

Which research path to take on the road to development impact? A discussion of research's impact on international development in light of the DFID literature review

13.00 – 15.00
27 October, 2014
The Wellcome Trust

Background

Around the world international development donors and governments of low-income countries are stepping up their funding of research. This is partly on the assumption that research has positive impacts on socioeconomic development.

However, a recent DFID literature review has brought into question the evidence on how research actually has an impact on international development. It found that research does make important contributions to socioeconomic development but perhaps not in the ways that many people assume.

How should this new evidence change our thinking and activities around research for development?

Discussion

A major topic of conversation was around the review's suggestion that capacity building and investment in human capital were one of the biggest drivers of development. A robust research ecosystem – both in terms of supply and demand, from research management to the use of evidence in policy-making – is crucial to research having an impact. Yet there are very few good assessments of research ecosystems in developing countries.

For example, we can sometimes take for granted that in the UK there are teams of technocrats and in-house advisers embedded in the political system which scrutinise and digest evidence for decision makers. There is also a culture of using randomised control trials and systematic reviews to examine interventions. However, some members of the discussion group advised that this kind of capacity can be very low in many developing countries. Some of the group suggested that this is an area which could be focused on more by capacity building activities, but participants noted that it will be important that the UK supports existing structures rather than imposing its own research ecosystem upon other countries.

Understanding the structures and weaknesses within local research ecosystems is key to developing a country's 'absorptive capacity' to use research. Furthermore, there is also a question of at what point it becomes non cost-effective for public funders to intervene at a systems level if sufficient research networks and mechanisms aren't in place. However, it seems there are few analyses of developing countries' research ecosystems¹. This is in part

¹. The [Knowledge Sector Initiative \(AIP4\)](#) was referenced as a project trying to build better research to policy systems, through focusing on demand, supply, intermediaries and enabling environment.

because it can be difficult to get behind closed doors and fully understand their decision-making and agenda-setting, especially with regular leadership changes.

Another avenue for exploring research's impact on development is the upcoming publication of the impact case studies from the Research Excellence Framework. An analysis of the database of case studies could provide an anecdotal insight into different 'research pathways', and by starting with research and looking forward could examine the routes of how research can flow into policy.

Another point of particular interest was the finding that there was little evidence to suggest that investment in research and technology transfer was an effective way to drive private sector growth in developing and emerging countries. This goes against commonly held beliefs in the sector and may be a difficult message for some to accept. There were some calls from the group for further research in this area to examine more fully the impacts of research on private sector growth, particularly in low- and middle-income countries.

[A revised ['Version 1.1' of the review](#) has since been written which includes a clarification of the focus on economic growth: *"Please note that investment in research may indirectly lead to economic benefits through indirect routes (for example via impacts on human capital or evidence-informed policy). These routes are not the focus of this chapter."*]

Overall there was a clear sense from the group that the literature review is a valuable contribution to our understanding of research's role in international development. The review helps separate rhetoric from reality, as well as inspire further debates on evaluating research impact. One probing question which was posed to the group – which included several major funders – near the end of the event asked: how much are organisations willing to invest in further research on research?

Potential next steps

The event mainly aimed to spark discussion; however there were some suggestions for future work which UKCDS will explore:

- An analysis of the 2014 REF impact case studies through an international development lens
- An assessment of the quality of research ecosystems in developing countries

Attendees

First Name	Last Name	Organisation
Craig	Bardsley	ESRC
Ben	Bleasdale	Academy of Medical Sciences
Matt	Davis	Royal Academy of Engineering
Jamie	Enoch	UKCDS
Caroline	Fiennes	Giving Evidence
Rosalind	Goodrich	IIED
Alex	Gwyther	UKCDS

Stephen	Hanney	Brunel University
Saskia	Heijnen	Wellcome Trust
Alexia	Hereford	RCUK
Jackie	Hinton	BIS
Jill	Jones	MRC
Ruth	Kelman	NERC
Qui Yi	Khut	Wellcome Trust
Melanie	Knetsch	Newton Fund
Jessica	Mackenzie	ODI
Kirsty	Newman	DFID
Vibhuti	Patel	Royal Society of Chemistry
Andrew	Shaw	DFID
Jane	Simmonds	Wellcome Trust
Ian	Thornton	UKCDS
Camilla	Toulmin	IIED
Martin	Walsh	Oxfam