Bridging the gap between research and practice

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> *Ideas serve often enough to furnish our actions with justifying motives… What is called rationalisation at this level is called ideology at the level of collective action.*

> Habermas (1968)

Enhancing development understanding

Over the past decade many international development agencies have broadened their activity portfolios beyond financial support of development projects or programmes, focusing increasingly on capacity development and knowledge sharing. This development is a response to the need for enhancing development understanding, expressed both within these agencies as well as amongst their constituents and/or partners. Reflecting a complementary development, academic institutes are responding to this need by expanding their scope beyond the research community, and are progressively including stakeholders such as policy makers and practitioners in the process of knowledge generation, even sometimes providing consultancy to decision-makers and agencies committed to development. Despite this convergence of focus between development research and practice, a wide gap still exists: knowledge transfer between the two is limited, collaboration is limited and there is still a dearth of relevant knowledge reaching Southern stakeholders. Many efforts to bridge this gap have been initiated; almost as many have failed.

The challenge of bringing together research and practice towards the achievement of mutual development objectives is fascinating. It is a field much explored, but an adequate response is rare. Initially motivated by diminishing public extension services available to counterparts in the South, especially in the field of agriculture and health, and augmented by the ongoing demands of the 'Information Society' in which access to information has become an increasingly important condition for personal development, the logical step forward for knowledge sharing practitioners would be to call on the experts in the field of 'knowledge development', namely researchers and academic institutes. Oddly enough, this is not (yet) a common practice. There is a lack of literature exploring why this is. What are the challenges? What are the opportunities? What can be learnt from past efforts, successes or failures? Is it worth pursuing such partnerships? Or are the differences simply too overwhelming to be overcome?

This story provides a perspective, not a definitive answer, and draws from numerous examples and experiences in current development practice[1]. It explores the question why it is so difficult for research and practice to work together effectively in servicing mutual stakeholders and bridging the 'knowledge gap'. Why? Because there is so much fertile ground for more in-depth knowledge sharing amongst both research institutes and development agencies – and it seems too good an opportunity for us all to forgo.

Overcoming cultural barriers in a knowledge partnership

Many development agencies over the past five to ten years have developed new strategies in response to the demand for more in-depth knowledge and the need to make more effective use of financial means and experiences. Subsequently, knowledge sharing strategies have flourished.

Nonetheless, many organisations find themselves pressed by the urgency of day-to-day operations, maintaining a focus on the here and now and future directions, with less time to reflect on previous efforts; and whilst significant time and financial resources are increasingly spent on monitoring and evaluation, motivated both by internal drivers for organisational learning as well as external drivers such as donor requirements, this is not always enough to truly grasp fundamental change drivers or causes for failure or success. However, the need to enhance organisational learning internally and amongst counterparts continues to grow, but pragmatic contingencies imposed by direct stakeholders (counterparts and donors) are likely in the future to restrict even further the opportunities for in-depth reflection and learning. As such, a response might be to find a strategic partner with the time and skills to address this need for more thorough knowledge – and a partnership between development agencies and development-oriented research institutes seems to be an obvious solution. Even so, not many such strategic partnerships exist. Experience shows that fundamental character differences contribute to the apparent gap: the pragmatic approach harnessed by most development agencies versus the thorough manner by which research institutes seek to move scientific knowledge (see also Barrett e.a. 2005).

Overcoming differences

Developing initial interest for a research-practice partnership, and subsequently overcoming pragmatic obstacles such as finding the time and financial resources as well as establishing management support are challenging in any partnership; nonetheless, with perseverance and patience, these are easier to overcome than cultural differences.

Three cultural factors
The main factors standing in the way of effective partnership between research and practice might be roughly categorised as *institutional*, *communicative* and *philosophical* differences.

Institutional differences
Significant institutional differences exist, first, in the manner by which the two type of institutes work towards achieving their goals, and second, in terms of the intended beneficiaries which these efforts target.

For instance, development agencies generally mainly focus on activities such as funding, networking, lobby, capacity development and knowledge sharing, and counterparts consist predominantly of Southern-based NGOs. Academic institutes

have educational goals, targeting primarily the international research community. In other words, whilst on the long term there is a mutual objective, such as sustainable development, there are significant differences in the manner by which this is achieved. For instance, a measure of success for a development agency might be a vast network of development NGOs achieving their institutional objectives, whereby its main output is financial and political support for civil organisations and initiatives that share its policy priorities. For an academic institute, a measure of success is more likely to be a flourishing research community, whereby critical analysis of practice and development of formal knowledge are the most important means by which this is achieved.

In a research-practice partnership, institutional differences manifest themselves particularly in the manner by which the agencies attempt to move forward. This means first, a difference in pace: whereas a development agency tends to move (relatively) fast and pragmatically, in response to the continuing and urgent demands of its counterparts, a research agency prefers a thorough, analytical approach, maybe even taking a step back once in a while, to ensure everything is comprehensively explored and academically valid.

As a result, determining the terms and scope for a partnership on mutual grounds is likely to lead to many discussions in an attempt to come to a common understanding and define the main issues at stake. Whilst extremely important, interesting and relevant, it can be a challenge to find a satisfactory balance for both parties in terms of not just content, but also the process and form by which the partnership is to be substantiated.

Obviously, it will take some time to find a productive balance between content and process, between the need to ensure that outputs of the knowledge network are thoroughly analysed, befitting of an institute with an academic reputation to defend, versus the desire to move forward quickly and pragmatically.

Communicative differences
The field of development is no different than any other expertise, in that it has a very particular vocabulary. This 'jargon' is largely shared in academic circles and practice-oriented development, but the way in which a message is articulated and communicated does vary significantly. This has to do primarily with the differences in the targeted audience and readership.

The need for and pressure on researchers to publish in academic journals to gain academic credit makes it less attractive for them to spend their time and energy (re-) articulating their ideas for practitioners or for people in developing countries who may be able to take advantage of research findings to improve their personal situation. Development agencies consider precisely these people the ultimate beneficiaries of their efforts and will make an effort to ensure outputs are produced which are relevant and appropriate for this audience. Amongst development practitioners, the level of formal education is widely divergent, they often have a native language other than English, they are not necessarily accustomed to academic discourse, and all in all, they do not have the time or priority for long and complex analyses even if the subject matter is pertinent to them. Generally speaking, amongst practitioners there is

primarily a need for easily accessible, to the point and pragmatic knowledge on how to get a job done more effectively, and in terms of formal literature, it is primarily case- and action-based research that is appreciated. Moreover, development agencies often cannot afford to invest in long-term, in-depth research: the financial and time-commitments are simply too strenuous, both in terms of supporting its production as well as its 'consumption'. Staff is often overwhelmed by the urgency of their day-to-day activities, so that there is insufficient opportunity to stay up to date on research findings; these are simply often too long and complex, too theoretical and far-removed from development practice. This would lead to the clear conclusion of the need for bridging between researchers and practitioners, for example by distilling and making user-friendlier what practitioners need to know from researchers. In other words, it is not only about the knowledge itself but also about its accessibility.

At the same time, the concept of knowledge *sharing* differs between the two: development practice (as the name suggests), relies primarily on empirical evidence to show whether policy and strategic assumptions are correct or not, often tested by sharing amongst peers. However, in academia, knowledge is acceptable after comprehensive analysis, thorough documentation, cross-examination and peer review has proven it valid, and deems it worthy of the researcher to set his or her name under it. Further, whilst knowledge amongst development practitioners can be shared fairly openly and informally through a vast array of methods and tools including storytelling, informal publications and the Internet, academic knowledge is often proprietary because of the credit to be gained by the researcher, and is only acceptable after publication in an academic journal. Anything besides that is considered 'grey literature' and doesn't really count.

Particularly for knowledge sharing practitioners in development agencies, a priority is getting the best information out on how to get a job done well, and determining the most effective way to communicate this. In other words, besides the message itself, finding an appropriate mode of communication is very important, and this might include, besides conventional forms such as books, articles, etc., more creative formats such as cartoons, posters, the Internet, etc.

This might mean, for instance, ensuring the availability of good, up-to-date websites, taking advantage of readily available material within both institutes. For research agencies, this less of a priority because the development of *new* content through research initiatives is more important. Fostering commitment from both sides for two equally important activities can as such prove challenging. Nonetheless, this is concurrently an opportunity to be creative in harnessing each others' strengths: a website is an excellent source to make accessible the high-quality content generated by academics such as grey and formal literature, student and staff research outputs, etc., and can disclose cases, programme evaluations, etc. from development practice to be used for academic purposes. This is an opportunity for researchers to better familiarise themselves with practitioner motivations and needs, and gain access to case material, whilst for development practitioners, this means access to in-depth knowledge allowing them to enhance their development efforts.

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Philosophical differences
The third cultural factor affecting collaboration between research and practice, is the different *epistemological* views i.e. the theory of knowledge. This relates to the difference in the interpretation of the question '*what is knowledge*'. This complex question will remain unanswered here, but it is inevitable to briefly explore the parameters of the discussion to understand the fundamental differences in approach between academics and practitioners.

The quest for an 'absolute body of knowledge' was pursued from Aristotle to Kant, but has been deconstructed from thereon forward. Nonetheless, the pursuit of knowledge *as objectively as possible* still lies at the heart of all science. Habermas (1972) captures this problem by identifying the subjectivity which *idealism* brings to scientific pursuit, and the impossibility of human interest to be divorced from knowledge. Barrett et al (2005) developed a view that knowledge is differentiated by the capacity of individuals to exercise judgment and is closely connected to action. This affects the capacity of individuals to 'capture' and transfer knowledge – it is indeed always subjectively affected. This is inherent to the human capacity to know, implying the relativism of knowledge.

> *Science can only be comprehended… as one category of possible knowledge, as long as knowledge is not equated effusively with the absolute knowledge of a great philosophy or blindly with the self-understanding of the actual business of research.* [Habermas 1972]

Habermas identifies different processes of inquiry, of which the approach of critically oriented sciences incorporate *emancipatory cognitive interest*. In other words, the facts relevant to the empirical (practice-based) sciences are first constituted through an a priori understanding of our own experiences, viewed in the perspective of doing for a purpose: by understanding the motivation underlying our actions, we are able to identify the stake (*human interest*) we have in the activity and develop our scientific knowledge on the topic – furthering it beyond this stake. Habermas' critical reading of empirical knowledge is such that our actions are coated with subjective beliefs, serving to furnish us with justifying motives; at the level of science this is called rationalisation, at the level of collective action it is ideology (Habermas 1978). Obviously, such a train of thought implies a serious pitfall for scientific research that aims to develop 'objective knowledge', in that knowledge represents an innate human interest that cannot be divorced from the topic at hand. And this is of course especially the case within a field that is so suffused with ideological motives, as social sciences and development in particular.

The rather banal conclusion we can draw from this is that science and practice need to understand what each constitutes as 'knowledge', acknowledging the different stake each has. We might state that on the one hand science's stake in knowledge is the pursuit of pure theory stripped as much as possible of ideology, and on the other hand practice-oriented pursuit of knowledge is an understanding and justification of human interest: a verification of methodological approaches – or rather, simply understanding *what works for whom*.

This abstract analysis of the stake in knowledge (or the motivation for its pursuit) between research and practice-oriented institutes is nonetheless highly illustrative of

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the fundamental differences that they have to understand in order to establish a successful partnership, especially in a field as ideologically driven as development. It is precisely the pursuit of ideological interest that drives development practice, and precisely the intention of science to remove this very ideology, releasing knowledge from interest.

However fundamental the difference, in the need to achieve a realistic balance – in the development of relevant research, and in the meta-analysis of development practice – a joint space can be identified. Effectiveness of knowledge depends on whether it in fact addresses a human interest or ideology and whether the methodology it describes is appropriate for scientific purposes. In other words, the process of knowledge generation entails the development of a theory arising from an ideology; it entails testing the theory whilst identifying and acknowledging the particular human interest which by the nature of science and human scientific pursuit obstructs the achievement of 'pure theory'; and last but not least it seeks the evidence that supports this theory. Translated to (knowledge for) development practice, this means developing critical empirical evidence to support – by proving or disproving – a theory, identifying whether the premises upon which a development approach is motivated are justified, and through this analysis, moving knowledge forward. (Popper 1963/1959)

Paradoxically, whilst underscoring the fundamentally different approaches to knowledge generation and understanding, development knowledge – inherently driven by ideological motivations – can not exist without being firmly rooted in scientific pursuit. Namely, philosophical analysis of practitioner and academic knowledge illustrates the need to work together in collecting empirical data, analysing its meaning and identifying/deconstructing ideological justifications, to create a new realm of evidence as to whether the assumptions that motivate our strategies are valid, or need to be adjusted.

Bridging the gap between research and practice
Sharing knowledge between research and practice in a structural manner is highly challenging but can be rewarding, inspiring and fun for all parties involved and their constituents. It contains the potential to enhance development understanding, capitalising on the particular strengths of researchers and practitioners to mutual benefit. Experience shows that it is often cultural barriers that stand in the way of effective collaboration. However, these can be overcome and valuable knowledge sharing partnerships can be fostered if built upon a number of basic building blocks.

10 building blocks
1. Get to know each other
Articulate, acknowledge and try to understand each others' differences at all levels (institutional, communicative and philosophical). Start with a few small initiatives to experiment what works and what doesn't rather than going for a 'big bang'. In getting to know each other, social networking can be highly effective!
2. Be patient
It takes time to understand each others' interests, differences and priorities; but invest the time now, it will avoid a lot of frustrations and misunderstandings in the long run. Different types of institutes have different working paces due to their approach and

objectives, and finding a balance in these can be challenging: forcing things forward if they appear to stagnate can be counterproductive, but beware of losing momentum.

3. Be respectful

Researchers and practitioners have a different understanding of knowledge, divergent approaches to developing it and alternative justifications for action. Develop a common understanding of these differences, acknowledge each others' insights – and respect them. Be prepared to look beyond your own years of development experience or an academic title, and rather listen to each other and learn from viewpoints shared from a different perspective.

4. Embrace diversity

Both scientific knowledge and practitioner knowledge are highly context specific in terms of their relevance and applicability. However, don't be afraid to step out beyond the usual boundaries: a research-practice partnership can provide an opportunity for both partners to venture beyond the conventional frame of reference, which can provide energy, innovation and new insights.

5. Scientific knowledge is nothing without practical knowledge – and vice-versa

As illustrated above, progress in knowledge is an interaction between formal, scientific analysis and empirical, practitioner evidence – without the one, the other is weakened. Harness the potential to move your knowledge 'out of the box'.

6. Foster a clear, mutual frame of reference

Develop a set of concrete parameters for the partnership which both partners feel comfortable with. This doesn't have to be 'set in stone' but can be adapted as the partnership develops. A strong common goal with a number of clear mutual objectives will provide direction and focus to work towards, but be realistic in what is feasible, especially in the beginning.

7. Build the partnership incrementally

Better to let many small buds develop into a blossoming tree than to go for one big bang: whilst there is potentially more to win in terms of visibility, it can cost too much energy to maintain momentum after the big bang; and in case of failure the whole partnership is likely to flop. Small initiatives are easier for people to get involved in and broad ownership of research-practice partnership is the key to success.

8. Ensure broad institutional buy-in

The most valuable knowledge lies within the heads of people, so the more people get involved, the more knowledge can be mobilised. Partnerships between research and practice-oriented institutes will succeed on the long term if there is broad institutional buy-in: this is necessary to guarantee priority can be given to the initiative and time and resources can be invested. Without institutional commitment, such initiatives remain the 'hobby' of individuals – and when their energy falters or their time becomes scarce, that's the end of it. Specifically in research-practice partnerships, institutional buy-in ranges from management, faculty/staff, to students and of course institutional counterparts – the ultimate intended beneficiaries of such initiatives.

9. Equal commitment to the partnership

In terms of investments in the partnership, this needs to be roughly equal; whether this involves in-kind contributions, financial resources or other, partners need to feel as if their counterpart is matching their investment.

10. Allow for mistakes

Due to the significant cultural differences between practise-based and academic institutes, a partnership between the two is a challenge, no matter what. The investments are significant – but so are the potential rewards. It can be highly motivating for development practitioners to step back from their daily practise and

reflect in more depth upon the meaning and effect of their work; likewise, more interaction with development practitioners can provide new perspectives for researchers in terms of extending their intellectual pursuits beyond the academic community and into the field of those people most thirsty for relevant knowledge. However, it will take time for staff of both institutes to truly harness the potential of such initiatives. There is no clear-cut formula for success, and therefore identifying the most effective manner for fruitful interaction can be found only by trying. It is inevitable that some initiatives will fail but be prepared to learn from these together and move forward.

Critical success factors
The development of a joint knowledge partnership is by no means easy, but it can prove stimulating for both parties involved – and beyond.

Critical success factors include:
- The involvement of stakeholders– of researchers and students, as well as of development practitioners and counterparts.
- Harnessing momentum, to enhance active commitment beyond the core group of a partnership.
- Show results to stakeholders of the partnership.

It appears that cultural differences might pose the biggest threat to a successful research-practice partnership. But with time and patience success can be achieved. Once partners have come to know each other more profoundly, understanding each others' priorities and needs, they can start learning from each other, truly reaping the benefits of a research and practice partnership. New professional dimensions can be unearthed through small wins – a student research here, a practitioner lecture there – baby steps which can help to overcome the most urgent differences.

Whilst a definitive bridging of the gap between research and practice is still far down the road, only time will tell whether we are able to jump over our own shadows and move knowledge – both scientific and practice-based – forward.

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Abstract
This article provides a perspective on the cultural differences which can be encountered between academic institutes and development agencies in pursuit of knowledge sharing partnerships. It identifies a number of the major obstacles to be overcome and provides ten building blocks which can contribute to bridging the gap

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between research and practice, enabling knowledge to be shared effectively within the development community – from research institute, to development agency, to the ultimate beneficiaries: development practitioners in the South.

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[1] This story draws from experiences shared formally and informally from various institutes including Hivos, IICD, Ford Foundation, the Institute for Social Studies, and the University of Dar es Salaam.