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Priority setting in research for development: a donor's perspective

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Dutch development assistance in research has taken the twin shape of technology transfer and research capacity building. In 1992 DGIS established a Research Unit to implement a new policy for utilizing and strengthening local research capacity on the basis of demand-driven research agendas. Some of the resulting Multi-annual Multi-disciplinary Research Programmes (MMRPs) developed into research organizations. Overall, the experience with the MMRPs has been rewarding in terms of utilizing local research capacity by funding local research proposals, and of enhancing the relevance of research by using a demand-oriented approach. In addition, the DGIS Research Unit supports a number of programmes where decision making is shared between Northern (mostly, but not exclusively Dutch) and Southern researchers. There is a broad consensus about the importance of supporting and utilizing local researchers and local research capacity to address local research agendas. Instead of a global research agenda with general priorities, a multitude of research agendas to address specific local priorities are emerging. In particular, the policy aimed to equip Southern researchers to address a Southern research agenda with practical research to address the priorities of the poor.

1 Introduction

In the post-war period research and innovation made a major contribution to economic growth in the industrialized world. This success gave rise to optimistic scenarios in which the apparently powerful tools of science could also be used to alleviate poverty and encourage development in the former colonies. Most of these scenarios were relatively straightforward, if not simplistic, and ultimately proved to be false.

The affluent society in the North was based on the carefully managed relation between mass production and consumption. Henry Ford was one of the first to recognize that he could pay his labourers a decent wage provided that they could be persuaded to use their

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increased purchasing power to buy products (such as the Model T Ford) that could now be produced cheaply, quickly and in large volumes. The success of 'Fordism' was based on a well defined division of labour, not only within the productive system, but also between the system, the government, civil society and science.

The role of science was to keep the engine of Fordism running by feeding it with innovations that would continue to increase productivity or economize on the use of raw materials, thereby contributing directly to profitability. Publicly funded research was to provide the basic capacity and ideas that privately controlled research could tap for innovations, aided if necessary by intermediaries like technological institutes. Within these boundaries, science and knowledge production were assumed to be objective, value-free, universal and curiosity driven. This traditional top-down, a-political, ivory tower image of research still persists as an attractive ideal to many, especially scientists and development policy makers.

The optimism regarding the role of science in development was therefore not surprising. Through the simple transfer of knowledge, technology or innovations from the North, the South could overcome poverty. If, in addition, the South invested in building a knowledge system roughly modelled on the ivory towers of the North, development was bound to be sustainable. Development assistance in research took the twin shape of technology transfer and research capacity building.

The picture sketched so far may seem exaggerated, but it provides an adequate framework for understanding the linearity mechanisms, methodologies, orientations and priorities of and in knowledge production. With the Green Revolution and the agricultural research system represented in the Consultative Group on International Agricultural Research (CGIAR) in mind, the picture becomes more concrete and vivid.

It soon became apparent that the Northern knowledge system was incapable of achieving the ambition of eternal growth. In order to meet the demand for innovation in the post-Fordist era, knowledge systems in the North were reorganized. The ivory towers were torn down, and knowledge became the product of teamwork, tailor made, flexible and multidisciplinary. To use the terms of Gibbons *et al.*, knowledge production shifted from mode 1 to mode 2.[2] It was in the midst of this shift, in the early 1990s, that a debate began in the Netherlands on the features of a new policy to support research for development.[3]

2 Dutch research policy

A crucial aspect of the Dutch policy on development research was that it did not aim for a science policy as such. The interest was primarily in development itself, with research as an instrument for development, or to get an analytical grip on the development process.

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2 Gibbons *et al.* (1994), Nowotny *et al.* (2001).

3 Schweigman and Bosma (1990), Schweigman and van der Werf (1994).

Basic elements

The first element of the research policy emerging at the end of the 1980s was the acknowledgement of the importance of domestic research capacity in developing countries. Various arguments were put forward to substantiate the relevance of fostering such a capacity, not least with a view to ensuring the sustainability of the contribution of research to development.

Until that time most research cooperation had involved the utilization of the research capacity in the North (the donor) rather than in the South. In the new policy, strengthening and utilizing Southern research capacity became more important, with the aim of building up a minimum critical mass of qualified local personnel at home rather than abroad. Research programmes in the South that were to be supported should therefore focus on developing human capacities, expanding the empirical knowledge base, and proposing and validating government policies.

The second element of the policy was that research should be based on the development priorities of local researchers and authorities in developing countries. In short, it should be based on local demand, and not on the interests of donors or Northern researchers. In order to make local priorities effective as research guidelines, efforts should be made to foster better relations between the scientific community, the private and public sectors and the political community.

One of the fundamental questions immediately raised was: whose demands or priorities should be used to guide the content and direction of research? Further, if there is no consensus among the scientific, economic and political communities in a developing country, who is to choose the priorities? The new policy made it clear that in resolving this so-called 'Ganuza dilemma',[4] foreign researchers and policy makers should not use the lack of consensus as an excuse for making such choices themselves. Neither could they disregard the priorities identified by a group in a developing country in favour of those of Northern researchers or funding agencies by referring to global problems such as the environment or new technologies, since developing countries were not involved in setting these research priorities. In addition to these Northern or global threats to local priority setting, it was realized that in most cases existing research capacity in the South inhabited ivory towers at least as high as those of their counterparts in the North. In addition, governments can make poor choices that do not adequately reflect the needs or the wishes of local people, in particular women and ethnic groups.

It was expected that the Ganuza dilemma could be addressed in three steps. First, identify the groups in the developing country whose interests should be served by a specific research programme, on the basis of development criteria. Second, identify local researchers who are closely affiliated with that group. Third, accept priorities that are the result of a conditioned demand orientation in a dialogue with the research and policy-making partners. In short, DGIS support to research activities in developing countries

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[4] This dilemma was first articulated by Enrique Ganuza, a Latin American social scientist, during a conference on development research in Groningen in 1989.

therefore required that the research agenda and priorities should be based on local demand, and that the agenda should be addressed by local researchers.

The MMRPs

In line with the new policy, in 1992 DGIS introduced a new instrument, the Multi-annual, Multidisciplinary Research Programmes (MMRPs). These programmes would support demand-led research focusing on the processes of change, development, transition and transformation in a specific country or region.[5] Established in ten countries, the MMRPs were intended to have the following characteristics:

- they would be designed, implemented and coordinated entirely in the developing countries;
- they would support locally relevant research, with contributions from various disciplines;
- the research agendas would be set in an autonomous internal policy dialogue between researchers and non-researchers (NGOs, grassroots movements, governments), free of external interference, in order to increase the relevance and societal impact of the research and ensure the utilization of the results;
- they would finance a wide range of activities, including networking, PhDs, workshops, training, methodologies, etc.; and
- once under way, they would be free to request support for monitoring, training, etc., from sources other than DGIS.

In each country, the local institution that hosted the programme, and the steering committee made up of representatives of major local stakeholders, enjoyed full decision-making autonomy. For these programmes a conscious attempt was made to create a sanctuary against the asymmetries of the global research world, leaving them free to make their own choices with respect to contacts, cooperation and support. Thus, the policy aimed to promote demand-led rather than supply-driven research. The Netherlands would supply the framework and the resources, while the research agenda would be formulated and implemented by the researchers in the South.

To prevent the programmes being usurped by special interest groups, independent intermediary organizations were identified that could be trusted to bear responsibility for facilitating the process of articulating local demand. Together with the selection of countries, the crucial choice of partners – the host organizations and chairs of the steering committees – were made by DGIS.

Continuity and change

In exchange for the opportunity to experiment with the new research policy and the MMRPs, DGIS also had to continue to service the clients of the old policy. The intention was to use the experiences with the MMRPs to reform those more traditional activities along the lines of the new policy. Thus, in addition to the changes, there would also be continuity.

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[5] Bautista *et al.* (2001).

DGIS continued to support multilateral research efforts through the CGIAR, albeit with a greater emphasis on reorienting them to reflect local research needs and priorities, and to strengthen research capacities in developing countries. DGIS hoped to strengthen inter-university cooperation programmes between the Netherlands and developing countries in line with the new research policy orientation. DGIS also aimed to increase expenditures on research to a target of 5% in its bilateral cooperation programmes.

3 Impressions and experiences

In 1992 DGIS established a Research Unit to implement the new policy. Given the importance attached to the MMRPs as instruments for utilizing and strengthening local research capacity on the basis of demand-led research agendas, the Research Unit devoted considerable time and effort to these programmes. Before addressing some of the lessons learned from these programmes, it is worthwhile sketching a broader view of the place of research in Dutch development cooperation.

In the early years the Research Unit attempted to quantify expenditures on research, not least with a view to assessing whether the 5% target was being reached (note that expenditures on traditional fellowship and scholarship programmes at higher education institutes in the Netherlands were not included).

In 2003 total DGIS expenditures on core research activities amounted to about €44 million per annum, or 1.1% of all expenditures on development cooperation, with a slight decline from 1.2% in 2000 to 1.1% in 2002. Almost 93% of this amount was spent on three categories: research/scientific institutions, agricultural research and forestry research. The annual budget of the Research Unit was €22 million, or one-half of DGIS expenditures on research. Most of the remainder originated from other ministries and directorates, such as the Environment and Water. Despite the target of 5%, bilateral expenditures on research were negligible.[6]

The activities supported by the Research Unit can be characterized in terms of the type of activity and decision-making power. Along the first dimension, a distinction can be made between support to research funding versus support to research activities and/or networks. Along the second, a distinction can be made between Southern versus shared North–South decision making. Support to the CGIAR is regarded as a separate category. Using these two categories, the Research Unit's expenditures in 2003 were as follows:

Research funding	Southern decision making (e.g. the MMRPs)	30%
Research funding	North–South decision making	22%
Research	Southern decision making	7%
Research	North–South decision making	16%
CGIAR		24%

[6] These figures should be treated with caution since they relate to activities whose major or sole activity is research. Research expenditures within the framework of other activities are less visible and more difficult to quantify.

The rest of this section describes the experiences with the various instruments in the context of the DGIS research policy.

The MMRPs

As can be expected, there are no easy or uniform lessons to be learned from the MMRPs (the latter as a metaphor for all research funding activities with Southern decision making that received funds from the Research Unit). As a result of personal, institutional and organizational differences and differing local contexts, the experiences have been mixed. Nevertheless, an attempt can be made to draw lessons in terms of local research capacity, demand orientation and relevance, and resolving the Ganuza dilemma.

Local research capacity

The (Dutch) choice of the ten countries where the MMRPs were to be established was based largely on the assessment of whether there was an existing critical mass of researchers. It was considered to be beyond the means of the Research Unit to start building such a critical mass from scratch. In addition, it would be very difficult for a research-funding programme to function in an environment where the number and the quality of research proposals submitted for funding were likely to be low. In some countries there were serious doubts as to whether such a critical mass of researchers could be found.

Experience has shown that these doubts were justified. In some countries, despite serious efforts, it proved infeasible to establish an MMRP; in others it was decided to go ahead, despite doubts about the quality of the existing research capacity. These latter programmes were successful in organizing training courses for various target groups, but the research output has been very low and the impact remains even lower. The researchers involved and the scientific community at large appreciated the programmes, but they gained little support among civil society, NGOs or the poor since they were unable to deliver. Indeed, it proved to be beyond the means of the MMRPs to create a domestic research capacity.

Even the concept of research capacity building might have to be reconsidered. In several cases, the ‘researchers’ were in fact employed full-time as teachers or lecturers. University curricula and training programmes were insufficient to equip them as researchers. In some cases, professors or lecturers were not allowed to do research during the normal working week, so their work was confined to weekends. In other cases, teachers conducted their research on a consultancy or contract basis, in addition to their normal duties and teaching obligations. The more successful programmes, however, did provide opportunities for young researchers or senior researchers on sabbatical, by offering training in practical matters, such as how to write research proposals and methodological approaches.

In line with the demand orientation, the programmes developed their own ways of managing research, including generating research proposals, assessing proposals, monitoring and evaluation, and involving stakeholders. An interesting spin-off has been that some of the more traditional research institutes have shown interest in the management practices that evolved within the MMRPs.

In funding demand-oriented research activities in countries with an adequate critical mass, some programmes contributed to the process of rooting research capacity in their own society, by organizing workshops and conferences to present and discuss the research findings. The researchers were exposed to other stakeholders who took them seriously as partners, and became part of larger networks, perhaps also including farmers, NGO representatives, extension workers and policy makers. For the first time other stakeholders were able to hold them accountable for their results. In some programmes the concept of researchers was widened to include journalists or NGO activists.

From the perspective of the researchers, the most refreshing difference from normal research funding was the lack of bureaucratic ties and limitations. If available at all, research funding in developing countries is riddled with rules and is often highly politicized.

Demand orientation and relevance

Much of the disappointment in the performance of the research programmes in terms of development or poverty alleviation can be attributed to the absence of links between ongoing research and the local demand for knowledge or innovations. In order to increase the relevance of the research supported by the MMRPs, the DGIS policy had postulated demand orientation as one of the basic requirements for funding.

With hindsight, it is remarkable that in the design of the MMRPs so little attention was paid to identifying and prioritizing research to be supported. Neither DGIS nor the local programme partners made an effort to focus the research activities; the local steering committee was responsible for considering and accepting research proposals. As a result, the research was spread too thinly, both geographically and thematically, and so had little impact. Partly as a result, it is equally remarkable that few stakeholders other than scientists and policy makers were involved in programme design or decision making. It appears that the networks of researchers identified to set up the programmes did not include NGO staff, extensionists or farmers. The programmes' lack of focus prevented the meaningful involvement of other stakeholders. Thus, although DGIS and the local partners succeeded in preventing Northern concerns dominating the research agendas, too few efforts were made to involve other local stakeholders, and to encourage their contributions in order to ensure the relevance of the research. It was insufficiently taken into account that not only Northern, but also Southern researchers inhabit their own ivory towers.

From the results that were published, it can be concluded that those responsible for decision making did their best to support research that was relevant to the poor or powerless. Many studies were carried out that had an impact in terms of empowerment,

development or poverty alleviation. Yet the involvement of other stakeholders would undoubtedly have added to the quality and the robustness of the programmes as a funding mechanism. The limited involvement of stakeholders also meant that the dissemination of the research results was not an integral part of the activities, but had to be organized by the researchers or the programme after the work was completed.

In order to do justice to the multi-faceted problem of poverty, it was assumed that the research would have to be multidisciplinary. Over the years, however, hardly any research supported by the MMRPs was multidisciplinary, let alone transdisciplinary. In some cases, it was only at the programme level that some degree of multidisciplinarity was achieved by combining the findings of various separate research activities. In terms of Gibbons *et al.*, knowledge production in the MMRPs turned out to be mode 1 rather than mode 2.

For many of the programmes, the preparatory phase extended over several years. Most of this time was spent assessing the adequacy of the research capacity and resolving institutional issues. In particular, choosing the right partners was considered to be crucial for success. These issues are discussed in the next section.

The Ganuza dilemma

The question of 'who will formulate whose demand' to be addressed by the MMRPs was crucial for ensuring the relevance of the research and its impact. The DGIS Research Unit, supported by the Netherlands Development Assistance Research Council (RAWOO), made extensive efforts to identify committed individuals and organizations (mostly NGOs) that would be able and willing to set up and implement the programmes. Fact-finding missions were organized and funds were made available for workshops to identify potential partners, to assess research priorities and discuss progress.

The institutional structure was supposed to consist of a steering committee made up of local stakeholders that would be responsible for decision making, an intermediary organization that would host the programme without interfering in the management, and a secretariat, headed by a coordinator who would be responsible for day-to-day management. In practice, the institutional design was defined by the coordinators, most of whom belonged to the network of the Research Unit. Depending on their position and ambition, the coordinators either established a new organization on behalf of the MMRP, or decided that the organization they worked for would host the programme.

Next, the Research Unit, in consultation with the coordinator, was to nominate the chair of the steering committee. Together, the coordinator and the chair were to decide on the orientation of the programme, and to identify the other members of the steering committee. The process of co-option was of course also heavily influenced by the networks of which the coordinator and the chair were members.

The Research Unit did little to encourage the development of effective checks and balances within the MMRPs. Sometimes, programme proposals were accepted before these checks and balances were in place, and little or no effort was made to encourage

their emergence, or to insist upon written rules and regulations, criteria, terms of reference and a memorandum of understanding between the host organization and the steering committee.

The division of responsibilities between the programme elements were largely informal. In later years, the unclear position and role of the host organizations created confusion, not least for the coordinators who were often employed by them, who found their loyalties divided between the organization and the steering committee. In other cases the host organization took over – or at least tried to take over – the role of decision making from the steering committee.

In some cases a programme was registered as an independent organization with research organizations as members, who then assessed and decided on their own research proposals. In addition to the question of credibility of such a funding mechanism, this practice discouraged non-members from even trying to submit proposals for funding. Some MMRPs developed into research organizations rather than serve as a research funding mechanism, using project funds to carry out their own research rather than to support research activities or strengthen local research capacities.

The most intensive contacts between the MMRPs and the Research Unit were through the coordinators, at the annual coordinators' meetings. Thus, even though the steering committee was responsible for the programme, the members were not always involved in decision making and were informed only afterwards.

All of these factors have contributed to a very mixed picture with respect to the institutional design and the strengths of the MMRPs. What they share as institutions, however, is the vulnerability of decision making within the programmes and the extreme dependency on one or two individuals. From the perspective of the sustainability of the programmes, or of the use of research for development, this situation is one that must be avoided in the future.

Overall, the experience with and within the MMRPs has been extremely rewarding in terms of utilizing local research capacity by funding their research proposals, and of enhancing the relevance of research by using a demand-oriented approach. Southern researchers have used the opportunity provided by the programmes to show that they are capable of doing excellent as well as relevant research. The MMRPs have helped to build the self-confidence of the researchers involved, and have thus contributed to more equitable relations with their colleagues, either in reputable institutes in the South, or in international research institutes in the North. Local researchers have shown that they are capable of producing innovations, of contributing to the empowerment of the poor and of improving policies. In providing such opportunities, the MMRPs have contributed to the process of rooting research capacity in their local environment and establishing networks of stakeholders.

So far, these lessons have not been (sufficiently) translated into local attempts to influence research funding mechanisms, research policies or research funding. On a practical level, it is remarkable that none of the Poverty Reduction Strategy Papers refers to research as an effective instrument for reducing poverty. Of course, this is not the sole responsibility of the programmes, but at least it could have been expected that they would be able to make a successful case for the inclusion of research. In these respects the programmes are still modest and too inward looking.

4 North–South cooperation programmes

In addition to the MMRPs, the DGIS Research Unit supports a number of research funding programmes where decision making is shared between Northern (mostly, but not exclusively Dutch) and Southern researchers. Examples include the South Africa–Netherlands Research Programme on Alternatives in Development (SANPAD), the Indo-Dutch Programme on Alternatives in Development (IDPAD), the Netherlands Foundation for the Advancement of Tropical Research (WOTRO), and the International Foundation for Science (IFS). More than 20% of the Research Unit's budget is devoted to such activities.

In the early years, the attention of the Research Unit was focused on gaining experience with the MMRPs in ways to strengthen research capacity in the South and to increase the relevance of research. The lessons learned from these experiences were also used to try to influence decision making in these programmes in the same directions.

It is even more difficult than with the MMRPs to draw conclusions about the success of these programmes. They are smaller in number, whereas their contributions on average have been greater. There are wide differences between them in terms of their geographical scope and thematic coverage. Some programmes have been established only recently, whereas others have a longer track record. In some cases the Research Unit is the sole donor; in others it is only one among many others.

Overall, however, the impression is that the experiences of these programmes in increasing the relevance of research and strengthening the local research capacity are not markedly different from those in the MMRPs. Perhaps at one stage the DGIS Research Unit may have been ahead of its time in terms of its research policy and main funding instrument, but over the last decade the donor community at large as well as the scientific community have been rethinking the concepts and basic principles of research, research cooperation and research funding.[7]

It is now widely accepted that increasing the local relevance of research is essential. The applicability of research (in production or policy), demand orientation, and stakeholder involvement in identifying priorities have become part and parcel of the vocabulary of all

[7] IAC (2004a,b).

research donors, funding mechanisms and research institutes. In the same vein, there is a broad consensus about the importance of supporting and utilizing local researchers and local research capacity to address local research agendas. To a certain extent, a new division of labour between Northern and Southern research capacity is emerging. The major task of Northern capacity is to build and strengthen Southern research capacity (in addition of course to the production of knowledge to address their own challenges), whereas the Southern capacity is to produce knowledge that meets local needs and demands.

In this division of labour, a new dilemma is emerging. As a result of the emphasis on demand orientation and relevance in both the North and the South, research agendas are becoming increasingly localized. Instead of a global research agenda with general priorities, a multitude of research agendas to address specific local priorities are emerging. As a consequence, Northern expertise or technology transfer has almost by definition become irrelevant in terms of problem solving for the South. In addition, it is questionable whether, from a Southern perspective, capacity building in and by the North is meaningful. Southern capacity building might serve the purpose much better.

5 The CGIAR

The Research Unit's support to the CGIAR has a long history, as do the discussions on the necessity for and the pace of change within the Group and its Future Harvest centres. The Unit's experiences with the CGIAR have little to add to the foregoing discussion, except for the notable resistance to change with respect to the successes of the Green Revolution. For a long time, increasing productivity seemed to be the system's only possible answer to every problem.

A complicating factor in the case of the CGIAR is the rigidities that result from the institutional setup of its crop-oriented research centres with a global mandate. Increasingly these rigidities have proved to be a serious hindrance to the CGIAR in realizing its mandate, which is to increase food security and alleviate poverty.

Since the mid-1990s, however, the CGIAR has started to experiment with better integrated, more demand-led approaches in the form of the eco-regional programmes, system-wide approaches and, more recently, the Challenge Programmes. It is still too early to draw any conclusions about the functioning of the Challenge Programmes as funding mechanisms since they were launched only in 2003. The Centres are increasingly realizing that changes are necessary. For example, some five years ago, the suggestion by a few donors that there should be closer cooperation between the International Rice Research Center (IRRI) and the International Maize and Wheat Improvement Center (CIMMYT) caused an outrage. Yet at the CGIAR Annual General Meeting in 2003 it was announced that the two institutes had started open-ended discussions that might result in anything between close cooperation and a full
merger.

6 Conclusions

At the 2004 World Social Forum held in Mumbai, India, some of the participants made it clear that there still is a wide gap between academics and activists on the one hand, and oppressed citizens and the poor on the other. It might be added that an equally wide gap could probably be discovered between academics and activists.

The ambition of the DGIS research policy was to close the gap between research and development, or at least to prevent the gap from widening. In particular, the policy aimed to equip Southern researchers to address a Southern research agenda with practical research to address the needs and priorities of the poor. Well functioning networks consisting of (representatives of) all the major stakeholders are a necessary condition for realizing this ambition.

Among the various activities supported by the Research Unit, there are many examples of successful linkages that have resulted in increased productivity, empowerment of women and ethnic minorities, employment, food security or improved policies. Thus an approach founded on the basic elements 'Southern capacity' and 'demand-led' research is capable of closing the gap. The evidence, however, is too haphazard to be convincing at an aggregate level. The MMRPs have been successful within the limits of their programmes, but were too inward looking. They have had little effect on the research policies or research funding principles in their respective countries. Neither they nor the Research Unit have been capable of putting research high on the policy agenda or to position demand-led research as an effective instrument for development or poverty alleviation.

One of the reasons seems to be that both the MMRPs and the Research Unit supposed that successful research activities would be sufficiently persuasive in and of themselves to influence research policy making. Rather than relying on automatic trickle down (or up) effects, the programmes and the Unit should have been more actively involved in policy making on research and networking.

Another reason seems to be related to the basic assumption that Northern dominance of research cooperation was the major cause of biases in the research agendas and the lack of relevance of research in the South. Once this dominance was removed and full autonomy was put in Southern hands, it was assumed that all problems would be solved. This proved to be a misconception. Research capacity in the South also resides in ivory towers and is not well rooted in the local context. It will require extensive efforts and shrewd strategies to persuade scientists to come down from their ivory towers and to become partners in networks and coalitions that respect and appreciate the contributions of other stakeholders in knowledge production.

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