The International Peace Academy is an independent, international institution dedicated to promoting the prevention and settlement of armed conflicts between and within states through policy research and development.

This meeting note summarizes the key points and recommendations that emerged at an experts' meeting convened by the International Peace Academy on November 30, 2005, at the Permanent Mission of Canada to the United Nations. Participants included leading experts and academics, UN member state representatives and UN staff. The meeting focused on ways in which the UN system can be better informed by and utilize evidence-based research.

COUNTING WHAT COUNTS:
Ten steps toward increasing the relevance of empirical research in the UN system

That the United Nations (UN) system needs reliable data and analysis is clear to all. Without them, there is little basis for evaluating the effectiveness of the UN's various strategies, policies, and programs to promote peace and development. Why, then, does the UN system pay so little heed to the abundance of critical research being generated by the academic community worldwide? Conversely, why aren't academics making their research findings more relevant, accessible, and digestible for the policy community?[1] What can be done to narrow the divide between UN officials and academic researchers?

The lack of resort to empirical research in policy making is not a dry theoretical problem. It has direct implications for the ability of policy-makers to accurately evaluate the impact of policies and programs, thoroughly assess what works and what does not, and effectively channel funding and resources. Empirical data can help redirect policies that did not produce expected results. For instance, the collection of a new data set of ex-combatants in Sierra Leone found no evidence at the micro-level that internationally-funded programs of disarmament, demobilization, and reintegration (DDR) facilitate the actual demobilization and reintegration of individuals.[2]

However, this sort of empirical research is still an exception and not the rule. The inadequacy or, in some cases, the non-existence of data

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[1] A recent joint publication of INCORE and the United Nations University confirms the gap between the UN system and academia. See Cheyanne Church, *Mind the Gap: Policy Development and Research on Conflict Issues* (The United Nations University, 2005).

[2] Macartan Humphreys and Jeremy Weinstein, *Disentangling the Determinants of Successful Demobilization and Reintegration*, paper presented at the American Political Science Association, Washington, D.C., 2005.

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can drive political agendas that grow out of distorted pictures. As the recent *Human Security Report* showed, understandings of global security are obscured by many myths, such as that the number of armed conflicts is increasing, that the vast majority of those killed in today's wars are civilians, and that women are the primary victims of war. None of these claims are based on reliable data.[3]

It should be acknowledged that there are certain characteristics inherent in both research and policy circles that hamper the possibilities for mutually constructive dialogue. In academic research, the primary source of the impediment is the incentive system that rewards studies grounded in theory, which hold little policy relevance. Articles published in academic journals, rather than editorials in leading newspapers or targeted policy memos, provide the ground for a career in academe. From the policy perspective, academics do not even ask the right questions—they generally refrain, for instance, from conducting program evaluations, focusing instead on understanding processes. They tend to examine long-term trends rather than aim for short-term impact, which policy-makers, and especially donors, prefer to see. The policy community, for its part, suffers from chronic shortages of resources, lacks a quantitative research-oriented culture, and becomes easily encumbered by "the politicization of everything." These limitations are deeply ingrained in the operational nature of the two communities and cannot be tackled overnight.

Nevertheless, with some creativity there are at least ten concrete steps that can be taken in the short term to strengthen the link between academic research and the policy community:

1. **Maintain a systematic online compilation of relevant policy questions.**

Members of the policy community are confronted daily with questions for which they seek meaningful answers, such as the impact of a particular reform program on development or peacebuilding. Similarly, researchers—doctoral students in particular come to mind—are continually in search of questions for possible exploration. A user-friendly online compilation of policy-relevant questions, which could be created and maintained by a research institution that is well informed of policy developments, would help spark ideas for research that serves the needs of the policy community.

2. **Create a virtual handbook of data and analysis to increase their accessibility.**

There is a wealth of data and analysis being generated by the research community around the world on issues of acute interest to the United Nations. However, the UN system remains ill-equipped to absorb this knowledge, if it reaches the doors of the UN at all. An independent website, based on the model of Wikipedia, the self-regulating online encyclopedia, could be launched to compile available data and analysis. Peer-reviewers would edit the contents and organize the information in a simple, usable format. A well-structured, apolitical external website would facilitate and promote the policy community's use of existing information.

3. **The United Nations should increase the availability of its publications, data, and analysis.**

UN agencies, departments, field missions,

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[3] *Human Security Report 2005: War and Peace in the 21st Century* (Oxford University Press, 2005), p. 2.

and country teams collect and produce a wealth of information. However, most of this information is either not available to the public or is scattered in the hard drives of UN staff. More agencies and departments should maintain websites and databases based on the examples of the databases of the World Bank and the "best practices" compilations of the UN Development Programme (UNDP) and the UN Department of Peacekeeping Operations (DPKO).

4. **Universities, and especially graduate programs, should institute programs to facilitate internships in the field in order to expose future academics to policy-relevant work.**

Similarly, the UN system should establish a system to accommodate graduate students, post-doctorates, and other researchers seeking internships. The policy community would benefit from additional professional research at relatively low costs, while academics would increase their exposure to those topics of relevance for policy-makers. Internship programs should promote the delivery of both policy reports and articles for academic journals in order to ensure that their final products reach both policy and research audiences and are a boon to academics' careers.

5. **Use randomized experimental designs to conduct program evaluations.**

UN agencies and departments need to rigorously evaluate their programs and activities in the field in order to ensure that they are having the desired impact and that resources are being used for worthwhile efforts. Simply put, in a randomized experiment, people from a common pool are randomly assigned to two groups; the random assignment

ensures that the two groups have similar characteristics. Then, one group receives a certain treatment while the other does not, so that the outcomes of the two groups can be compared. Certainly, there are ethical considerations to be taken into account for long-lasting randomized experiments. However, relatively short-term evaluations that might shed valuable light on the effectiveness of a program could be conducted. For instance, a group of ex-combatants can be randomly divided into two groups. If one group undergoes a six-month disarmament, demobilization, and reintegration (DDR) program while the other does not, the outcomes of the two groups in terms of a particular indicator can be compared in a rigorous evaluation of the DDR program.

6. **Researchers and country experts should accompany Special Representatives of the UN Secretary-General and mission staff into the field.**

Knowledge and understanding of the specific context of a country is crucial for effectively designing and implementing policies in the field. Country experts should play an advisory role throughout the life of the mission, from the designing and strategizing phases to implementation, monitoring, and evaluation.

7. **Academic experts should be invited to participate in UN efforts to enhance system-wide coordination.**

For example, the Criminal Law and Judicial Advisory Unit of DPKO regularly convenes the Rule of Law Focal Point Network, which coordinates the communication and activities of eleven UN departments and agencies involved in rule of law initiatives in peacekeeping operations. If called to participate, an

external rule of law expert could make important contributions to the deliberations of the Focal Point Network by bringing in fresh insights based on hard data.

8. **Use external reviewers to evaluate policies.**

It is common for both governments and multilateral organizations to create inter-agency task forces to evaluate strategies, policies, and programs. However, these task forces generally devolve into power struggles in which each agency or unit tries to defend its interests and positions. Rather than creating inter-agency task forces, the UN should have external teams of experts conduct evaluations to ensure neutrality.

9. **Researchers should aim to utilize data, analysis, and information from a diversity of sources.**

It is of little surprise that when 191 UN member states deliberate on an issue, the issue becomes politicized. The definition of terrorism is a well-known example, as are understandings of food aid and humanitarian protection. As such, data and analysis that draw on or are produced by institutionally and regionally diverse sources are likely to be regarded as having more credibility, particularly on more politically sensitive issues. For example, an analysis of terrorism that relies entirely on data from American universities or researchers may be received with skepticism by the policy community regardless of its empirical rigor.

10. **Strengthen local capacity for data collection and analysis.**

Both the United Nations and the academic community should promote training programs to enhance local capacity for rigorous field-based research. Given the resource constraints of the United Nations and the difficulties of in-country data collection by an external researcher, strengthening local skills in empirical research would help generate valuable new country data and also create a pool of in-country personnel to meet future field research needs.

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