
THE ROLE OF RESEARCH IN EFFECTIVE POLICY MAKING

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Abstract

Research has the potential to be an important influence on policy. This article outlines an approach taken in seeking the inclusion of research recommendations into policy. A model of the process is developed and the steps involved are outlined. Researchers must engage with the key policy actors, the inclusion of research findings into policy is a difficult task but necessary because good research will not succeed in influencing policy, simply because it is good. Research has a key role to play in, informing policy makers and determining policies which progress the EU aim of a living countryside rather than detract from it.

Introduction

This article initially sets the context for influencing policy through research. This involves exploring the rationale for this research study and the importance of involving all stakeholders in policy making. The process by which policy is developed/formulated is outlined. It examines the role of lobby groups and research in the policy formation process and the gap between the actual role of research and its potential role in policy making. An outline of the Dairy Action Research Programme (DARP) is provided, along with the policy proposals (the Business Development Plan) which were the focus of the policy inclusion efforts. A model which diagrammatically describes the key elements of the Irish Agricultural Policy Formation Process is presented which was developed based on the experience gained in the research project. A series of distinct steps for influencing policy through research are presented, which can guide future efforts to influence political decisions with research findings.

Rationale For And Background To The Research

The rationale for the Dairy Action-Research Programme (DARP) was that the viability of rural areas could be secured through recognising and fostering indigenous industry (dairying). Many small-medium scale dairy farmers who wanted to stay with milk production found themselves challenged by the need to make necessary investments while the outlook for the industry was uncertain. Many authors (Adams, 1982; Mannion, 1989; Roling, 1988) have previously identified that farmers survive, fail or thrive in an environment, which is as much dependent on what goes on outside the farm gate as what goes on inside it. Therefore, this research examined the constraints both inside (farm practices) and outside the farm gate (policy). Those inside were within the farmer's control and those outside required lobbying and research to effect change. In examining the future for small scale and family farms, many commentators look towards diversification, off-farm sources of income and new or alternative enterprises.

However, it is often overlooked that these other sources of income are complementary to the existing farm income and in order for the viability of the farm family to be secured the core income (farming) must also be secured.

Van der Ploeg et al., (2002) described the agricultural enterprise as having three sides (Figure 1).

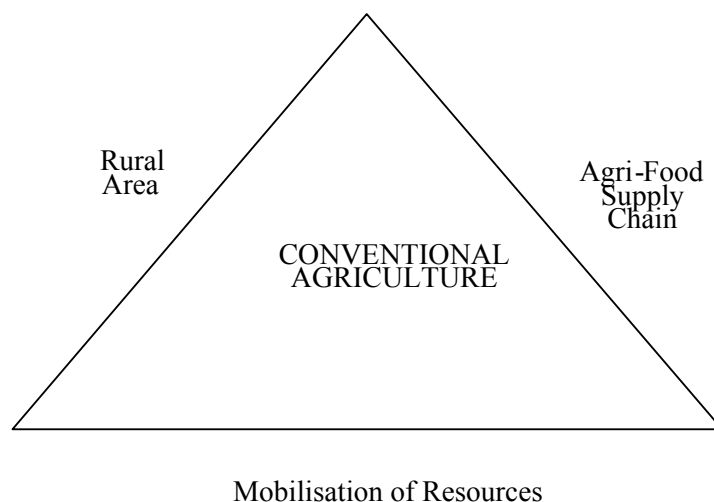


Figure 1. The three sides of the agricultural enterprise (Van der Ploeg et al., 2002).

One side is that which relates to the production of food, the second side is the rural area (farming contributes to the rural landscape and social fabric). The third side of the farm enterprise regards the mobilization and use of resources to produce and contribute to the rural area. Renking (2003) describes the changes occurring in agriculture in terms of broadening (diversification), deepening (changes in production methods and supply chains) and regrounding (mobilization of resources in new or different ways). Therefore, farming is changing and adapting on a number of fronts in order to survive in a changing world, however, while farming is becoming multi-functional, the activities are rooted around a core farming enterprise. Dairying is one of the core agricultural enterprises in County Clare. Renking (2003) pointed out that in general, rural development practices are not policy driven, policy is not striving to ensure practices which will secure the future of rural areas. This research specifically set out to overcome this void by determining policy measures to enhance the viability prospects of one sector of farming and seeking the introduction of these policies.

The proposals from the DARP were rooted in the objective of supporting the achievement of viability of small-medium scale milk producers (supporting the EU concept of a living countryside). In order to have a living countryside, policies need to favour the survival of those who are living and working in the countryside. Mannion et al. (2003) highlighted that the challenge of a living countryside is to enable those who live in the countryside to have a 'good living' and sustainable rural livelihoods. As the EU continues with the reform of the Common Agricultural Policy and meeting the requirements of the WTO agreement, it is critical that the impact of all policy changes primary producers (farmers), rural dwellers and the rural economy are examined. This is important in order to achieve the goal of a living countryside and the introduction of policies that support rather than detract from this goal.

The DARP recognized that farmers had to move forward from the position they found themselves in (influenced both positively and negatively by past policies and threatened by future policies). The aim was to secure the future of these family businesses and a vibrant rural economy. Farming must move with the changing world and requirements but the impact of the changes in policy on farm households and rural areas must not be ignored. Farmers must be considered in the shaping of policy and indeed are to a certain extent, through the politicians and farming lobby groups. However, this study set out to determine the best set of policy measures to favour the viability of one sector of farmers and to seek their introduction into policy (taking account of both the political realities and the constraints on farm families). Research has an important role to inform policy making by involving the stakeholders, even though, it is difficult to inform change from the ground up.

Background to Influencing Policy

In simple terms, there are two main aspects to policy, broad and specific. The broad policy aims/goals are the aspirations that the policy makers have for society or a sector of society whereas the specify policy instruments are the practical measures/instruments by which these aspirations can be achieved. An understanding of the different aspects of policy is important in order to get a more complete understanding of the policy process, the influence of lobby groups and the role of research. The policy process is portrayed by Winter (1996, p.11) (**Error! Reference source not found.**) as a system which is both circular and continuous and has as its input both political demands and resources and as its outputs, different kinds of policy decisions and consequences. The decisions in turn have an impact upon society and consequently influence future inputs (Burch, 1979).

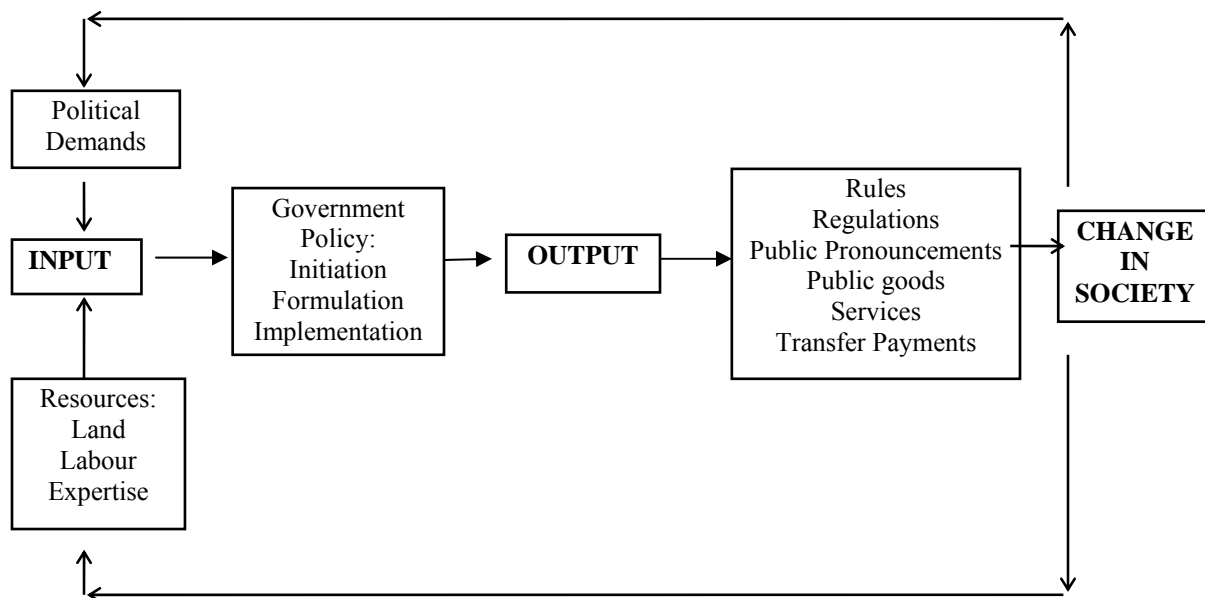


Figure 2. The policy process (Winter, 1996).

Political demands of society are mainly expressed through political parties, pressure groups and election results. These political demands, together with the resources available to government, combine to determine policy programmes and outputs. These, in turn influence society, thus

affecting future political demands and, through the economy, the resources available to future governments. The policy process does not end with the delivery of a policy package. Inevitably any policy output has to be interpreted by those charged with its implementation. The interpretation of policy is a necessary part of the policy process and one in which all manner of influence can be brought to bear. Decisions taken during implementation are as much a part of the policy process as the initial drafting of the policy. Influences, such as public opinion, lobby groups, political interests, market forces and technological options shape the environment within which farmers operate. Public opinions influence government policy directly in respect of their implications for votes. But common interests are also expressed through lobby groups which seek to influence the policy process directly as well as through ministries and parliamentary committees. The farmers' lobby has been particularly successful by becoming incorporated in the policy-making process. As part of Irish Social Partnership, the farm organisations have direct access to the government in policy making decisions. Government policy in turn influences farming in a variety of ways, through investment decisions, direct constraints on farming and agricultural market controls.

The Role of Research in the Policy Process

Research is one of the competing sources that seek to influence the policy process. Research has an important role to inform policy makers of the actual impact of past policies and of the possible impact of proposed changes on farm families. However, while it has the potential to be an important influence, research is overshadowed by the pressures and demands of the lobby groups and the political nature of decision making. Van der Ploeg et al. (1998) described the role of science as being to enlarge the 'window of opportunities' - that is to develop a range of contrasting policy options in order to allow for well-informed choices at policy level. According to Rist (2000), to understand the role of research in policy making, necessitates looking at research as serving an 'enlightenment function', researchers can only provide information which policy makers can draw on if they wish. Rist (2000) identified three distinct stages within the policy process where research has a role - formulation, implementation and accountability. Research has an important function in the policy process but unlike the lobby groups and the social partners, it does not have direct access to the policy makers. It is evident that researchers and research reports play an important enlightenment and informative role but do so, often, only when the policy makers require it. Research can determine the facts but ultimately politics will determine the decisions.

The Irish Agricultural Policy Formation Process

The key players in the Irish Agricultural Policy Formation Process include: the European Commission; the Government and the Minister for Agriculture and Food; national politicians; European politicians; civil servants; farm organisations (Social Partners); Teagasc; consumers/taxpayers; agri-food industry; department advisory committees; agricultural media; and other key individuals. However, the national policy decision makers can be confined to the main farm organisations and the Department of Agriculture and Food (influenced by the other government departments (in particular Finance) and the other social partners (in particular the unions and the employers)). Social Partnership as it is now known in Ireland has played an important part in policy making. The most recent agreement, *Sustaining Progress* was agreed in 2003. The main Social Partners represent the Employers, the Unions and the Farm Organisations

(Irish Farmers Association, Irish Creamery Milk Suppliers Association, Irish Cooperative Organisation Society and Macra na Feirme).

Purpose

The primary purpose of this research was to explore options and determine policy measures, which would secure the viability of family farms in Ireland. This involved an intensive 3-year programme of research and advice with farm families. However, it was recognised that the real benefits of the research may only be realised if the emerging recommendations and policy proposals were debated with the key decision-makers. The purpose of this paper is to document the role that research plays in influencing policy and the process followed in this project to gain the inclusion of the research findings into policy.

Research Methodology

The Dairy Action Research Programme (DARP) set out to address three fundamental questions: Was there a future for small-medium scale dairy farms in Ireland? To what extent did these farm businesses have the capacity to grow and sustain standards of living which were acceptable to farm households? What interventions were necessary to secure the future viability of family based dairy farms? The programme set out to answer these questions through intensive farm-based research which was managed through a partnership of University College Dublin, Teagasc, Rural Resource Development Ltd. and Golden Vale.

On the ground, the programme functioned through and was shaped around 150 farmers. The programme had two distinct components, advisory and monitoring. The advisory component was implemented through a network of 16 discussion groups (each consisting of 8-10 farmers). The discussion group method was chosen because of its widely proven record in: enabling high levels of participation by farmers; building on existing farming knowledge and practices; encouraging ownership of learning; and raising the confidence of members. Four types of group activities were involved: group discussions on-farm; field days; group discussions indoors; and one seminar. To facilitate the on-farm monitoring, one farmer (labelled the focus farmer) was chosen from each of the 16 discussion groups for detailed and on-going examination of farming practices over the life of the programme. The role of the focus farmer was to give evidence of the effect of the advisory strategy, to detail their attitudes to their farming environment of the time, and to give their views on emerging policy measures. Aspects monitored closely were: grassland management; stock; finances; milk supply, quality and quota; and husbandry practices. The high level of contact between the 'focus farmers' and the researcher allowed for the main factors which influenced decision making to be recorded and also provided a forum in which to debate the policy proposals and recommendations which would impact on the farmer's viability (Kinsella et al., 2000).

A range of research methods were employed over the lifetime of the research programme, including: face-to-face research surveys (with potential participants, participants and non-participants); collation of financial accounts (farm and household); direct observation; grass growth monitoring; evaluation and assessment of farm facilities and buildings; evaluations with focus farmers; management record sheets; focus group meetings and elite interviews. The efforts of the research team to seek the inclusion of the research findings into policy are documented in the results section.

Results And Conclusions

The DARP identified the main factors, which interact to influence the viability of the dairy farm businesses of the participating farmers in Co. Clare. Set against the emerging AGENDA 2000 reforms and the influencing factors identified, a number of future scenarios were examined for the impact on farm viability. The DARP concluded that the investment necessary to improve the viability of small-medium scale dairy farm households in the AGENDA 2000 environment was only possible with external supports. Based on the work of the DARP, a package of appropriate policy measures, labelled the Business Development Package (BDP) was proposed which would enable development by small-medium scale dairy farmers. The BDP comprised of:

- a 50% investment grant for buildings and farm infrastructure;
- tax relief on milk quota purchase;
- stock relief; and
- an advisory support grant.

The DARP identified that the viability of dairy farm businesses results from the combination of farmers confidence in their future as well as highly efficient management by the farmer coupled with policy measures at the local (co-op), national and EU levels which support these businesses (Figure 2) (Kinsella et al., 2000). Therefore, as the goal of this research was viable dairy farm businesses, it was critical that the research sought to influence policy decisions, local, national and EU. The efforts of the research team to seek the inclusion of the BDP into policy are outlined in detail in the next section.

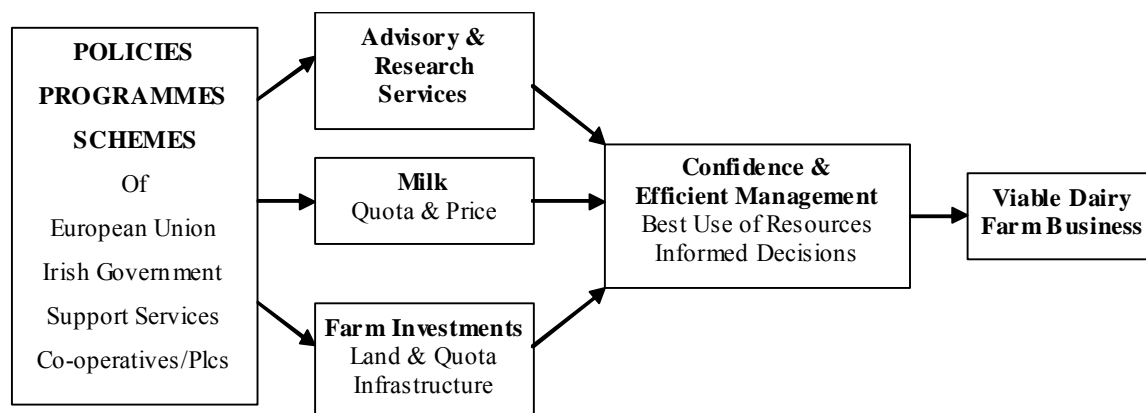


Figure 2. Achieving viability in dairying – the key factors (Kinsella et al., 2000)

Three particular aspects of the Agricultural Policy Formation Process were specifically targeted in this study (in order to influence policy decisions) (based on **Error! Reference source not found.**):

- (i) Input into the Process: The research findings of this study were potentially an input into the policy process, therefore, the aim was to make the information widely available to all interested parties.
- (ii) Policy Makers: The aim was to inform and influence the key policy makers in their decisions on the policy instruments that should be introduced.

(iii) Political Demands of Lobby Groups: The study aimed to influence lobby groups to get them to lobby on behalf of the study proposals (recognition of the powerful position of lobbyists in the Policy Formation Process).

The research findings from this study were an input into the policy process, but significantly, from outside the process, the research team did not form part of the policy making group - they had no control over the decision making. This meant that every effort had to be taken to influence the key policy makers and influencers (the Agricultural Social Partners and the Department of Agriculture and Food). Researchers generally produce their findings and make them available to the public and interested parties but rarely enter into the political arena of trying to get the results accepted as part of policy. Every effort was made in this study to seek to influence policy as a result of the research. In order to generate interest in the research (recognising the tardiness of the process of influencing policy) provisional research recommendations were entered into the process one year before the end of the field work.

A number of specific activities/events were undertaken in the process of influencing the policy makers. These included:

- National television programmes;
- Local and national radio programmes;
- Reports and features in national, local and farming newspapers;
- Conferences/seminars (local, national and European);
- Briefing meetings with politicians (local, national and European);
- Briefing meetings with farm organisations (local, national and European);
- Briefing meetings with Department of Agriculture & Teagasc personnel;
- Publication and launch of a research report.

Utilising the experience gained in this study, it is possible to develop a new model based on that of Winter (1996, p.10) which provides a diagrammatic illustration of the key elements in the Irish Agricultural Policy Formation Process and the role of research in that process (Figure 3). It can be concluded that research has a definite role in the Irish Agricultural Policy Formation informing and influencing the key lobbyists and policy makers. This process can be two-way such as in this study where the proposals were modified in response to the views and suggestions of the policy makers and lobby groups. However, the reality of the political nature of decision making is that individual lobby groups claim the credit for policy successes and research may fail to get the credit it deserves. While research may be independent and impartial, the lobby groups have their own specific agendas and motives and therefore may only utilise and support research findings depending on the particular advantage there is for themselves and those they represent (or claim to represent).

Outcomes of the Efforts to Link Research Findings into the Policy Process

The findings and recommendations of the DARP were recognised by and incorporated into major agricultural and rural policy advisory documents including:

- the Report of the Oireachtas (the two Irish houses of Parliament) Joint Committee on Agriculture, Food and the Marine (referred to the proposals from this study as an interesting package to target aid to potentially viable dairy farmers);
- the Report of the Agrifood 2010 Committee (recognised that the transition to an open market for quota will have significant implications for smaller dairy farmers, and for

regions where they are concentrated. Specific measures should be put in place to assist smaller farmers who have the potential to become viable and that such measures might include the type of action proposed by this study); and

- the White Paper on Rural Development (suggested that one possibility for supporting family farm units involves an integrated development approach whereby small and medium scale farmers undertake business development programmes for their farm enterprises and secure access to a package of necessary investment, advisory and other supports).

On the broader BDP proposals, tax relief on milk quota purchase was introduced by the Government while similar farm investment measures to those in the BDP but not to the level proposed in this study were introduced. Stock relief was extended but only for young trained farmers. No progress was made on the advisory support grant, however, the DARP was instrumental in establishing an innovative Teagasc-Golden Vale Programme for Dairy Development in Co. Clare.

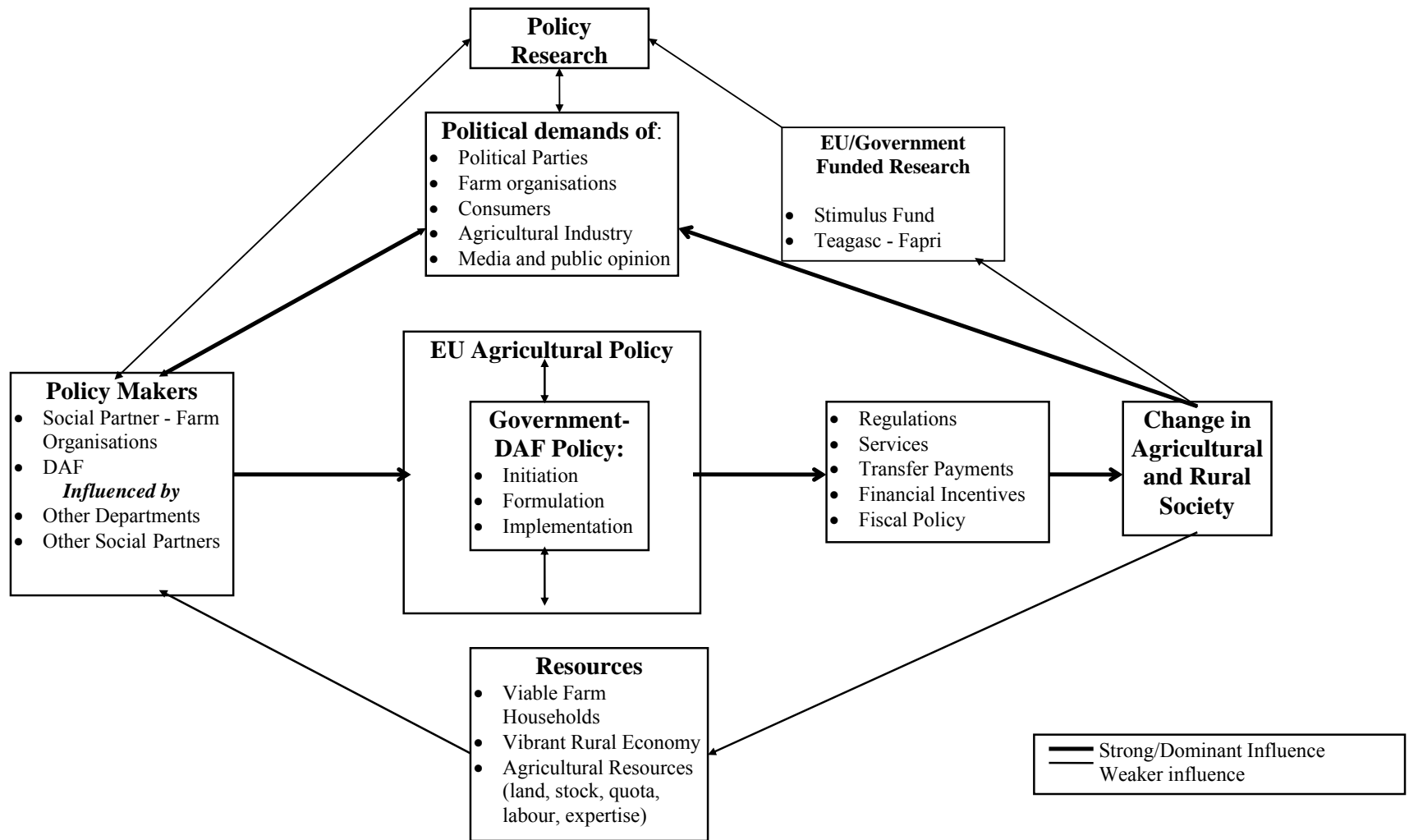


Figure 3. Key elements of the Irish agricultural policy formation process.

Steps in Influencing the Policy Process Through Research

It is possible to identify a series of distinct steps in the process followed in this study in aiming to have the policy proposals adopted and a number of lessons that have been learned about linking action research into policy. Five steps have been established which can guide future efforts to influence the policy process:

- (1) Research;
- (2) Involvement;
- (3) Information;
- (4) Policy Development; and
- (5) Inclusion.

Step 1: Research

Policy research is necessary both as a result of changes in society (develop proposals in response to these changes) and in order to bring about change in society (develop proposals which will stimulate changes). It is important that the exact cause of a particular problem is determined as the cause is more deep rooted than may be originally thought and therefore the solutions are complex. This research was conducted in partnership between the proposed beneficiaries, small scale dairy farmers and concerned institutions. Research identified the most appropriate technologies, advice and suitable policy proposals for the target group and other small scale dairy farmers nationally.

Step 2: Involvement

Sustainable change in agricultural and rural society can only occur if those employed in agriculture and living in rural areas are involved. In order to ensure that the policy proposals developed are relevant and appropriate, it is important to involve the target audience and others knowledgeable about the area/issue in question in the development of proposals. In the DARP study, Teagasc and Golden Vale (local agencies) were involved in: the identification of possible farmer participants; the development and implementation of the research programme; and the development of the policy proposals. The participating farmers were also involved in the development of the policy proposals. Representatives of the four partner institutions guided the research. A high level of participation and partnership in policy research is important because the solutions to many issues are complex. Policy is only one of many influences on farm households and the involvement of as many key players as possible increases the possibility of developing the most appropriate proposals and of gaining political acceptance for them. It is evident from past experience that the involvement of the stakeholders allows for the development of the most appropriate and realistic policy proposals.

Step 3: Information

The role of policy research in the Irish Agricultural Policy Formation Process (Figure 5) is to inform and influence the political demands of: political parties; farm organisations; consumers; the agricultural industry; media; and the general public and policy makers, with research findings and policy proposals. The wider farming community and general public should be made aware of the research programme to let people know that the research is being carried out and to place the emerging policy proposals in the public domain (through all means of communication, including: print; television; radio; and personal methods).

Step 4: Policy Development

Policy development in the DARP study involved a two-way communication process on the emerging proposals between the researchers and the policy makers and the key influencers/lobby groups. This was due to the recognition by the research team of the need to engage with the policy makers in order to develop the most appropriate and realistic package of measures. The presentation of the emerging tentative proposals through the media and at public conferences allowed for debate and discussion. It was an opportunity to discuss both whether the issue merited a change in policy and the specific solutions that were being proposed from the research study. As a result, it was necessary to fine tune the proposals in line with them. The reality being that if proposals are not in agreement with the EU objectives for agriculture, there was little chance of them being included into policy. The final proposals in this research were publicised with the aim of gaining their acceptance by the farming community who they were developed for, by the political lobbyists and by the policy makers. The main debate at this stage was the need for such a package and the selling of the merits of the package.

Step 5: Policy Inclusion

The process of the inclusion of research proposals into policy is continuous and in order to achieve further success, research teams need to continually lobby the decision-makers. Important in this stage are the target population and activists in local areas who will lobby for the introduction of the research proposals. The full inclusion of research proposals such as the BDP into policy depends on political decisions, which can potentially be influenced by lobbying. Evidence of the successful lobbying on behalf of this study is the establishment of the Co. Clare Dairy Development Programme and the inclusion of aspects of the BDP in policy measures.

Educational Importance, Implications and Application

Agriculture and farming operate in a continually changing policy environment responding to and influenced by many different forces and actors. An understanding of the agricultural policy process and its influences is critical for those seeking to influence the process. Lobbyists and special interest groups have a powerful role in the process. They have their own agendas (which may or may not be influenced by research), however, independent research can play a key role if the interest groups are made aware of the research findings/proposals. Researchers need to know the key players and to channel their research findings to them. Equally it is important for extension agents, teachers and students to understand how the system operates and the influences on it. The research outlined in this study aims to clarify the process by documenting one approach to seeking the inclusion of research findings into policy. Many students, teachers and researchers undertake research (policy and technical) at some stage in their careers', however, there is often disappointment at the level of interest in and uptake of their findings. This study helps to clarify the role of research in the policy process and significantly the need for the researcher to pursue their efforts beyond the traditional end-point of producing and publicising the research findings. Researchers need to engage with the process and follow through. The question that must be asked is how worthwhile is research if the findings are not implemented or publicised. The consequences of engaging with the policy process is that the research team may need additional skills or resources in order to influence the process e.g. PR, media and negotiation.

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