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Capacity Building for Demand-led Research: Issues and Priorities

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In the context of the failure of past development efforts, and the knowledge asymmetry between North and South, this brief examines the concept of demand-led research. Southern nations require support from the North to build capacity, but they face an uphill task in realizing the capabilities necessary to identify and rectify what Amartya Sen calls 'patent injustices'. For example, poverty, gender, inequality and other such deprivations.¹ Demand-led research can generate knowledge that will empower individuals and enable them to acquire the capabilities necessary to make informed choices of their own, without intellectual inputs from the North. Nevertheless, to create the basic minimum conditions upon which these capabilities can be built, North-South collaboration is critical. Governments and policymakers in both the North and the South, as well as institutions of higher learning and research, have important roles to play in the process of generating knowledge, and in building the capacities and congenial atmosphere for demand-led research for sustainable development in the South.

Introduction

At the international seminar 'Demanding Innovation', held in Maastricht, the Netherlands, in October 2001², the participants concluded that conventional research is inadequate to bring about sustainable development in the South due to the prevalence of Northern paradigms and the neglect of development issues and needs in the South. Thus the use of knowledge as power becomes significant. Presently there is an asymmetry in this use in favour of the North.

This brief discusses the potential of demand-led research as a means of reversing the asymmetry in North-South research, and examines some innovative research partnerships. It recommends a number of steps that governments and policymakers, as well as researchers and research institutions could take to assist the process of capacity building and enhancing the capabilities for demand-led research for sustainable development.

Development Experiences and Experiments

Many countries in the South have witnessed economic growth over the years, but the disparities between North and South have widened, and the number of people living in poverty has increased. It is now accepted that most development policies over the past 50 years were culturally inappropriate, qualitatively unacceptable, or unsustainable.

In their efforts to eliminate poverty, international institutions are now promoting employment opportunities; empowering the poor; removing discrimination on the grounds of gender, ethnicity and social status; and enhancing security for the poor. Underlying these strategies is the assumption that participatory development at the micro level can redress some of the effects of past efforts, and contribute to alleviating poverty. However, if micro level participatory development is to be sustainable, it is essential to think globally as well as locally.

Even when communities and regions advance economically, individuals may still be deprived if public action is not guided by a philosophy that promotes justice for all and equal access to the benefits of economic growth. According to Amartya Sen, the quality of life should be assessed in terms of individual 'capability' to do or potential to achieve something - more technically, to achieve a certain 'functioning'. At least in basic capabilities, people should be made equal. To identify and rectify 'patent injustices' (for example, poverty, gender inequality and other such deprivations), open discussion of issues and feasible solutions and a transparent decision-making process are crucial. This public identification and decision-making process is dependent on the basic capabilities of individuals. Democracy, basic civil rights and political freedom are indispensable for such a public debate. Participation in political decisions and social choice should therefore be seen not as the means but as the ends of development.

Globalization and Decentralization

Globalization has led to unprecedented linkages among cultures, locations and individuals. The revolution in information and communication technologies has accelerated this process, and offers tremendous potential for development. For those who are denied the right to voice their demands domestically, such as many indigenous peoples, international networks enable them to articulate their needs and to ensure that they are heard by the appropriate agencies. At the other end of the spectrum, decentralization can be seen as a means to bring about people-centred development by encouraging local participation in policy making and implementation. Global and local knowledge can complement and reinforce each other. To be able to utilize the knowledge that is available globally, countries in the South must be able to translate it into a form that is socially relevant and culturally acceptable, and adapt it to local circumstances. However, the lack of local expertise will hamper their ability to develop regulatory frameworks to manage the impacts of globalization, to monitor the diffusion of new technologies, and to protect the rights of individuals. Thus science and technology capabilities must be enhanced at the local level.

Decentralization has also highlighted the need to strengthen the capacity for research to address local problems. While networking and information exchange can help to identify solutions, the scope for replicating them elsewhere is limited. A decentralized research capacity therefore needs to be created at the local level, focusing on grassroots development and institution building, and encouraging local people to participate in knowledge generation. Since most countries in the South are poorly equipped to meet this challenge, institutions in the South and the North will need to work together to build the South's capacity to assess and adapt knowledge to local situations, as well as to create new knowledge that may be applied elsewhere. North-South research partnerships can play a vital role in this undertaking.

North-South Partnerships: Rectifying the Asymmetry

Many North-South research partnerships are dominated by the Northern partners, who often set the research agenda, and apply analytical and methodological parameters based on Northern experience rather than taking into account the conditions in the South. Too much emphasis is placed on scientific relevance and too little on development relevance. So far, these partnerships have been largely ineffective in increasing capacity in the South.

Recognizing the asymmetry in such partnerships, and the consequences for science and technology in the South, in the early 1990s the Netherlands Directorate General for Development Cooperation (DGIS) established the Multi-Annual Multidisciplinary Research Programmes (MMRPs)³.

At present there are nine MMRPs - four in Africa, three in Asia, and two in Latin America. Unlike many other forms of North-South research collaboration, the MMRPs were set up to carry out multidisciplinary, location-specific and demand-led research. DGIS provides long-term support, but the Southern partners are autonomous in terms of programme management, setting the research agenda and implementing the research. Each MMRP addresses problems from the perspectives of many stakeholders, whose interests may conflict. All research is socially relevant, focusing on contributing to three goals - poverty alleviation, environmental protection and improved gender relations - within the overall framework of sustainable development. These goals represent significant rights across cultures, and their denial can be regarded as leading to 'patent injustice'. The MMRPs are demand-led by design; the donor is merely a facilitator.

Some programmes have chosen to address similar issues, and if the results could be pooled and analyzed, they may yield insights that could be applied elsewhere. Unfortunately, networking among the MMRPs has been limited. They have not been equally successful in carrying out multidisciplinary research, or in establishing linkages between stakeholders, policymakers and the research community. Although they are free to choose the means of knowledge generation, not all programmes have developed innovative interactive methodologies. Nevertheless, in their brief period of existence the MMRPs have contributed to the creation of a culture of demand-led research, demonstrating that researchers in the South can build their own capabilities without intellectual inputs from the North.

Knowledge Generation through Demand-led Research

Demand-led research refers to activities in which people are able to bring about their own development, with the objective of building up research systems to unleash the potential of the South. The move to market-oriented economic systems and to more liberal forms of governance has been accompanied by a shift from donor-initiated to local ownership of development policies, with better accountability and transparency. To generate the knowledge needed to inform such policies, greater investment is needed in building capacity and capabilities. Science and technology will only have long-term impacts if research is socially relevant and locally acceptable. Can existing science and technology policies accommodate such wide-ranging societal functions?

Michael Gibbons⁴ has suggested that there are two modes of knowledge production. In the conventional mode, it is assumed that basic knowledge trickles down to be used in technological and social innovation. The validity of such linear 'science push' models is questionable, particularly in the South, where technology has widened the gap between rich and poor, and in many cases has accelerated the

degradation of the resource base, threatening sustainable development. Some Southern researchers have become activists, while others feel that only methodologies developed by Southern scholars can address development problems, and that other arrangements can, at best, deal with the symptoms, but not the causes of poverty. Alternative means of knowledge generation are needed to meet development needs, in which demand influences supply, and social accountability is more important than academic accountability.

In the second mode of knowledge production,

- basic and applied research addresses social needs, and identifies solutions in the context of their application;
- research is trans-disciplinary, integrating knowledge and skills from different disciplines and other sources;
- the producers of knowledge work together with potential end users; and
- quality assessment is based not only on scientific peer review but also societal criteria.

Here, the emphasis is on the interactions between the producers and users of knowledge, and the ways in which knowledge is absorbed, communicated and applied. Research is more likely to be relevant and useful if end users are involved in needs assessment, priority setting and implementation. There are a number of problems, however. Can researchers deal with the demands of social accountability? If a number of stakeholders are involved in the research process, who should decide what to do, when, and whether they are doing the right thing? How can the contributions of non-professionals be acknowledged? In some parts of the world alternative science movements are working to address these issues, recognizing the value of science for empowering people. They have demonstrated that ordinary people can understand and work with science provided it is communicated in a language they can understand. New channels of communication are therefore needed to bridge the gap between formal science and traditional knowledge, and dialogue to address how local knowledge can be codified and what safeguards are needed to protect their intellectual property rights.

The two modes of knowledge generation are complementary parts of a research system, each of which can learn from the other. However, the value of the second mode has not received due recognition, even though it could make significant contributions to demand-led research. Attempts should be made to promote it, and to ensure that it becomes part of the mainstream of science.

Demand-led Research and Capacity Building

One of the assumptions underlying demand-led research is that if stakeholders are involved in setting the research agenda, they will reflect the society's need for knowledge. This may not necessarily be the case, however, since the

'needs' of the deprived and marginalized may not be articulated if only those in positions of power are able to express demand. Sectarian groups may influence public opinion, demands may change over time, and new interest groups may emerge. Therefore, researchers are needed who possess a judicious, discretionary capacity to understand and interpret what is demanded - whether the demand tries to rectify or accentuate injustices - and who can maintain their objectivity while acting as agents of change in the process of development.

A variety of social institutions - governments, political parties, NGOs, the judiciary, the media - contribute to development. Research, if demand-led, can not only aid these institutions, but also generate public discussion on what constitutes injustice in society. Stakeholder participation where all participants are on an equal footing not only facilitates a needs-based development agenda, but also ensures that the knowledge generated is relevant and accessible. This is not just an alternative means of development, but is development itself, since knowledge and empowerment go hand in hand. A process like this calls for a new culture of research.

'Capacity building' for this new culture of research and knowledge-in-development can be seen as the process of putting in place the conditions and infrastructures that are necessary prior to 'capability building'. Therefore, efforts to build the capacity for demand-led research should focus on the conduct and management of research, and on developing the ability to appraise ongoing research and translate the results for local use. Networking is central, among institutions at local, national and international levels, across disciplines, and between activists, academics and policymakers. Such networks may focus on

- strengthening the infrastructure and/or technical know-how;
- updating existing knowledge and encouraging discussion of the process of knowledge generation;
- linking up with the policy process to ensure that research recommendations are implemented; and
- developing trans-disciplinary linkages to allow for the cross-fertilization of ideas, and to exchange knowledge.

In the context of demand-led research, capability also means the ability to define national priorities, and to organize policy-relevant applied and strategic research. However, the development policies conceived in the South are often not conducive to this, and the capabilities that are available are often underutilized. This may be due the lack of investment, the outflow of experienced researchers from the public to the private sector or overseas, conflicts between researchers and repressive governments, or foreign experts dominating domestic policy, etc. If developing countries are to bridge the knowledge gap and protect their interests in the emerging global context, they will have to increase their own public

investment in research. The North can only play a role by reversing the decline in financial assistance, and North-South research partnerships can only help in developing the capacity for demand-led research to enable the South to formulate its own policies and strategies for development.

Conclusions and Recommendations

In view of the failure of development efforts in recent decades, and the clear asymmetry in the process of knowledge production, the concept of demand-led research has many dimensions. In view of the knowledge gap between North and South, and the poor material conditions in the latter, support from the North is needed to build up the necessary capacity. Even with such support, however, countries in the South face an uphill task.

Demand-led research could help to generate that empowering knowledge that will enable individuals to acquire the capabilities necessary to make their own informed choices. This can only come about if concerted efforts are made to ensure it becomes part of the mainstream. In particular,

- Governments in the South could promote demand-led research in order to create the conditions necessary for the development of capabilities, by increasing the proportion of their GDP allocated to socially responsive science and technology in general, and to demand-led research in particular.
- Governments in the North and international institutions could express their commitment to support demand-led research by increasing the allocation of financial resources on a long-term basis. By supporting innovative programmes like the MMRPs they could help build the capacity for demand-led research in the South, and to create an atmosphere that is conducive for mainstreaming demand-led research in the North.

- Programmes like the MMRPs should establish a network through which like-minded researchers can consolidate their experiences, disseminate their work and create a constituency to mobilize public opinion and policy support for demand-led research in institutions of higher learning and research.
- Institutions of higher learning and research should encourage demand-led research by extending appropriate recognition to practitioners, providing infrastructural support, organizing training programmes to help build a community of demand-led researchers, and assisting in the creation of databases bringing together the results of such research.

Ultimately, the implementation of these recommendations will depend on the commitment and determination in both the North and the South to mainstream demand-led research. Even though the processes of implementation may vary according to national circumstances, the goal is to ensure that demand-led research becomes part of the effort to utilize science and technology for sustainable development.

Notes

- ¹ Bautista *et al.* (2001) *Comparative Study of the Impacts of Donor-initiated Programmes on Research Capacity in the South* (The Hague: DGIS, Ministry of Foreign Affairs).
- ² The seminar 'Demanding Innovation: Articulating Policies for Demand-led Research and Research Capacity Building', was jointly organized by DGIS, ECDPM and the European Commission. The proceedings of the seminar are available at: www.demanding-innovation.org
- ³ Gibbons, M. *et al.* (1994) *The New Production of Knowledge: The Dynamics of Science and Research in Contemporary Societies* (London: Sage).

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