

## Reinventing development research

# Knowledge on the move

The focus of development research on local and national processes has been rendered obsolete by new global power relations. Researchers must be more concerned about relevance than academic excellence. Open knowledge networks are needed to allow access to knowledge. These are among the ideas discussed at the Knowledge on the Move conference.

By **Mariëtte Heres** and **Frans Bieckmann**

The goal of the Knowledge on the Move conference was ambitious – to reshape a complex research area that is dominated by outdated thinking. This goal was similar to that of the 46 roundtables organized by the Institute of Development Studies (IDS) in 2006 (see box on page 17).

The various speakers emphasized how international relations have changed in recent decades. The world is now wealthier, but the gap between rich and poor is wider. There is no longer a clear dividing line between the rich North and the poor South, as inequalities and mechanisms of exclusion are now adopting new forms. There is growing awareness among researchers that security and geopolitical factors are inextricably linked, and that new ways are needed to incorporate them into development theory, policy and practice.

‘Acknowledging that development problems are not limited to the South can help us realize that solutions are not limited to the North’, said Henk Molenaar, director of WOTRO. ‘Yet, by and large, the world of development cooperation does not seem eager to embrace this wider, global dimension’. Cross-border processes play an increasingly important role in development research, while the differences between people within individual countries are growing. Focusing research on such local conditions is no longer sufficient; yet studying worldwide trends makes no sense without considering specific local causes and effects.

Knowledge is essential to the development process. Knowledge

The international conference ‘Knowledge on the Move’, held at the Institute of Social Studies (ISS), The Hague, at the end of February, was organized by NWO/WOTRO Science for Global Development, the Netherlands Organization for International Cooperation in Higher Education (Nuffic) and ISS. The 150 participants included development researchers, policy makers and NGO representatives from Europe, Africa, Asia and Latin America.

and innovation determine the economic and social development of a country and its people to a greater extent than do labour, natural resources or even financial wealth. In a keynote presentation at the conference, Luc Soete, director of UNU-MERIT, Maastricht, noted that the multinational business sector is shifting its attention from research and development to innovation. The focus is no longer so much on discovering new technological principles, but on how to make better use of the existing stock of knowledge. ‘Knowledge sharing’, said Soete, ‘shifts attention away from the purely technological aspects of research to a broader spectrum. This shift actually implies a much more complex structure of knowledge production activities’. For developing countries, the old model of research involved adopting existing technologies. Now, however, every innovation is unique. The new model therefore requires expertise in the reuse of knowledge.

This shift is creating a new sort of inequality between those with knowledge capacity and access to the stock of knowledge and those without. A new worldwide knowledge infrastructure is required to address this inequality and to foster new programmes and behaviours better suited to current conditions. This brings with it new obstacles and dilemmas.

## Global or local?

What direction should development research take? The research agenda focuses increasingly on global issues. Both Molenaar and Bert Koenders, the Netherlands’ Minister for Development Cooperation, indicated that this global trend goes against current development policy. While the research agenda is internationalizing and its focus is becoming less country-specific, the emphasis in development cooperation is on ownership and context-related policy. ‘The field of research for development finds itself caught in the middle’, according to Molenaar, ‘and the same holds true for individual researchers, for donors and policy makers, and for practitioners. Research for development is being tossed this way and that, without knowing where to look or where to go’.

The South focuses on the global research agenda because the South is where most money is invested. However, the agenda is still grounded in Northern paradigms at the expense of research questions that are relevant to developing countries. There is too



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In 2006, the Institute of Development Studies (IDS) in Brighton, UK, organized a series of 46 roundtables around the world on the theme 'reinventing development research'. Many of the roundtable sessions took place in sub-Saharan Africa, Latin America and Asia. This 'world tour' culminated in a conference to mark the institute's 40th anniversary.

In his conference presentation, Shalmali Guttal of Focus on the Global South, an NGO based in Thailand, commented that development research is in need of a complete overhaul. She aimed her criticisms at the 'small development world', which she believes is incapable of finding solutions to the major crises of our time. Guttal argued that development researchers should make more of an effort to utilize alternative forms of knowledge.

There are several similarities between the IDS conference and Knowledge on the Move. Many of those who took part in the IDS roundtables observed, for example, that the richer countries have for a long time determined the research agenda in both the North and the South. There has long been a focus on producing new

research results, and the existing stock of knowledge is ignored.

In the special edition of the *IDS Bulletin*, Adebayo Olukoshi of the Council for the Development of Social Science Research in Africa (CODESRIA), noted that Western researchers present their knowledge as universally valuable, even though it ignores complex realities and nuances. He called on them to recognize the value of knowledge from different local contexts and sources, which could then be adapted to the various needs of countries and communities. Only then, he concluded, can development research have any meaning for social transformation.

The analyses that emerged during the roundtables and at the conference, and reported in the *IDS Bulletin*, addressed many of the same dilemmas that surfaced at the Knowledge on the Move conference. There is clearly global support for setting a new course for development research.

*Reinventing Development Research, IDS 40th anniversary:*  
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little research that is genuinely embedded in the local context, too little room for developing countries to follow their own research agendas, and no opportunity for translating local efforts into more general perspectives.

Within research for development, therefore, there is a need for local, demand-driven and context-specific research. And as a consequence of globalization, there is a whole array of unanswered questions. However, Willem van Genugten, chair of the WOTRO, did not see this as problematic. 'I see no conflict between local and global research questions', he said. 'You have to listen to the needs and problems of the South. Through dialogue, these questions come forward from a local context. You can then extend them to a global context. Through dialogue between researchers from the North and South, you refine a detailed research question and method. That generates research that is usable in the local context, but from which you can also learn more general lessons. This kind of research is the focus of WOTRO'.

Should the North focus on global research questions and the South on local development issues? Berit Olsson of the Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency (Sida) thinks not, asking, 'Shouldn't the South learn to understand the world?' Hoda Rashad of the American University in Cairo would rather abandon the North-South paradigm: 'The search for wisdom from developed countries, which is often translated into theoretical solutions not grounded in cultural and social realities, has shifted to South-South collaboration'. Nira Wickramasinghe of the University of Colombo, Sri Lanka, went further, claiming that the whole world could benefit a great deal from theories from the South, and asked, 'Why shouldn't we use a theory about ethnicity and conflict from Sri



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### The Southern perspective

By Jos van Beurden

Participants from the South requested several times that the conference not treat the South as a single entity. China, India, South Africa and Brazil are major players in development-related research. Researchers in South Africa intend 'to go global and to do more innovative research, for themselves and for other countries', according to Anshu Padayachee, director of the South Africa-Netherlands Research Programme on Alternatives in Development (SANPAD). Research institutions in South Africa, in fact, own more and more of their own research agenda. In India, the level of development-related research is reasonably good. The Indians practiced 'autonomy in research long before the concept of demand-driven research came up among donors', said Narayan Nair, director of the Centre for Development Studies, Kerala, India. In many other Southern countries, research capacity remains underdeveloped. Mamadou Diallo Iam, senior technical advisor at the Ministry of Communication and ICTs in Mali, said that Mali 'was not ready' in the 1990s to work along the principle of demand-driven research and still has great difficulty doing so. In Sri Lanka, the number of knowledge producers has increased, but 'the production of academic works with a plausible shelf life is meagre', according to Hoda Rashad.

### Successes

Several participants highlighted a number of Southern successes – in the organization and financing of research, in broadening the focus of research, and in involving target groups in the research. In India, the government of the state of Kerala decided to take over the funding of a community-oriented research organization previously funded by the Dutch because of the poor quality of its output. In Egypt, Hoda Rashad said, 'researchers are challenged to propose solutions for poverty alleviation. They study the experiences in Chile, Mexico, Brazil and Ecuador'. In West Africa, Kwame Bofo-Arthur of the University of Ghana commented that 'the insights brought about by research on peace, security and governance have helped a lot in understanding the numerous conflict situations in the region. But the research agenda still has to be extended to include emerging issues such as the trafficking of children, drugs and small arms'.

### What is a 'researcher'?

Several Southern participants stressed the need to redefine the term 'researcher'. Meghna Guhathakurta, director of Research Initiatives Bangladesh, said that Bangladesh has seen the introduction of *ghonoghobeshona*, which means research 'with an active role for members of oppressed minorities and villagers'. Based on this research, and subsequent actions, have brought economic change and dignity to many communities.

Lankan scientists?’ (For more on the Southern perspective, see box on page 18.)

Another problem is that important knowledge often never leaves the South. Paschal Mihyo of ISS was amazed at the worldwide shock earlier this year when violence erupted in Kenya, pointing out that Kenyans have been dying for a long time, yet this information is rarely reported in the global media.

### Access to knowledge

The issue of access to knowledge was also discussed. According to Luc Soete, ‘In many research areas, European welfare will be less influenced in the long term by the development of local knowledge, its international commercial exploitation and intellectual appropriation, than it will by global access to such knowledge, the development of joint global standards and the rapid diffusion of such new technologies to other, non-EU countries’. To ensure that Southern researchers have access to knowledge, more open knowledge networks need to be built.

For many poor countries, intellectual property rights (IPRs) pose a major obstacle that prevents them accessing the knowledge they need. Orlando du Ponti of Nunhems, a Dutch company specializing in vegetable seeds and sharing products, called this the ‘access paradox’. ‘Knowledge is increasingly locked away behind patents’, he said. ‘Mostly, it is only available to multinationals, but universities too are increasingly using patents to protect their knowledge’.

### Relevance

Another challenge is that Western research is too concerned with excellence and not enough with applicability. The point was made repeatedly that social relevance should be more important than academic prestige. Much more applied research is needed, although this should not happen at the expense of basic research.

Furthermore, the focus on publication in prominent journals must be reduced. If knowledge is locked away in expensive journals, few can access or make use of it. One way of doing this, according to Sybolt Noorda, president of the Association of Universities in the Netherlands (VSNU), is to broaden academic ranking criteria. ‘Mainstream academics mostly want to publish in the most renowned journals’, said Noorda. ‘Research is about reputation, ranking and excellence. We need additional rankings in which the relevance of the research also counts’. Research could, for example, be ranked on whether it is used by the poor or by development organizations.

### Local capacity

Berit Olsson of Sida noted that the research capacity in poor countries must be strengthened so that those countries do not have to limit themselves only to currently available knowledge. ‘Research capacity will allow poor countries to conduct their own local analyses and to draw up their own relevant research agenda. It will also provide room for evidence-based critical thinking in higher education’. Bert Koenders agreed that each country needs its own ‘knowledge base’, which should include both scientists and students, but donors alone cannot provide that base. Olsson called for a long-term commitment by North and South to work together, and for greater transparency regarding funding and other possibilities for Southern researchers.

### Solutions

Many changes are necessary to ensure that knowledge moves in the right direction. Sybolt Noorda of the Universiteit van Amsterdam called on NGOs and other organizations to pressure universities to collaborate more on development issues. Just as governments and companies try to influence the academic world in ways that suit their own best interests, so development researchers should be more assertive in pushing theirs. A new system in the North should focus on development-related research, and emphasize the links between local and global issues. The research should be conducted in global networks with Southerners who can contribute to specific local contexts. These knowledge networks should be open, so that access to knowledge is not dependent on wealth or power.

In Europe, for example, the framework programmes are the EU’s main instruments for funding international research projects, but they are exclusive. Luc Soete explained that the programmes date from a time when ‘the international competitiveness of particular European high-tech firms and sectors was considered essential for Europe’s long-term welfare’. Firms of foreign origin are benefiting from EU-sponsored programmes as long as they are located in Europe. The programmes are still intended to strengthen Europe’s competitive position. According to Soete, the exclusive nature of the framework programmes must be opened up.

Several speakers proposed greater use of ‘twinning’ as a more sustainable and balanced form of partnership. Luc Soete emphasized the need to integrate research for development into the research curricula in the North. Soete himself is exploring the possibilities of working with comparable institutes in the South, aimed at eventual twinning. Twinning involves much more than just collaborating on programmes. It can lead to formal exchanges of staff and students, and to joint decision making.

Old ways of thinking are still deeply embedded in academic and political bastions. Development is still looked at largely through bilateral spectacles, and traditional projects and partnership programmes are still the norm. The donor relationship is by nature bilateral, and national thinking is still predominant. In many of the workshops during the conference, the main topics of discussion were how to shape a partnership, who should be in charge, and how to use local knowledge and increase the relevance of research for the poor in the South. But a much clearer link must emerge between those local levels and global processes or global public goods.

Knowledge on the Move posed a clear challenge, which Louk Box summarized at the end of the day: ‘A new kind of knowledge system must be built, one that transcends the limitations of local and universal research and allows us to achieve a synthesis’. ■

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- The presentations at the Knowledge on the Move conference can be found at: [www.knowledgeonthemove.nl](http://www.knowledgeonthemove.nl)
  - L. Haddad and C. Knowles (eds) (2007) Reinventing development research, *IDS Bulletin*, 38(2).
  - L. Turquet (2006) *Institute of Development Studies: 40 Years 1966-2006*. IDS.