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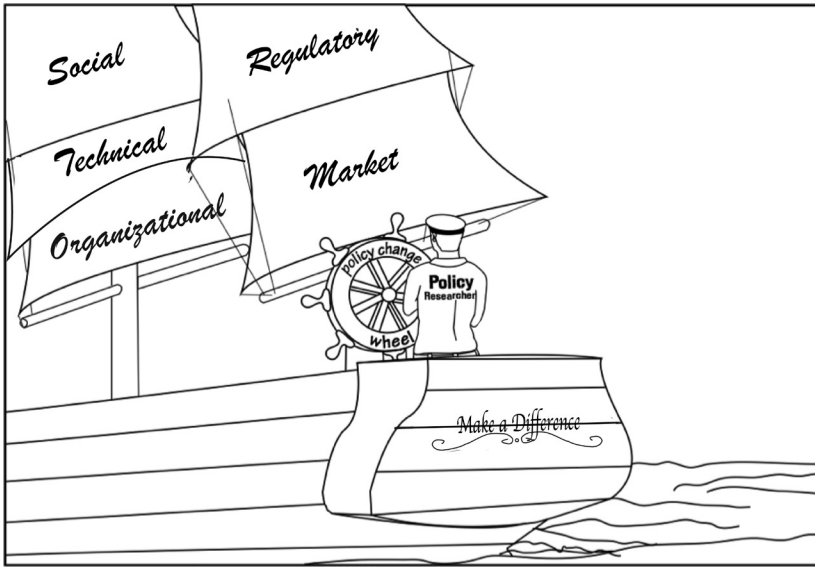## *Make a Difference With Policy Research*

We wrote this book for people who want to change the world—or at least some part of it. You may want to make a difference in problems of truly global proportions, such as climate change, war, disease, famine, economic crisis, or water pollution. You may want to address problems that affect an entire country, such as persistent unemployment, racial and gender inequality and intolerance, worsening educational opportunities, or obesity. You may want to deal with issues that are more local in scope, such as inefficient and ineffective service delivery in your agency, poor profitability in your business, homelessness in your city, or deterioration in your neighborhood. Policy research can help you change the world responsibly.

We think of policy research as both a voyage and a destination. In this howto book, we take you through the policy research voyage phase by phase. But it's important not to lose sight of the destination: *policy makers and*

implementers informed and motivated to act by your persuasive recommenda-
tions based on evidence-based, meaningful, and responsible policy research.

In this introductory chapter, we first answer some frequently asked ques-
tions about what policy research is, who does policy research, and what it
means to do policy research responsibly. Then, we describe the context in
which policy research happens and what this means for policy researchers.
Finally, we lay out the plan of the book.

FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS

Questions frequently asked about policy research include what it is, who does
it (or who can do it), and what it means to do policy research well, that is,
responsibly.

What Is Policy Research?

The term *policy research* refers both to a skillful process and to an outcome.
The process is a set of activities to perform and outputs to produce. The out-
come is documented knowledge about a problem and about ways to solve the
problem combined with carefully reasoned recommendations for action.
Policy research involves using evidence to understand the causes and conse-
quences of problems and the advantages, disadvantages, and risks of different
ways of dealing with problems. Evidence can include data already assembled
by others and new evidence collected especially for policy research purposes.
Evidence means facts, data, and experience—as opposed to assumptions,
theories, opinions, and values. But, of course, assumptions, theories, opinions,
and values—we call them *meaning*—are ever-present and affect both the
production of evidence and its interpretation and use. So policy research
involves working with both evidence and meaning to create outcomes that
help to change the world.

Policy research is not the only way to change the world. It is not the most-
used way. And it may not even be the best way in all circumstances. There are
other ways to change the world. You can change the world by leading and
participating in social, religious, political, or artistic movements. You can
change the world by leading and participating in organizations, governments,
and businesses. You can change the world by inventing new things and ideas.
You can change the world by educating, parenting, and helping. You can
change the world just by being who you are.

All these different ways of changing the world require people to take
actions, observe the consequences of those actions, and then change their

actions based on feedback. In some contexts, this is called *learning by doing.* In other contexts, this action–feedback–reaction cycle as applied to problem solving is called *entrepreneurship*—either social entrepreneurship (Bornstein & Davis, 2010) or business entrepreneurship (Drucker, 1985; Mullins & Komisar, 2009). Policy research can help this action–feedback–reaction cycle. Policy research is a process that attempts to support and persuade actors by providing them with well-reasoned, evidence-based, and responsible recommendations for decision making and action. So, even if you are changing the world in your own way, you can use policy research in your decisions to act. Whether you are a political leader, governmental official, or business manager, policy research can help.

Who Does Policy Research?

Policy researchers can be found all over the place. Some policy researchers are professionals. Often called policy analysts, some professional policy researchers are employed in government agencies, nongovernmental organizations (NGOs, like foundations and charities), and think tanks. They conduct analyses (often using economic methods such as cost-benefit analysis) of policy areas such as employment, education, health care, and housing. Professional policy researchers may be academics in universities concerned with policy questions related to their areas of expertise, whether that be social work, criminal justice, or real estate. Some professional policy researchers are not called policy researchers at all; they are called business strategists, financial analysts, or management consultants who use economic and social science methods to systematically evaluate the costs, benefits, and risks of investments; of innovations like new products, services, or processes; and of new organizational designs and management systems. No matter what the job title, professional policy researchers typically study proposed improvement opportunities or solutions to problems—we call them *interventions.* These interventions may be identified by policy makers, executives, and funding agencies for study or may be derived by the policy researcher's evidence gathering. The product of the policy researcher's research, documented in reports and papers, is a set of persuasive and evidence-based recommendations to policy makers, executives, or funding agencies about the decisions or actions that should be taken.

Policy research isn't just for professionals. It is also a useful skill and resource for people who do not do policy research full time or for pay. Almost anyone can be an "amateur" policy researcher: a teacher, social worker, manager, staff member, parent, athlete, or citizen who is troubled by some state of affairs, passionate about change, and motivated enough to systematically

explore what is known and not known about a problem's causes, consequences, and solutions. Amateur—we might even say *accidental*—policy researchers differ from professionals in at least three ways.

First, accidental policy researchers, unlike professionals, may not have a client at the outset of their policy research journey. That is, they may not have someone who expects to receive their reports and recommendations. Accidental policy researchers typically study policy problems and interventions solely because of their interest or concern. Accidental policy researchers are often motivated to address the problems of a particular vulnerable or victimized group such as acquired immune deficiency syndrome (AIDS) sufferers, people who were laid off in a financial crisis, poor children not well served by their schools, homeless people, and so on. Victimized groups are potential beneficiaries of policy research, but they are not usually its clients. Clients are those who can take action based on policy research recommendations. Therefore, accidental policy researchers may have to find clients for their research. Professionals, on the other hand, know who their clients are—the people or organizations that commissioned their research.

A second difference from professional policy researchers is that accidental policy researchers often have more options about what they do after arriving at a recommendation for action. Professional policy researchers often do only policy research. When they finish one project, they go on the next policy research project. Accidental policy researchers can do that, too. Or they can move into an advocacy role, devoting their energies to mobilizing others to take action now that they have a persuasive case for change. Or accidental policy researchers can move into an entrepreneurial role, deciding to try to implement their own recommendations. They might do this through a start-up organization, whether a nonprofit, a for-profit, or a benefit corporation. For example, if an accidental policy researcher came up with an idea for a new product or service that would help a victimized group, he or she might set up a new organization to market the product or service. Accidental policy researchers might also become entrepreneurs inside the organization in which they work. This is sometimes called *intrapreneurship.* If, for example, Susan is an accidental policy researcher persuasively recommending a better process for service delivery in her organization, she may become an intrapreneur, implementing the intervention herself.

A third difference from professional policy researchers is that accidental policy researchers often have more flexibility in the methods they can use to do their policy research, including using primary research methods such as interviews, field experiments, surveys, and case studies. In contrast, professional policy researchers are often expected—and limited—to use a policy research approach referred to as *secondary analysis,* that is, quantitative

analyses using sophisticated statistical procedures and economic models of large data archives of facts about employment, health, economic activity, and so forth. Professional policy researchers are sometimes also expected to conduct cost-benefit analyses of alternative interventions. Accidental policy researchers are not restricted in this fashion.

This book provides guidance for accidental as well as professional policy researchers. The policy research process as described in this book is not formulaic; it demands creativity. At the same time, it is systematic, such that it is disciplined, rigorous, and in a word, professional. We believe that a professional approach to policy research is just as appropriate for amateurs as it is for professionals. Even if you are the ultimate client for your own policy research, doing policy research as professionally as you can within your resources of time, money, and other people's help is the *responsible* thing to do.

What Does It Mean to Do Policy Research Responsibly?

Responsible? What do we mean by that word? We mean being sensitive to the potential harm you can do to people and the environment by even the best-intentioned interventions. The reason to do high-quality policy research, even if no one is paying you to do it, is that it will help you avoid recommending or implementing a cure that is worse than the disease.

History is full of stories about negative consequences—not just of accidents or natural events like earthquakes and volcanic eruptions but also of actions and nonactions (decisions to do nothing) that people may have deliberately taken for what they thought were good reasons. Think of the atom bomb dropped on Hiroshima, failure to delay the launch of the Challenger space shuttle, the policy of apartheid in South Africa, or the recurrent noninvestments in levee repair in New Orleans prior to Hurricane Katrina. When negative consequences happen, we may assume that people acted with bad motives or that they were powerless to act differently, when in fact, some people acted (or didn't act) deliberately but without considering the possible negative consequences as well as they could have done.

We believe that many policy changes have negative consequences, sometimes worse than the problems they are meant to solve, even when the changes are made with the best of intentions. At the same time, we believe that many of these negative consequences can be anticipated and therefore avoided or mitigated in advance (rather than just coped with after the fact). Anticipating negative consequences requires (1) knowledge of evidence—what worked and didn't work in the past, (2) disciplined imagination about the future, and (3) the experience-tested methods of policy research we present in this book.

Although doing good policy research cannot eliminate all possibility of negative consequences, we believe that good policy research is a must for anyone who wants to change the world responsibly.

THE CONTEXT OF POLICY RESEARCH AND IMPLICATIONS FOR POLICY RESEARCHERS

One of the experience-tested tools of policy research that we discuss in this book is the *theory of the problem*—a theory of why a policy problem exists and how it produces problematic outcomes. (To solve the problem, you will also need a *theory of the intervention*—when, why, and how it works.) We briefly describe our theory of how policy change happens, where policy research fits in, and what this theory means for policy research and researchers.

The Context of Policy Research

One widely held theory of how policy change happens (or should happen—it is not always easy to know whether some theories are descriptive of what actually happens or prescriptive of what should happen) is the rational choice model (Munger, 2000; Sabatier, 2007; Stone, 2012). Rational choice theory holds that policy makers base their decisions and actions on a systematic analysis of costs, benefits, and risks of alternative courses of action. Rational choice theory does not necessarily assume that policy makers are omniscient. The theory acknowledges all sorts of limits on rational decision making—such as time constraints, imperfect information, and cognitive biases. As a result, rational choice theory does not rule out the possibility of bad decisions and unintended consequences.

We don't subscribe to the rational choice theory of the policy process. We believe that social and business policy change happens through contests of values and ideas (Stone, 2012). Even if policy makers had perfect information about the consequences of proposed actions, there would almost never be complete consensus in an organization, let alone society, that a recommended action is the right thing to do. Because conflicts about evidence and meaning are inevitable in policy situations of any scope or importance, the chances are great that whatever policy change occurs, if any, will be a synthesis or resolution of various conflicting proposals. Sometimes, the synthesis will be a compromise that disappoints everyone. Sometimes, it will have truly horrible outcomes. Sometimes, it will be the best possible solution. The goal of

responsible policy research is to try to change the consensus of opinion leaders toward the best possible solution given circumstances and current knowledge while recognizing that knowledge is imperfect and the label *best possible* always implies making value judgments.

A Hypothetical Example of Policy Research in Action

Let's suppose a policy researcher working for a consumer products company was asked to evaluate an investment in a new manufacturing facility. Let's assume that the researcher conducted a systematic analysis of business conditions and possible alternative future outcomes depending on whether the new facility was built or not. During the policy research process, the policy researcher gathered evidence and meaning by talking to stakeholder groups, including workers, managers, citizens, government officials, and representatives at other companies.

With the policy research in hand, the policy researcher might then be confident that the new facility would enable the company to grow rapidly, to expand its workforce considerably, to return more profits to shareholders, and to yield more tax revenues for the nearby town. At the same time, the researcher would also be aware that the new facility was planned for a different state than where the existing facility operated. The researcher would also know that the old facility would be closed down and all its workers and managers laid off and that the company's two main suppliers would also end up closing their facilities as well, further harming employment in the town.

After examining all the evidence, the policy researcher would then make several alternative recommendations to executives, one of which is a creative recommendation that protects the current employees and the town where the old facility was located. (Here's an assignment for you! Can you give an example of a recommendation that protects current employees and the town?)

Executive policy makers in the company will then decide which recommendation to implement. They may decide to implement one of the policy researchers' creative alternatives. However, they may completely ignore the policy researcher's creative recommendations and simply close the existing plant despite the harmful consequences to the town. Finally, they may decide to take no action at all and keep the existing plant running for a while longer, leaving the policy researcher aware of the possibility of an impending plant closure but not able to share that possibility with any of those in the town.

Three points should be clear from this hypothetical example of policy research. First, the policy researcher is not the one who makes the final decision or takes the action (unless the policy researcher shifts out the research role into an entrepreneurial role). As a result, what actually happens may not reflect

the policy researcher's analysis or recommendations. Actual policy change is rarely if ever a straightforward product of rational analysis and choice. Instead, it is often a complex compromise resulting from conflicts over ideas and values.

Second, even if policy research does not influence the decision makers in the short run, it may change the course of events in time. In the short term, a single policy research study may not change policy makers' minds. However, over time, the results of many policy studies can accumulate and become decisive in persuading policy makers to act in ways that a policy researcher recommends.

A third lesson of our hypothetical example is that the policy researcher has a responsibility to make, if not the best possible recommendations, at least very good ones that are rigorously grounded in the evidence. Making good recommendations can be extremely challenging because recommendations always involve questions of meaning and value judgments as well as analyses of evidence. Significant creativity is often required to identify ways to navigate value conflicts among different stakeholder groups (e.g., shareholders, workers and management, citizens, the planet).

If a seemingly straightforward business decision such as investing in a new manufacturing facility can raise so many issues, it should be no surprise that policy research conducted to solve public policy issues is even more challenging, and rational choice theory is even less likely to apply. Like many others (Munger, 2000; Sabatier, 2007; Stone, 2012), we see policy change as occurring in a turbulent environment. That environment is turbulent in part because it includes many stakeholder groups with different needs, values, and concerns. Among the stakeholders of public policy issues are people afflicted by social and economic problems, people who may be affected (positively or negatively) by solutions to the problem (e.g., care givers and service providers, large corporations, citizens, taxpayers) and policy makers and policy researchers who have to think about how their policy recommendations may affect their own careers and livelihoods. In addition, the environment in which policy change occurs is turbulent because of conflicts over theories, evidence, and values. In this stormy environment, solutions to policy problems are often incremental, even when major change is needed.

In the turbulent environment of policy change, policy research can sometimes make a difference. But it's important to recognize that policy research can sometimes make a difference for the worse. This can happen when policy researchers behave irresponsibly, for instance, by biasing their recommendations: selecting or distorting the evidence to support their own values and preferred solutions. The recommendations of irresponsible policy research are sometimes accepted and implemented. When that happens, the outcomes are

grim: The problem is not solved, the problem actually gets worse, or the side effects of the solution are worse than the problem.

Sadly, even responsible policy research can sometimes also make a difference for the worse when partisans of opposing views discredit the research or distort its findings to support opposite conclusions. When this happens, good interventions for complex problems may become politically unacceptable. Doing policy research as professionally as possible can help, but it cannot eliminate the possibility of this negative outcome. Responsible policy researchers must constantly remain aware of the stormy context of policy research. Like every other action in life, policy research can have unintended consequences.

Implications for Policy Researchers

Here is the paradox you face as a policy researcher. On the one hand, policy change is more turbulent and less predictable than a rational choice theory of policy change. Yet, on the other hand, systematic policy research that makes use of evidence (as well as meaning) is needed to make recommendations that have some possibility of being accepted, despite the fact that policy makers do not always take the decisions and actions that policy researchers recommend.

What this paradox means for you is that policy research has limitations. You will encounter flimsy evidence, difficulties in obtaining new evidence, challenges of balancing evidence and meaning, and an extreme difficulty of changing closed minds. But unless you provide decision makers with evidence about the possible effects of different kinds of interventions for a problem, you are leaving decision makers with nothing more for guidance than common sense, opinion, and demagoguery. *We know that it takes passion to change the world, but it takes more than passion to make the world a better place.* It takes critical thinking, evidence, meaning, and careful value judgments.

Let us sum up, then, some of the key characteristics of good policy research. First, good policy research is (1) credible because it is informed by evidence and unbiased (to the extent possible) about the pros, cons, and risks of problems and potential interventions; (2) meaningful to, and engaging of, representatives of stakeholder groups, which include policy makers, people who suffer from problems, and people who may be affected by solutions; (3) responsible, by considering a broad spectrum of potential negative consequences of change; (4) creative, because your policy situation may need new or different solutions than those used elsewhere; and (5) manageable for policy researchers, that is, doable within the time and resources you have available.

Second, good policy research requires good policy research questions. Good questions do not define the problem in terms of one solution, as the

following question does: "How can we improve citizens' access to guns for self-defense?" Good policy questions are broad enough to encourage a search for more and possibly better solutions. With more solution alternatives, there is a greater likelihood of finding one solution aligned with stakeholders' beliefs and values. Good policy research questions also do not rule out the possibility that some, maybe all, interventions may have worse effects than allowing the current situation to continue unchanged.

A third characteristic of good policy research is that it is creative. Creativity, particularly in the design of policy recommendations, is needed for many reasons. Evidence about the causes of problems may be missing, weak, conflicting, or contested. The same could be true of evidence about the costs, benefits, and risks of possible solutions. In addition, problems and solutions can mean different things to and for different stakeholders. That is, stakeholders rarely value the same things, and they are usually unequally affected by the problem or its solutions.

Creativity is required when designing good recommendations for another reason as well: There are so many different types of possible interventions from which to choose. Possible ways to solve problems include training and education, new processes and technologies, new organizational arrangements, taxes, laws, incentives, monitoring, punishments, and many more (Bardach, 2009). Effective intervention in a situation may need to target a point quite distant from where a problem is observed. For example, instead of recommending education for smokers, you may want to recommend restrictions on the marketing practices of tobacco companies.

Still another reason that creativity is required for good intervention design is that some problems can only be solved by interventions in multiple aspects of a problem at the same time. For instance, to improve children's learning at school, you may need also to improve support for their learning at home, their nutrition, and their access to health care.

A fourth characteristic of good policy research is that it requires having a detailed understanding of the context in which the problem exists and having a theory of how and why the problem occurs. We spoke of policy change as occurring in a turbulent or stormy context. In this book, we encourage you to examine all aspects of a problem's context for *malleable variables* (sometimes also called *change levers*) that can serve as good targets of intervention. Later in the book, we use the STORM acronym—referring to the social, technical, organizational, regulatory, and market conditions surrounding a problem—to help you broaden your search for malleable variables. Stakeholder analysis and the Policy Change Wheel are additional tools we provide later for helping you analyze the context and articulate your theories of problems and interventions.

A final characteristic of good policy research is that it rarely comes easily. It is hard work, it takes time, and it doesn't always win you friends. But it is important, meaningful, and fun work to do!

THE POLICY RESEARCH VOYAGE

We use the metaphor of a sea voyage to describe the policy research process. Figure 1.1 provides a map of the voyage. As in many real travels, the policy research process does not always follow a straight line, as the map might suggest. There are occasional side trips, and some activities are repeated again and again. (Reframing the policy research question has a lot in common with packing, unpacking, and repacking your bags when traveling!) We try to capture these iterations in the details of each chapter.

Each chapter describes the major activities you perform and the *deliverables,* that is, the outputs you produce at each stage of the voyage. In addition, the chapters discuss intermediate goals—we call them tracking indicators— that you can use to know whether you are staying on course throughout the iterations and inevitable obstacles that arise in any policy research voyage.

As you read through the next chapter, Chapter 2, you will see that it concerns the activities and deliverables involved in launching your policy research process. You start this Launch Phase with a policy research question that is as good as you can make it at the time, given what you know. A good policy research question is one that is broad enough to be meaningful but focused enough to be manageable given the time and resources you have available. As you familiarize yourself with the policy problem, you progressively refine the question, which helps to focus your subsequent research. Tools to help you refine the policy research question are presented in Chapter 2, including the Policy Change Wheel, STORM context conditions, and Stakeholder Analysis. Other important activities in the Launch Phase are to identify experts and other stakeholders who may be able to help you and to enlist some of them, formally or informally, as your advisers.

Chapter 3 outlines the goals, activities, and deliverables of the Synthesize Existing Evidence Phase of the policy research voyage. Here, starting with your more focused research question, you systematically collect, analyze, and synthesize evidence that already exists about the problem and possible interventions for improving the problem. We discuss good sources of evidence and ways to assess the strength of the evidence. By the end of this phase, you should have a very good idea about what is known about the problem or its solutions and, more important, about what is not known. This is important because you need to decide whether the existing evidence is
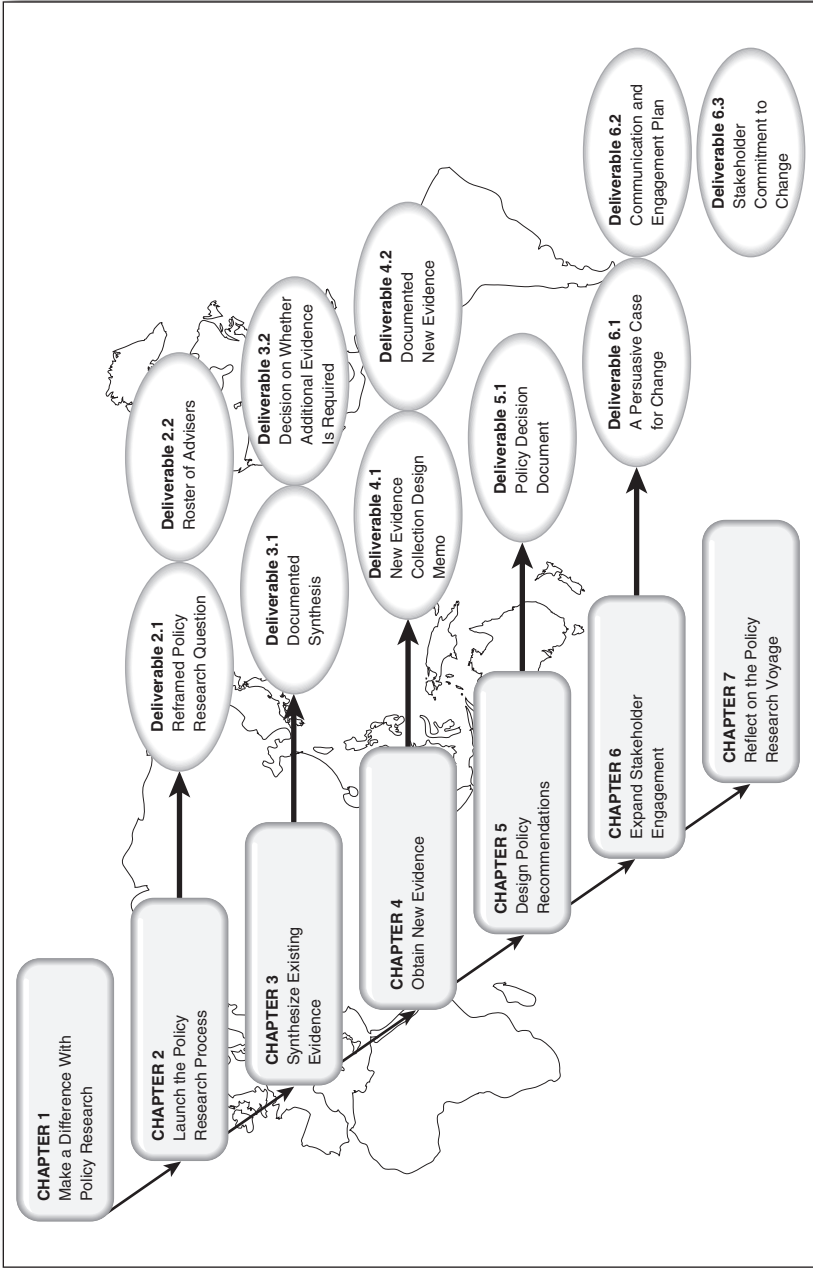
Figure 1.1 The Policy Research Voyage Map

strong enough for you to make confident policy recommendations (as described Chapter 5) or whether you need to collect additional evidence (as discussed in Chapter 4).

Chapter 4 focuses on the Obtain New Evidence Phase of the policy research voyage. This phase starts with a policy research question about what is not known (about the problem or its solutions). Answering this question may involve *secondary analysis*—statistical studies of data published in archives. However, other primary data collection methods may be better for your focused research question, including interviewing, conducting surveys and case studies, and creating field experiments. Chapter 4 covers the basics of research design, ways to increase your confidence in the results, and how to obtain new evidence ethically.

You now have a wealth of existing and possibly also new evidence about the policy problem and its solutions. But your job is not done; you must extract from the evidence a set of action recommendations for policy makers. Doing this well is a challenging and creative design activity; we call the phase Design Policy Recommendations. A critical first step in this phase— the subject of Chapter 5—is to develop what we call the Base Case, a description of the current situation and its negative outcomes, against which each of several alternative solutions will be compared. We explain the importance of assessing each alternative fairly using the same evaluation criteria rather than attempting to stack the deck in favor of the alternative you think is best. Ultimately, you will combine information about the Base Case and about the alternative interventions into a brief, well-structured, and persuasive decision document that informs policy makers and encourages them to take action.

You are still not done yet, even after making your recommendations to policy makers! At this point, your recommendations have been based primarily on the evidence and have not yet fully been tested for meaningfulness, that is, aligned with stakeholders' assumptions, theories, opinions, and values. If your recommendations do not align well, they may not be adopted or they may be resisted; as a result, your recommendations will not improve the problem or will have unacceptable negative side effects. In the Expand Stakeholder Engagement Phase, outlined in Chapter 6, you seek to gain stakeholders' support for your recommendations through a persuasive Case for Change. Of course, during this phase, you may also decide that you have to modify your recommendations to make them more meaningful.

The last chapter, Chapter 7, presents our reflections on the Policy Research Voyage. We distill the advice of the previous chapters into a set of principles for doing meaningful and impactful policy research.

CONCLUSION

Methods for Policy Research is meant to be an inspirational book. By the time you finish reading, we hope you will know what good policy research is, know how it can help create positive social and organizational change, have the skills you need to do good policy research, and be inspired to do good policy research on problems that are meaningful to you, even if you don't do policy research as a profession. If, after reading this book, you do not have all the resources you need to do good policy research alone, the knowledge and skills you learn should still help you select good advisers and research partners. In addition, you should be able to help others in their policy research voyages.

There are many ways to change the world. Social and business entrepreneurs change the world by implementing change, that is, by intervening in the existing state of affairs. Policy makers (e.g., legislators, investors, donors) change the world by making decisions and by supplying entrepreneurs with needed resources (e.g., legislative mandate, funding) for success. Policy researchers can also change the world—by changing people's minds. Policy researchers can use the tools described in this book to inform policy makers, entrepreneurs, and people affected by problems and to encourage them to act in ways that are evidence based, meaningful, and responsible. By synthesizing what is known about problems and solutions, by obtaining new evidence about what is not known, by designing recommendations for action, and by engaging stakeholders, policy researchers can envision and stimulate optimism for creative new solutions that solve problems without creating worse ones. Policy researchers can make a difference. Bon voyage!