

Knowledge on the Move

Emerging Agendas for
Development-oriented Research

Editors

Henk Molenaar

Louk Box

Rutger Engelhard



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Contents

Preface	
Are we ready for radical changes?	vii
Louk Box	
Acknowledgements	xiii
The editors	xv
Acronyms and abbreviations	xvii
1 Introduction and synthesis:	
Towards a new understanding of research for development	1
Henk Molenaar	
Research partnerships, practices and capacity development	31
2 Research arenas:	
International research partnerships on the move	33
Luc Soete	
3 Research practices:	
A question of values	49
Hoda Rashad	
4 Research capacities:	
Investing in research capacity	59
Berit Olsson	
Emerging themes in research for development	67
5 Trade and development:	
(How) can research help to promote trade and development?	69
Sanoussi Bilal and Niels Keijzer	
6 Migration in a globalizing world:	
Knowledge, migration and development	89
Annelies Zoomers, with Gaspar Rivera-Salgado, Maruja M.B. Asis, Nicola Piper, Parvati Raghuram, Mariama Awumbila, Takiywaa Manuh and Joris Schapendonk	

7	Human rights: International research cooperation for human rights	123
	Willem van Genugten and Conny Rijken, with Balghis Badri and Fatima L. Adamu	
8	Food security and sustainable agriculture: Making science work for innovation	145
	Bram Huijsman, Andy Hall, Jon Daane and Leonard Oruko	
9	Health systems and health research: Development of knowledge that matters	169
	Ivan Wolffers, René van Veenhuizen, Joost Ruitenber, David Ofori-Adjei, John Gyapong and E. Pamela Wright	
10	Climate, energy and environmental care: Investigating new collaborative research approaches	195
	Pieter van der Zaag, Bekithemba Gumbo, E.R.N. Gunawardena, Shahbaz Khan, Nzula Kitaka, Jay O’Keeffe, Edwin Rap, Stefan Uhlenbrook and Anne A. van Dam	
11	Peace, security and governance: Research arenas, partnerships and capacities	223
	Mohamed A. Salih, with Paschal B. Mihyo, Nira Wickramasinghe, Kwame Boafo-Arthur and David J. Francis	
12	Research communication: Some knowledges are more mobile than others	239
	Nick Ishmael Perkins, Geoff Barnard, John Young, Nicola Jones, Maja Djuric, Liz Carlile and Jackie Davies	
	Responses from the policy arena	265
13	Development-oriented research: Taking the side of the poor	267
	Jan Pronk	
14	Knowledge, growth and distribution: Strengthening the capacity of innovation systems	273
	Bert Koenders	
	Contributors to this volume	283

Development-oriented research

Taking the side of the poor

Jan Pronk, Institute of Social Studies, The Hague, the Netherlands¹

Summary

In this volume, the contributors discuss the field of international research cooperation and explore emerging agendas for development-oriented research. In his response, former Minister for Development Cooperation Jan Pronk looks more closely at the role of research in the South, and discusses the paradigm that has guided the Netherlands policy for international research cooperation over the past 20 years. He describes some of the global forces that have made that policy inadequate to deal with the challenges currently facing countries in both the South and the North, even though the paradigm on which it was based may still be valid. Jan Pronk concludes by posing some questions that may help in focusing the debate about setting priorities in the emerging research agendas.

1 Introduction

I hope to contribute to the discussion on international research cooperation as a politician and practitioner, but in particular as a student of development policies, processes and situations. My observations are grounded in two important lessons I learned from my teachers in both academia and politics. First, one should always choose research subjects that are relevant and can be applied to improve the lives of the poor and vulnerable, if not now, then certainly in the not too distant future. This may be a subjective selection criterion, but it is one that I have embraced as my own. The second lesson is that one should always ensure that policies are based on solid analysis, and then constantly question them and to be prepared to change them on the basis of new evidence.

Following this lesson implies continually going from theory to practice and back again – searching and *re*-searching, *re*-flecting, *re*-thinking and *re*-doing – in order to ensure that policies remain relevant to the needs of the poor.

2 Location, location, location

In the process of applying these lessons I have learned to appreciate the variations in and the differences between development processes, and have come to the conclusion they are always highly situation and location specific. This fact of life may be difficult for politicians and policy makers to accept, since they like to think in terms of general models and overall systems.

It is often said that through globalization, knowledge is increasingly ‘on the move’, available everywhere and shared by all. This may seem inconsistent with the observation that all development processes are situation and location specific. However, it is important to recognize that globalization has been only partially achieved, and that not everyone has equal access to the knowledge that is available worldwide. Having access to the internet no longer means that you belong to an elite, but it should be kept in mind that there are still more than 2 billion people who do not have access to modern technologies, and so are unable to benefit from research findings, or to participate in information and knowledge sharing. Globalization is by no means complete.

Globalization is being driven by Western forces, such as technology and economics, and so is access to knowledge. These forces, in particular the push for economic growth, are based on capitalist values and focus on material consumption, profit and innovation. These values, by definition, stand for renewal, progress and development and the power of markets. Globalization is not only far from complete; it also leans heavily towards Western capitalist values.

The forces that drive globalization are affecting all areas of the world. People living in the tropical forests of Brazil or the deserts of Darfur are affected by the same forces as the inhabitants of cities such as The Hague. To understand how globalization

actually impacts on people, it is necessary to know something about the situation in which they live and to appreciate how they cope with the forces that drive globalization. It is necessary to talk to people, look into their faces and genuinely listen to what they have to say, and to be aware of the political, social and cultural circumstances under which they live. It is impossible to understand the complexities of the security situation in Iraq or Afghanistan, or political problems with majorities and minorities in the Netherlands simply by opening a laptop and surfing the web. It is necessary to talk to people and to probe deep, very deep, in order to unveil the underlying causes of these crises. Anyone who wishes to do a good job will first have to carry out long-term field research, and meet with and listen to local people, in particular the voiceless, the vulnerable and the weak.

3 The Dutch paradigm

The contributors to this volume have reviewed research and development policies and experiences over the past two decades, in particular those of the Netherlands. The analytical basis for the Dutch research cooperation with the South was laid at an international conference on development-related research held in Groningen in 1989,² which was followed by a second meeting three years later.³ At the first conference I suggested four principal guidelines for research cooperation. First, probe deeply into a situation; second, keep testing and continue testing; third, be relevant to the poor and powerless; and fourth, do not disregard the element of power as a major variable in development processes.

At the Groningen conference Professor C.J. Chetsanga of the University of Zimbabwe provided an illustration of why the notion of power should never be ignored when analyzing development processes: ‘We in developing countries feel like players in a football match where the rules of the game change each time we are about to score’. That is the power in the process. Another speaker, the late Professor Peter Kloos of the VU University Amsterdam, elaborated on this notion: ‘an orientation to poverty eradication necessitates an understanding of elitist behaviour and thus researching power’. In other words, power is important not only in the development process, but also in the research into the process.

After the conference, the notion that power plays a role in development processes, and that value systems direct research, was integrated into a new, alternative approach to research cooperation. Joske Bunders of the VU University Amsterdam, one of the main thinkers who helped develop it, called it the *interactive bottom-up approach*.⁴

The approach called for multidisciplinary research and for an holistic view, taking into consideration the situation in which people live as they themselves perceive it. The starting point was not the traditional research disciplines, but location-specific descriptions of situations in which people live, their perception of these situations, their own needs and the constraints they experience in achieving their ambitions.

The interactive bottom-up approach rejected the traditional project-based research funding and advocated principles such as trust, the long term and self-reliance. Research cooperation should no longer be directed by the power of donors or by researchers from donor countries. Research cooperation should be guided by the ‘people within’ and by researchers as closely as possible related to them. This was the paradigm of interactive bottom-up research cooperation.

The policies of the Multi-annual Multidisciplinary Research Programmes (MMRPs), which started in 1992 when I was Minister for Development Cooperation, were based on this paradigm. Of course, I am disappointed that the programmes have been terminated, but I am a politician and I accept that any new minister has the right to halt initiatives started by his predecessors. I do not wish to dwell on that, except to say that I am particularly disappointed in myself because I was not convincing enough to ensure that the notion of power in the research process was retained.

The MMRPs were launched during the euphoria after the end of the Cold War, the emergence of sustainable development thinking and the Earth Summit in Rio. Sixteen years later there are many reasons to review the policy that guided the MMRPs, because the context in which development processes in the South take place have changed substantially. The paradigm underlying the policy may still be valid, but the policy itself is no longer adequate to guide North–South research cooperation. A new approach to development research is required, and hence a rethinking of the role of knowledge, research in development, capacity building and research partnerships.⁵

3 The context of research

Before we can discuss new approaches to development research, the current situation in the South needs to be analyzed and understood. Here I highlight just four aspects.

First, the forces of globalization are different and more intense than they were 20 years ago. New players such as China, India and other emerging economies have entered the global market and its governing bodies. The influence of international capital and multinational companies has grown substantially. In addition, new technologies are connecting people, markets and institutions, resulting in the disappearance of old frontiers and the emergence of new ones. Frontiers between states, between countries, between geographical spaces, and between North and South have blurred, but new barriers between people have emerged, such as increased levels of exclusion, new forms of apartheid, growing inequalities and ever-wider gaps between rich and poor.

The two billion people without a voice, power and access to basic needs have not been completely forgotten. On the contrary, they are being researched – but as if they were livestock. Northern countries face many of the same problems as Southern countries, such as climate change and rising food and energy prices, as well as abject poverty within their borders. And, in all countries, in the North as well as in the South,

wealth is distributed very much less equally than it was 20 years ago. In fact, globalization has led to stagnation in poverty reduction.

The second concern is that regional conflicts are much more complicated than ever before. Cultural antagonisms are coinciding with economic inequalities and political polarization. The concept of security is translated in terms of self-protection, homeland security, pre-emptive strikes, occupation – always of areas somewhere in the South belonging to the South. In fact, in the current development paradigm, security has been prioritized over and above the need for sustainability.

Third, new economic instabilities resulting from the capitalist character of international financial and economic processes pose unfamiliar threats. But, more important, climate change and loss of biodiversity are threatening both livelihoods and the lives of those yet unborn. These new instabilities threaten our survival, and we should not underestimate their potential impacts.

Finally, the resurrection of the capitalist system, which has embraced neoliberal values and embedded traditional development approaches into an overall political, economic, military, environmental and security policy, is creating a geopolitical situation that is completely different from that of 20 years ago.

4 The role of research

What is the role of research and knowledge in today's context? I do not mean traditional development research, but research that is being carried out by the world's principal knowledge institutions and research centres, such as the laboratories of multinational companies, the think-thanks of international banks, governments and their military, intelligence and security communities, and the universities and consultants who are contracted by them. In today's context, their research is playing an increasingly important role in strengthening the positions of people within their own system, and in widening the gap between them and others outside their system. This research fosters the development of new technologies and their application. But rather than responding to demand, these technology applications manipulate people's needs, distort values and create even more demand. This research mortgages the use of scarce natural and financial resources, jeopardizing the rights of future generations and their survival.

This is the present situation. For many organizations and companies, their research is just an instrument for sustaining themselves and for strengthening the values that support their viability. Against this I plead for research to be used as an instrument for exerting countervailing power, and for knowledge that can be used for bringing about equity, rather than as an instrument for perpetuating existing systems.

In my view, in today's context, research should play four roles: First, research should investigate the mechanism of power. Second, research should analyze the consequences of the policies of the rich, the powerful and the middle class, in particular their negative impacts on others. Third, research should provide the knowledge to

elaborate alternative approaches to bring about sustainable and equitable development for the poor. Finally, research should enable the excluded, the voiceless, the powerless and the poor to design their own future, to define their own perceptions, and to decide themselves about their own development path. In other words, borrowing from Bangladeshi terminology, they need to build their own resilience, their own creativity and their own imaginations. Research and the knowledge it produces should provide the countervailing power needed to challenge the mainstream and give the disadvantaged in society equal access to prosperity and power. This should also apply to future generations whose interests are being ignored. They face the consequences of the risks being taken today and will have considerably reduced environmental resources at their disposal for building a sustainable future. The choice of research themes and methods, and the development of knowledge about the relationship between man and the environment should be focused on securing the interests of future generations. I am not advocating value-free knowledge or value-free research. On the contrary, I would argue for value-loaded research and value-loaded knowledge that takes the side of the poor.

The contributors to this volume explore the emerging agendas for development-oriented research. What still needs to be done is to identify the priorities for research. To help focus the debate about these priorities, I would suggest the following questions for further consideration: Who decides about the allocation of scarce resources? Who decides whether there is progress? Who decides whether there is failure? Who decides about the distribution of costs and benefits in a process? Who innovates? For what purpose? And finally, in the choice of research subjects and research modalities, who calls the tune?

Notes

- 1 Jan Pronk was formerly Netherlands Minister for Development Cooperation, and is currently professor of the theory and practice of international development at ISS. This chapter is based on his presentation to the Knowledge on the Move conference, ISS, The Hague, February 2008.
- 2 C. Schweigman and U.T. Bosma (eds) (1990) *Research and Development Cooperation: The Role of the Netherlands*, report of a conference at the University of Groningen, 1989. Amsterdam: Royal Tropical Institute.
- 3 C. Schweigman and I.A. van der Werf (eds) (1994) *Development-related Research Collaboration: A Second Look at the Role of the Netherlands*, report of a conference at the University of Groningen, 1992). Amsterdam: Royal Tropical Institute.
- 4 See J.F.G. Bunders (1994) *Participative Strategies for Science-Based Innovations: The Case of Biotechnology for Small-scale Farmers in Developing Countries*. Amsterdam: VU University Press.
- 5 For a review, see V. Menon, P.R.G. Nair and K.N. Nair (2005) *Alleviating Poverty: Case Studies of Local-level Linkages and Processes in the Developing World*. Delhi: Rainbow Publishers.