

Demanding Innovation

articulating policies for demand-led research capacity building

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Keynote Address

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Critical Issues in Developing Demand-Oriented Research Capacity

My presentation this morning draws some of the issues and lessons learned regarding development research in the South from the comparative study of donor-supported research capacity in the South (See the report and executive summary in the kit). Issues donors may consider as they reflect upon what to reinforce or do differently in the future are woven into the discussion.

On the Notion of Demand-Oriented Research Capacity Building

When Lea Velho, David Kaplan and I planned the study three years ago, we had hoped to find comparator programs that shared most of the features of the Dutch Multi-annual Multidisciplinary Research Program (MMRP) or the MMRPs. The MMRPs were created in response to a deliberate government policy to link research more closely to the needs and interests of the developing world, particularly the poor. The designers of the policy attributed the insufficient orientation of Southern researchers toward local societal problems to the prevailing asymmetric character of North–South research collaboration. They accordingly sought to minimize the likelihood of Northern researchers dominating collaboration efforts with Southern partners by calling for a shift in key responsibilities such as agenda and priority setting, the conduct of the research and financial accounting from the North to the South.

As designed, the MMRP is a research capacity-building programme that is managed autonomously by the Southern partner, and which provides long-term support for demand-driven, location-specific, multidisciplinary research for sustainable development. Initial difficulties encountered in the search for comparator programs made us decide that at minimum, the programs to be studied must primarily focus on research capacity building, whether they were demand-driven or not.

As it turned out, the programs varied considerably in terms of autonomy and orientation (i.e., academic/applied; macro-policy/micro) but interestingly, they all support and advocate the need for research to produce concrete applications that will benefit specific end users. It would seem then from the programs we studied that donor support for the production of knowledge for its own sake outside a development context has waned. As a matter of fact, the donors in the study have helped mainstream development perspectives that privilege the participation of the intended development beneficiaries in the search for “bottom-up” solutions through appropriate funding mechanisms that encourage academic researchers to forge links with external agencies including grassroots organizations, government policymakers and relevant groups within the private sector.

Issue 1: ● *Whose demand?*

In rhetoric, all programmes aim to foster in the long run, the development of the countries in which they operate. But because of differences in the mission, vision and thrusts of donors, they differ in their views of the type of demand-oriented research capacity to be built and how they relate to or incorporate the interests of the potential users of the research.

The university-based programmes that focus on building basic, non-participatory natural or social science research capacities adapted to local conditions respond to the demand from local universities and society at large for academically qualified researchers and teachers in the social sciences, natural sciences or in multidisciplinary fields. The research areas covered by these programmes reflect the salient problems of the countries concerned. Moreover, the programmes have developed mechanisms to consult with the intended research beneficiaries outside academia or to link up with them.

[For now, I will raise but not elaborate on the question of who translates needs into demand in country or a community; what interests are imbedded in the articulation of demand, whether the interests and needs of the poor are sufficiently represented by intermediary groups like government agents and NGOs. For purposes of the discussion, I will assume that the particularistic interests of those who articulate demand for the poor may be unpacked from genuine development interests of the poor majority].

Assuming the relevance of university-based programs in the South to local problems, it is notable that operationally the academic demands of graduate training programs have constrained efforts to link with end users other than the university-based beneficiaries. Such efforts are viewed as mere add-ons to the programmes. The underdeveloped links with ultimate beneficiaries is not viewed as problematic by these programs for two reasons:

- 1) because the primary goal of the donors is to build a critical mass of competent scientists and researchers; Indeed we were impressed by the remarkable output of MAs and Phds in the university-based programmes studied; and

- 2) they implicitly hope, along the lines of the traditional demarcation between theory and application in academe and the sequence where theory precedes application, that the knowledge produced by researchers in the programme will eventually be applied and redound to the good of the country/community.

Concerned with improving the conditions in the specific areas that they serve, most programmes outside academe, on the other hand, have clearer links with end users. The Andra Pradesh Biotechnology Program for instance brings together scientists, farmers and other stakeholders in the development and application of appropriate biotechnology in the semi-arid farming systems of Andra Pradesh. The goal is to build research capacity that integrates at the onset inputs from other sites of knowledge production apart from the university. These sites include the knowledge system of farmers or indigenous groups.

The model of research reflected in programmes found in India and Latin America led us to articulate in our study a mode of knowledge production carried out in the context of application to a concrete problem that underlies these programs. As Gibbons et. al postulated, ideally, the cognitive practices associated with this mode transcend the theoretical and methodological positions of collaborating research partners and encourages researchers to go back and forth between the “fundamental and the applied, the theoretical and the practical ... the curiosity-oriented and mission-oriented research”. Being locally driven and constituted, this mode of knowledge production is ideally sensitive to local contexts, and is committed to ensuring user involvement not only in the dissemination of findings but also in defining problems and setting research priorities. It recognizes the existence of multiple knowledge sites and views the scientific practices lodged in universities as one of many sites that are brought together in the search for solutions to particular problems. Finally, quality is assessed not only in terms of technical merit, but also in terms of the usefulness or relevance of the knowledge produced. As a consequence, the emergent research practices are socially more accountable and responsive.

The debates on the question of whether a demand-orientation can be integrated into various phases of research (an essentially cognitive practice), ultimately boil down to differences in ideas of science and the process of knowledge production. The relative success of the Andra Pradesh Program and some of the MMRPs suggests that it may be worthwhile for donors to reflect on their implicit or explicit perspectives on development processes and modes of knowledge production. Such reflection would affirm or revise the operational aspects of their research capacity building programs as they are carried out in developing societies.

Before examining issues in the operationalization of demand-oriented research capacity building at the level of programs, let me mention two issues associated with the notion of demand-oriented research. These are the questions of multidisciplinary and scientific quality.

● *Other Issues associated with demand-oriented research*

Issue 2: problem of multidisciplinary

Building a demand-oriented, location-specific research capacity requires a multidisciplinary perspective. But, as our previous speaker eloquently stated, this is easier said than done. In practice, the MMRPs, which explicitly aim to foster synergy among disciplines and sectors, are still very far from achieving desirable levels of multidisciplinary. The constraints lie in attachment to disciplinary orientations of the research community as well as the insulation of academe from development concerns, among others. But apart from the undeveloped state of many disciplines in the South, to which our previous speaker attributes the lack of multidisciplinary, we would argue that achieving this value is difficult because it requires synthetic thinking. Most of us are trained to disaggregate and analyze but not to integrate and move back and forth from the 'fundamental to the applied'.

Issue 3: the question of quality

The other issue is quality. Despite differences in modes of knowledge production, the programs we studied adopted notions of technical quality as defined by scientific communities. Even the Andra Pradesh Biotechnology Program is rooted in the evolving technical standards in the field of biotechnology. Most programs did not find the question of technical quality problematic.

Understandably, the issue of technical quality was more prominent for the MMRPs and probably for the participatory programmes in Latin America. This is due to two factors: the role the MMRPs performed vis a vis researchers and the process orientation of participatory development research.

With one exception, the MMRPs serve as research facilitators rather than convenors of multidisciplinary teams of expert researchers. The research facilitated by the programmes through a competitive selection process ranges from academic studies to action research (with a preferential option for inexperienced junior researchers). While this has allowed for research in diverse issues which the usual top-down research agenda approach could never have hoped to capture, it has also made the MMRPs more vulnerable to problems of research quality. In this regard, innovative systems of mentoring (study circles, senior-junior partnerships) have evolved.

But perhaps a major challenge facing MMRPs and the donors supporting demand-driven or participatory research is how to measure in qualitative and quantitative terms the output of process-oriented research with multiple outcomes. Existing standards of science and scholarship are used to assess technical quality. But apprehending the nature of a specific development process that is largely invisible requires more than the usual research criteria.

In addition to the traditional skills that the research community has absorbed, a nuanced reading of development that is iterative and gradual entails "listening skills, the

ability to combine an open and non-judgmental approach with enough understanding to make sense of and draw insight out of what one is observing” (Kaplan), and a capacity to reflect upon and intuit underlying movements. Clearly, the conventional indicators of quality in academic research, such as peer review, publications and citations in professional journals may not adequate or fully relevant for demand-driven, participatory research. The unconventional criteria to be developed, on the other hand, should not be associated with poor or lower quality research.

[Interestingly, our team of researchers did not begin with an appreciation of standards other than those upheld by conventional (positivist) social science].

Developing meaningful indicators would require sifting through conventional measures, unpacking the dimensions of development research, and identifying possible qualitative indicators and measures of processes that do not lend themselves easily to formalization. Both donor agencies and research communities will have to begin thinking in this direction. Some potential indicators include the following:

- the sensitivity and receptivity of researchers to local knowledge;
- the commitment to the production of research results of quality and of relevance; the capacity to negotiate, design, implement and manage research programmes; and

There are other issues connected to the notion and appreciation for demand-oriented research capacity but due to time constraints, let me move on to the

Issues Related to Institutional Arrangements and Mechanisms for Demand-Oriented Research

The idea of demand-oriented research presupposes mechanisms for discerning research relevance to concrete issues affecting the South. Our study highlighted the importance of two basic assumptions that are common sensical but often overlooked:

- Context is important and understanding it is critical to the design and implementation of programs. Despite common features among programs supported by the same donor, their implementation, nevertheless, vary according to the political economic contexts and the state of science and technology in the respective countries. On the other hand, there are commonalities among programs in different parts of the world because of similar experiences. To illustrate, the development of vibrant civil society groups in India, Bangladesh and the latin American countries explain why participatory research took deeper roots in these countries rather than in Tanzania or Uganda whose political and economic histories did not lead to the formation of strong civil society groups.
- Demand –orientation assumes that donors and the Northern research community have the capacity to listen to and trust that Southern partners (given appropriate mechanisms that can minimize abuse) have the right motivation and capacity to set their own research agenda; In this connection, the main mechanism for ensuring a more sensitive discernment of demand is the constitution of a

Steering Committee composed of various stakeholders in a society. [Of course there are many issues connected with the particularistic interests of potential Steering Committee members that can undermine the common good notion underlying demand-oriented research but we can discuss this later. The issue of how people who constitute the donor partners imbibe the spirit of demand-oriented research is also critical]

With these assumptions in mind, let me zero in on the issues related to institutional arrangements, autonomy and sustainability of demand-oriented research capacity building programs.

Autonomy from Donors and Institutional Autonomy

The programs in the study are either linked to or administered by academic institutions or bypass established institutional structures, although many of them are hosted by existing research centres (but independent of them).

Regarding donor control, donors in all the programs studied decided on the specific regions or countries to locate the programmes in and the broad field of knowledge or area of activity to be supported. Ironically, for the MMRPs, which advocate full autonomy, the establishment of steering committees composed of researchers and representatives of government and grassroots organizations was an absolute DGIS requirement imposed to ensure their autonomy.

Is it possible or desirable for donors to fully give up prerogatives in terms of general thrusts or organizational requirements in favour of Southern partners? Perhaps not. Research capacity building programs are after all partnerships that negotiate nuances in the interests of donors and partners. In many instances, the initial funding requirements of donors have had positive results. They have sensitised Southern partners, for instance, to unlabelled realities that are not as alien as they seem. Donors have enabled competent and younger Southern partners who would otherwise have not been considered by hierarchy-conscious superiors to assume important positions in programs. Through their conditionalities, donors have also protected programs from the particularistic interests of influential political groups within Southern societies.

Mentioning the more positive outcomes of conditionalities, however, is not to argue that donors should not move in the direction of less arbitrary control even in areas that have constituted their prerogatives in the past. In the spirit of their development philosophies, they would have to strive, despite initial beliefs that they know what is best for the developing society, to take into account their partners' views on the thrusts and mechanisms they are requiring. In this regard, I am reminded of the story of a brilliant Jesuit in a Philippine university, whose national and international reputation precedes him. In private conversations, he would say, the younger Jesuits do not seem to be as good as his generation but he strongly advocated that they should run the Congregation and learn by doing because they are the ones faced with the challenges of contemporary issues. More importantly, they will live with the future they should begin to create.

Having argued for some level of control in the initial phase of program development, our study shows a range of decision areas, which some donors continue to control that can be shared or completely passed on to Southern partners. The areas include choice of researchers in the south and their foreign collaborators as well as substantial, financial and operational management. Interestingly, it is only in the DGIS-supported programmes that the donors are not represented in governing boards, an observation consistent with the thrust of the policy of granting full autonomy to Southern partners in the determination of research directions and fund allocation. In contrast, foreign programme advisers and representatives of the funding agency sit in the boards of other programs. Donors even participate in administrative and executive committees and in some instances in specific management aspects. This has led to conflicts in program implementation.

We have no clear-cut answer to the question of whether donors should let go of traditional areas of control over programs they support because there are genuine cases of mismanagement and abuse of accountability. One MMRP, for instance, experienced mismanagement in the absence of a community of scholars and stakeholders that would have prevented such a possibility in the absence of donor control. However, donor agencies committed to development-oriented research, in collaboration with their Southern partners, would have to define more limited areas of control even as the responsibility of ascertaining the context of the programs and developing appropriate institutional mechanisms would fall more heavily on them. The mechanisms would include systems of governance involving highly respected members of societies concerned (e.g. an accountable Steering Committee). Donors will have to ask themselves and their collaborators whether organizational mechanisms that worked for them elsewhere will work in a particular place, and if not what new or bridging mechanisms ought to be in place?

As to institutional autonomy, there is a trade off between being an independent programme and one that is lodged in a host institution. For all the research programmes studied, the credibility of host institutions has contributed to their acceptance by the wider academic or development community. But the gains may have to be viewed against the imposition of institutional requirements and procedures that encumber iterative and development-oriented research programs.

The Issue of Sustainability

The issue of institutional autonomy is linked to the question of sustainability. From one point of view, programmes based in universities, research centres, government agencies or NGOs have greater promise of sustainability because both the networks of researchers they have produced and the institutions they are part of could be expected to work for the survival and continuation of such programmes. From another perspective, however, programmes that are not bogged down by the baggage of organizational and academic responsibilities have more opportunities to establish a research track record that will ensure their attractiveness to funding agencies.

When the issue of sustainability is raised, however, the question what exactly is being sustained? Is it a programme as an organization? Is it a model of research management the programme operationalizes and the underlying philosophical framework of development and knowledge production? Is it a policy that creates a critical mass of development researchers who can shift gears as they produce knowledge to improve the conditions of the poor because of their autonomy to move resources and researchers, especially on the ground? Is it a research movement or an organization? These are issues of course that confront donors and the research community in a respective country.

We ended our study on a liberal note. Impressed by the output of the different programs along their objectives and by the immensity of development problems in the South, we concluded that the programs have their own niches and that in their own way, they contribute to sustainable development in the areas where they work. The university-based research programs helped build a critical mass of researchers and bolstered their confidence to blaze trails for the unmapped terrain of development research.

Rereading the report for purposes of this Conference, however, I realize that while this is the case, the synergy of donor-initiated programs, conducted with greater understanding of the context in which they are working and how their philosophies of knowledge production and development interact with other demand-oriented programs, would go a longer way in helping push the limits of development in the South.

The task of reviewing programs in their discursive and real contexts is a big challenge confronting donors but they cannot do it alone. In the spirit of demand-oriented research for social development and transformation in the South, their partners should have a much louder voice in defining thrusts and directions. [this presupposes of course that the donors have done their homework in choosing the right people]. But just as important, they will have to debate intensely, clarify directions and if possible, converge on crucial areas with like-minded donors. In the light of failed experiences with some Southern partners, the demand for the sources of donor funds for greater accountability, the competitive world of donor agencies that usually turf without a mapping of other agencies doing similar work, these challenges are daunting. We hope, however, that this forum, no matter how small in the larger scheme of development research, will be a step toward dialogue and synergy among donors and between them and Southern researchers.