

## **“People come and go but we don’t see anything”: How Might Social Research Contribute to Social Change?**

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*In different fields of study, scholars interested in making a positive difference in the lives of their research communities insist on engaging policy makers and activists in their work. Paulo Freire, one of the most widely known public intellectuals, asserts that praxis enables critical thought, awareness and collaborative action for emancipation for oppressed groups. Within this framework, our contribution aims to provoke thinking on the need for accountability to research subjects in development research through an emphasis on producing policy-focused and change-driven, as opposed to purely theoretically oriented, knowledge. The overarching argument is that research should, in fact, be conscious and proactive about its contribution to positive social change. Drawing on primary data gathered through field research in Ghana between 2010 and 2016, the paper highlights respondent fatigue/distrust, cross-cultural translation, and the peculiarities of the diasporic researcher as some of the methodological challenges faced in the attempt to align one’s research towards the pursuit of positive social change. Some modest suggestions are provided regarding how to enhance the impact of research for social transformation. Keywords: Social Research, Empowerment, Praxis-Oriented Research, Social Change, Communities, People’s Lives*

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### **Introduction**

Theory is always *for* someone and *for* some purpose [...] There is, accordingly, no such thing as theory in itself, divorced from a standpoint in time and space. (Cox, 1981, p. 128)

The theory-practice divide is present in many social science fields (see Cox, 1981; Hill & Beshoff, 1994; Kurki, 2006; Smith, 2002). For instance, many highly ranked journals place an emphasis on theory—some even expecting to see evidence of a “new” theory before accepting a paper for publication. In development studies, such discussions previously centred on the divide between indigenous and scientific knowledge, particularly around who speaks for the poor and what knowledge is deemed legitimate (see Agrawal, 1995; Briggs, 2005, 2013; Chambers, 2013; Watts, 1993). Although development studies is currently informed by the rich experience of many practitioners, the discussion of whether it should be focused on theory or practice and the practical relevance of development research has happened before (Black, 1991; Narman, 1997; Schuurman, 1994).

These disciplinary divisions are obviously arbitrary, but the debate still remains in many fields over the real essence of research – whether for theory development, policy-relevant outcomes, emancipation or a mix of these elements. Even though critical theory is often