declined and other subjects became more prominent.

Over the entire period considered, the distribution of published outputs across research themes was quite balanced (Figure 2 and Table 1). However, research on land management, poverty, and food security was cited about twice as much as the other two thematic areas of research (public investment, markets and trade). To some extent

24 These data were compiled based on Google Scholar searches for specific IFPRI staff who did research in Ethiopia, using Harzing’s Publish or Perish software. No allowance was made for “quality”—an unpublished working paper is counted the same as a peer-reviewed journal article. Nor is allowance made for multiple outputs resulting from the same research effort (for example, a working paper that evolves into a journal article): all are included. Nevertheless, these data provide a rough indication of the overall research effort, the quantity of output, and changes in the overall portfolio of IFPRI’s research in Ethiopia with the passage of time. The data includes works published through early 2012, that mainly reflect research conducted through 2010. Finally, the reported figures do not include papers on famine and food aid conducted by Patrick Webb and Joachim von Braun, as that research mostly preceded the period of this review.
citations are indicative of possible spillover effects on other research – i.e., the extent to which initial research may have generated international public goods (IPGs).

**Outcomes**

The most important outcomes attributable to IFPRI’s work in Ethiopia lie in establishment and operation of institutions. These include fundamental contributions to three important and highly visible organizations, the Productive Safety Net Program (PSNP), the Ethiopian Commodity Exchange (ECX), and the Agricultural Transformation Agency (ATA); as well as to three “intellectual institutions,” the Ethiopian Rural Household Survey (ERHS), the Ethiopian computable general equilibrium (CGE) model, and several spatial analyses published as atlases. In Ethiopia, as in many countries, institutional change represents a necessary pre-condition of improvement in many dimensions of agricultural policy. In Ethiopia, it may also be a way of bridging the ideological gap between the suppliers and consumers of policy research.

Table 1 summarizes by thematic area the key outcomes to which IFPRI research made fundamental contributions. These are briefly described below:

- **Productive Safety Nets Program (PSNP)** – Begun in 2005, the PSNP is the second largest social safety-net program in Africa. It was established to replace Ethiopia’s near-chronic reliance on *ad hoc* international food assistance with a more systematic set of continuing interventions to improve livelihood outcomes in perennially food deficit areas. IFPRI’s role has been to monitor and evaluate program effectiveness including the identification of efficacious improvements. As a result IFPRI enjoys nearly universal acclaim (from the GoE and donors alike) for its contributions to the program’s success.

- **Ethiopian Rural Household Survey (ERHS)** – The ERHS is the centerpiece of IFPRI’s research on poverty in Ethiopia. Begun in 1989, this longitudinal survey has been collected in seven rounds – making it the longest duration panel data set of its kind
in Sub-Saharan Africa. It has been widely used by researchers both within and outside of Ethiopia in a variety of investigations into household poverty dynamics.\textsuperscript{25}

- **Ethiopian Computable General Equilibrium Model (ECGE)** – The ECGE was developed by ESSP staff (in collaboration with local partners) to support *ex ante* analyses of a variety of macroeconomic policy options. These include: (a) quantifying the implications for economic growth of alternative public investment allocations; (b) developing strategies for reducing food price inflation; (c) assessing the growth and distributional effects of foreign exchange rationing; and (d) examining the potential impacts of global climate change on Ethiopia.

- **Atlases of the Ethiopian Rural Economy** – Working with the GoE’s Central Statistical Agency (CSA), ESSP staff produced several national atlases that compiled spatially disaggregated information on the biophysical environment, access to services, demographic characteristics of the population, and crop and livestock production. The training of CSA staff in GIS methods has enabled the CSA to independently produce additional regional atlases.

- **Ethiopian Commodity Exchange (ECX)** – The ECX is the most visible outcome of IFPRI’s policy research in Ethiopia. Eleni Gabre-Madhin, the first head of the ESSP was the prime mover in the establishment of the ECX and subsequently became its founding director. Her research, along with other ESSP research, argued strongly for Ethiopia to set up a commodity exchange for grains (for example, Gabre-Madhin 2005; Gabre-Madhin and Goggin 2005). This argument was predicated on observations that the existing market structure was highly fragmented, that transport-adjusted prices varied widely across the country, that there were numerous informal impediments to interregional grain trade, that the law of contracts was ignored or only weakly enforced (so that contractual defaults were frequent), and that non-local price information was hard for traders to obtain. The culminating outcome of this research was the acceptance by the GoE that an ECX should be established.

- **Agricultural Transformation Agency (ATA)** – Funded by the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, the ATA was established to refine and guide policy changes required to address systemic bottlenecks within Ethiopia’s agricultural economy. IFPRI’s involvement in a set of diagnostic studies played an instrumental role in the establishment of the ATA; and very recently, IFPRI has been contracted to provide research-backstopping services for the fledgling ATA. The ATA is tackling very large problems – for example, reforming the seed and fertilizer sectors; developing soil maps for the entire country using state-of-the-art satellite-imaging technology; and pursuing a plan to rapidly and dramatically scale up teff production by disseminating improved technologies that rely on hitherto untested planting techniques. Each of these may yield remarkable breakthroughs, equally they may yield spectacular (and highly visible) failures.

\textsuperscript{25} Google Scholar lists 303 publications that have used the data set; and these publications in turn have been cited nearly 5,000 times.
• **ESSP Outputs and Outcomes** - The ESSP’s outputs span a large part of the ARD spectrum.\(^{26}\) They include 6 journal articles, 55 working and discussion papers, 16 research notes, and a number of other papers, research reports, atlases, and books (Renkow and Slade 2013). More than 80 percent of ESSP’s publications were not externally peer reviewed, and therefore there is little independent evidence of quality. In the absence of an effective results-focused research monitoring system there are few ways of tracking whether these outputs (publications), produced both outcomes (policy change) and impact (welfare change) or contributed in some less obvious way towards policy thinking about ARD in Ethiopia. Relatively few of the wide range of ESSP outputs appear to have produced tangible outcomes in Ethiopia. The most notable exception to this is the research that led to the creation of the Ethiopian Commodity Exchange.\(^{27}\) ESSP contributions to the ability of Ethiopian partners to create, process, and analyze information themselves – most notably through collaboration and training activities associated with the CGE model and the GIS-based *Atlases* – represent other, somewhat less visible outcomes that may produce substantial benefits over the long run.

Finally, conspicuously absent from Table 1 is any evidence of substantive outcomes of IFPRI’s research on Sustainable Land Management (SLM) – research which preceded the organization of the ESSP. That work generated an impressive array of (widely cited) refereed publications, but little in the way of sustained policy influence. For example, a 2007 review of IFPRI’s research on SLM issues in Ethiopia conducted as part of a broader evaluation of IFPRI’s global research program on less-favored areas found that while the research succeeded in bringing information to policy debates surrounding poverty issues in less favored areas, there was no tangible evidence of influence on policy outcomes (English and Renkow 2007). Six years later, we found little to add to these assessments (Renkow and Slade 2013). Very few interlocutors had strong memories of the SLM program of research. Individuals who had had direct connections to that work recalled it

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\(^{26}\) Subjects include cooperatives and rural producer organizations; market development; spatial analysis; agricultural growth; infrastructure investment; land rights and management; macroeconomic issues; urbanization; crop production; insurance and climate change; poverty; hunger and nutrition; input markets and microcredit; technology adoption; livestock; extension; gender; and food price inflation.

\(^{27}\) Our review revealed a remarkably wide array of opinions about the ECX’s impacts on traders and farmers—some sanguine, others not. However, because the ECX has not been subject to a comprehensive external review, judgment about these competing claims—not to mention evaluation of the overall impact of the ECX on traders and farmers—is currently impossible.
as having contributed to the policy debate on land management and environmental sustainability over the years; but in no case was a specific new government policy or policy modification attributed to that research. This betokens a program of research that, for all its successes in producing a large number of well-cited publications, seems to have run counter to GoE ideology and to have failed to produce traceable policy change.

**IFPRI's Influence on Policy Formation**

As the preceding section indicates, IFPRI’s activities in Ethiopia have generated a steady stream of high-quality research output across a number of ARD subjects. Significant benefits flow from the knowledge generated. It has produced evidence-based policy recommendations. It has contributed through other research projects inside and outside of Ethiopia to the generation of IPGs. It has played a key role in underpinning the formation and operation of a number of important Ethiopian organizations—most notably the PSNP, the ECX, and the ATA. As well, IFPRI has been instrumental in producing “intellectual institutions”—for example the ERHS, the geographic information system (GIS)-based Atlases of the Ethiopian Economy, and the Ethiopian CGE model—that have expanded knowledge and enabled further research. In addition, several informants asserted with certitude that IFPRI has raised the level of debate about ARD policy and strategy by creating an environment of evidence-based discussion. An increase in openness and transparency in framing policy is a valuable, if unquantifiable, benefit.

But how, if at all has IFPRI influenced ARD policy formation within Ethiopia? The somewhat depressing answer is very little. Before the advent of the ESSP and despite the impressive quantity of published output the authors were unable to trace with confidence
any clear cut case of attributable *policy influence*, notwithstanding the PSNP. And, after the advent of ESSP the evidence is also scant. It is certainly reasonable to attribute the major change in marketing policy represented by the ECX to IFPRI’s unflinching efforts, but even here it is hard to say whether there has been any positive and lasting welfare change. What is known is that the ECX is yet to meaningfully address the marketing issues it was originally set up to resolve, namely the multiple shortcomings in domestic grain markets.

Overall, there are few examples of policy influence or welfare changes plausibly attributable to ESSP’s research. This lack of clear influence and impact is almost certainly explained, at least in part, by the GoE’s ideological stance that has delayed or curtailed policy actions on agricultural input and output markets (the ECX notwithstanding) and land reform. These observations are fully consistent with the claims in the literature that the nature and influence of a research organisation’s work depend to a large extent on the political context and governance system in which it operates (Keijzer, Spierings and Heirman 2011). But in Ethiopia other forces—in particular, the way in which the research agenda is set, research priorities are established and research results disseminated—also contributed. We take these up in the remainder of this section.

**Idiosyncrasy**
IFPRI’s ability to be part of the policy dialogue in Ethiopia—as well as its visibility as a “player” in policy debates—took a quantum leap forward with the institution of the ESSP.

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28 The effectiveness of the PSNP has been measurably improved by IFPRI, but these improvements do not constitute policy change other than in the narrow sense of internal policy adjustments to the programme.
29 The ECX’s original attempts to address these weakness failed badly and the ECX was “rescued” (less than two years after its launch) by a government decision to give it a near monopoly of coffee marketing despite there being an already functioning, if imperfect, coffee marketing system.
30 There is a possibility that the lack of engagement on land reform is at least partly attributable to a prevailing (if unofficial) institutional “rule” within IFPRI - said to have been initiated by John Mellor, IFPRI’s DG at the time - that IFPRI would not engage in research closely related to land reform.
However, the ESSP’s research agenda has not been framed using formal priority-setting techniques – i.e. a rigorous and systematic examination of existing policy to identify policy gaps and to determine which gaps, if resolved, are likely to have the biggest payoffs within the prevailing political economy.

Rather, the process has been much more idiosyncratic in that topics have emerged largely in response to the particular interests of individual staff (particularly the Program Directors) and the availability of particular analytical skills or constructs. However, analyses of some key issues, such as agricultural input markets and price transmission, have languished without inspiring action, reflecting the ideological barriers mentioned earlier. Moreover, it was explained to the authors by one of the Prime Ministers’ closest advisors that allowing IFPRI to set up the ESSP in Ethiopia provided the GOE with effective protection against pressures for policy reform from Ethiopia’s major donors.

To a striking extent, the ESSP has depended on the idiosyncratic skills, relationships, and institutional connections to Ethiopia’s policy milieu of some of its staff. This has, by and large, worked to the advantage of the ESSP so far. Nonetheless, the important role played by idiosyncrasy in the choosing of research questions pursued by the ESSP has also created organizational vulnerability to changes in the leadership of both the ESSP and the GoE.

Capture

An organization like the ESSP faces the risk of being captured by the host government. Given its clear success in advocating some policy and institutional changes it is unlikely that ESSP was ever fully captured by the GoE. However, the failure to take a more determined stand on certain controversial areas of policy – for example, land issues; the value of direct GoE involvement in the operation of the ECX; input markets and agricultural
supply side issues – suggest that the ESSP was heavily influenced by the GoE’s bias against markets. Hence, it is hard to avoid the conclusion that the ESSP has been at least partially captured.

The threat of capture and the delicate efforts required to avoid it have been characterized by some IFPRI insiders as the unavoidable “price of doing business” in Ethiopia. Ultimately, this is an issue of balance. But because intellectual independence—as well as the perception of intellectual independence—is vital to IFPRI’s effectiveness over the long run, this issue merits continued careful monitoring.

Nevertheless, the very close connections of key ESSP staff to the politically powerful in Addis Ababa has resulted in important institutional changes and, by some accounts, a gradually increasing willingness by GoE to listen carefully to evidence-based policy arguments on some topics that initially met with unyielding resistance.

Advocacy
The literature on policy research is replete with abundant discourse on the importance of advocacy in achieving policy influence and change. In Ethiopia there was little evidence that IFPRI or the ESSP had fully grasped this importance. In general research findings were not well explained and only simple efforts such as policy briefs (often more concerned with method than findings) and infrequent workshops and conferences were used to deliver policy messages. There was no identifiable use of lobbying techniques or advocacy coalitions,\(^\text{31}\) nor, seemingly, was the political economy of reform in Ethiopia systematically

\(^{31}\) In fairness to IFPRI, such activity is difficult in Ethiopia where “…independent governance and advocacy institutions…..are of recent origin and have been operating under difficult circumstances. It was only in the last decade or so that independent policy institutions or institutions undertaking broadly similar functions began to make their appearance in this country. They have in other words a short history and an uncertain future.” (Rahmato 2008, p.1)
explored. Key policy makers were not targeted except through the idiosyncratic method noted above. A more strategic and instrumental approach to advocacy may have yielded a greater measure of policy influence.

A Summation
At the outset of this paper we posed some basic questions: How did IFPRI ensure the relevance of its policy research in Ethiopia? Was relevance enhanced or diminished by the sharp increase in the degree of collaboration provided by the ESSP? As a result, to what extent did IFPRI positively influence ARD policy reform in Ethiopia and thereby produce discernable welfare gains for Ethiopia’s smallholders.

Drawing on the evidence and findings outlined in this paper it is fair to argue that IFPRI’s policy research in Ethiopia was indeed relevant to the country’s main agricultural development challenges. There can be no doubt that IFPRI’s Washington-led policy research on sustainable land management, household poverty and food security, agricultural markets, and public investment – both prior to and after the establishment of the ESSP – addressed a number of key issues faced by Ethiopia’s multitudinous, impoverished smallholders labouring under gross market imperfections for both inputs and outputs.

The advent of the ESSP intensified the process of collaboration between IFPRI researchers and the GoE, and thereby increased the relevance of IFPRI’s in-country

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32 There is a considerable literature on this subject, much of which questions the traditional assumption of linearity in the research to policy nexus in favour or more multi-centred and overlapping structures. See, for example, the several publications that resulted from ODI’s Research & Policy in Development (RAPID) (www.odi.org.uk/programmes/rapid).
33 Some commentators on ways to maximize the impact of policy research argue for comprehensive information and communication strategies to be designed at the outset. (e.g., Harris, 2012).
34 Following Court and Young (2003) relevance means topicality, operational usefulness and credibility.
research. We have argued that it did so via strong idiosyncratic links of key ESSP staff to important policy makers in Ethiopia – notably the prime minister and his chief economic advisor. The work supporting the establishment of the commodity exchange, as well as consultative analyses of macroeconomic policy options (using the Ethiopian CGE model), are the clearest examples. This work helped to build IFPRI’s credibility in Ethiopia, first with the government (who acknowledge IFPRI’s contributions to improving the quality of policy discussion) and second among donors. The goodwill thus generated helped to cement IFPRI’s highly praised programmatic work on the evaluation of the PSNP (work that has always been led from Washington). It remains debatable, however, whether or not ESSP would have added measurably to the relevance of IFPRI’s policy work in the absence of these idiosyncratic links.35

Additionally, it is probable that the ESSP increased the likelihood of capture or partial capture, the idiosyncratic links being something of a two way street in this context. Proximity is a precondition of capture. But, as argued at the outset of this paper, capture does not necessarily imply that policy research is irrelevant or lacking in first best solutions. In the case of Ethiopia, partial capture and the ideological divide mostly operated to restrict the ESSP research agenda (thus limiting relevance) and to greatly handicap the speedy adoption of reforms – hence the absence of discernable welfare change attributable to the ESSP.

35 Indeed, it seems reasonable to posit a counterfactual in which some outcomes attributable to IFPRI’s research would have emerged absent the ESSP. For example, much of IFPRI’s research supporting the formation of the Agricultural Transformation Agency was organised out of Washington. Note also that while IFPRI was a key player in the creation of the ATA, it was not the only one. McKinsey and Co. were also instrumental, and the drive for change was greatly aided by the power and persuasiveness of the BMGF.
To conclude, it is worth posing a final question. Could the risk of capture have been foreseen at the outset and could it have been mitigated? It is certain that the ideological divide (as we have called it) was present when the ESSP was established in 2004 and well understood in donor circles. Thus, it is unlikely that IFPRI set up the ESSP in ignorance of this problem. On the other hand one or two key policy advisors to Meles Zenawi seemed, at the time, to offer a large welcome mat to the incoming IFPRI researchers – a welcome mat that concealed an implacable resistance to donor pressure for policy change and a distaste for market driven resource allocation.
References


Jones, N. and J. Young. 2007. “Setting The Scene: Situating DFID’s Research Funding Policy and Practice in an International Comparative Perspective.” Scoping study commissioned by DFID Central Research Department. ODI.


Figure 1. Number of publications annually by subject area, 1997-2012

For each year, these are the total number of publications (broken down by subject area) reported in Google Scholar as of September 2012.
Figure 2. Total publications and citations by research theme

Note: Because of rounding, not all percentages equal 100.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Research Theme</th>
<th>Outcomes</th>
<th>Impact Pathway</th>
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<tr>
<td>Food security &amp; poverty</td>
<td>Productive Safety Nets Programme (2005-present)</td>
<td>Monitor and improve targeting efficiency of program operations, Longest-duration household-level panel dataset in</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Ethiopian Rural Household Survey (1989-present)</td>
<td>sub-Saharan Africa; IPGs generation</td>
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<td>Land management</td>
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<tr>
<td>Public investment</td>
<td>Ethiopian CGE Model (2006-present)</td>
<td>Policy analysis tool (applications include exchange rate policy, food price inflation strategy, climate change</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Atlas of the Rural Economy (2006-present)</td>
<td>planning, urban planning)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Markets and trade</td>
<td>Ethiopian Commodity Exchange (2008-present)</td>
<td>Institutionalize, integrate agricultural markets</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Agricultural Transformation Agency (2010-present)</td>
<td>Institutionalize, integrate agricultural R&amp;D, input distribution, and extension systems</td>
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