Building bridges in development: Five recommendations to connect the islands of research, policy and practice.

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***Elizabeth Harrison**, **Eleanor Jew**, **Thomas Smith**, **Iqbal Ahmed** and **Sarah Peck** present the recommendations from a recent conference for early-career researchers on bridging the gap in development research, policy and practice. Participants were encouraged to consider partnership-based solutions to development problems. From having a realistic understanding of intended outcomes to formulating relevant research questions, constructive debate took place on how best to navigate and undertake practical solutions to developing dialogue across sectors.*

Does our research really make a tangible difference? Or are we kidding ourselves that we are really 'doing good'? And if we are, how can we change this to achieve the goals we want? These questions are prominent in the life of early career academics working in the development sector, who often enter the field wanting to have an impact on the world and making it, in some small way, a better place. Additionally, global political attention is turning more and more towards development researchers to solve some of the world's greatest problems, and researchers, policy-makers, and practitioners are increasingly acknowledging the need to work together to achieve these goals and make a lasting impact.

While the long-standing differences in approach, access, and thinking that have prevented a natural partnership between the three sectors of research, policy, and practice are well acknowledged, constructive and successful ways of bridging these gaps has proved more challenging. How to bring these three areas together and bridge the gaps between them has not yet been fully addressed, and early career researchers are well aware of the problems. As Wandersman et al (2008) argue, "if we keep on doing what we have been doing we are going to keep on getting what we have been getting".

The PhD-led 'Researchers in Development Network' ((RiDNet) based at the University of Leeds) felt that it was time to catalyse a dialogue around this impasse. These gaps need addressing, a greater understanding of the needs and wants in each sector is required, and practical, partnership-based solutions to development problems are necessary. On this basis, the RiDNet 3rd Annual Conference was held in November 2014 bringing together researchers, policy-makers, and practitioners for a day of discussions on how to improve working relations between the sectors and eradicate long-held but often erroneous beliefs about what each sector wants from the others. Integral to the day were keynote talks and contributions from experts in each sector: *Research* – Professor Jouni Paavola and Dr Susannah Sallu of the Sustainability Research Institute at the University of Leeds; *Policy* – Lindsey Jones from the Overseas Development Institute: *Practice* – Jessica Greenhalf from Restless Development; and '*the nexus'* – Lizz Harrison from Y Care International and Sarah Mistry from BOND.

This blog has amalgamated the many views and experiences that emerged into key focus points and lessons, which, when placed within the context of early career researchers, provide constructive recommendations on how we can begin to bridge the gaps between research, policy, and practice.

Recommendations

1. **It is important to distinguish between research that will aid understanding, and research with a practical application**. Not all research can be directly fed into 'action', but may aid a greater understanding of a subject. Having a realistic and clear understanding of the intended outcomes will enable expectations to be managed.

2. **Research should be "demand-led" instead of "supply-driven"**. The 'importance' of research topics is subjective, but, for example, if a PhD researcher wishes to conduct research that will potentially have an impact 'on the ground' they should consider how to communicate – and form relationships with – relevant NGOs and practitioners at the point of formulating research questions. Questions can then be formed that are both original in an academic sense and useful to those working in the field – whether academics, practitioners or policy-makers. Keeping this relationship throughout the research process is vital to ensure the research remains relevant, and findings are accessible to others.

3. **Boundary organisations can effectively communicate research.** Researchers do not have to do all the work – nexus organisations that cross the research-practice and/or research-policy divide such as BOND can assist in promoting research. These organisations can utilise and disseminate messages in ways that they know will be understood by relevant organisations, and these audiences will do the same in turn.

4. **Networks are essential**. Partnerships, collaborations, and face-to-face relationships are not only useful in testing ideas, hypotheses and conclusions, but also in disseminating research findings. Communication is frequently indirect, electronic, and impersonal. Having an interpersonal relationship with colleagues in different sectors makes the sharing of knowledge, findings, and ideas far more organic and constructive.

5. **Presentation of research findings is important to communicate their message effectively**. Lindsey Jones emphasised the need for infographics and other more visual forms of research dissemination in place of the conventional policy brief. These should be made with the intended audience in mind, so that it is relevant and easy to understand and interpret.

Concluding remarks

While the above five findings may seem relatively common-sensical, it is not easy to enact these within the context of multiple other pressures and demands. Different research projects will raise different challenges, and as such researchers, policy-makers and practitioners will need to be open-minded, patient and flexible, with a deeper understanding of the unique challenges in each sector. It will be necessary to continually experiment, reflect and share experiences of this process. However, as the RiDNet conference demonstrated, whilst bridging the research-policy-practice gap is not always a straightforward undertaking, solutions do exist. In order to be policy- and practice-relevant the early stage researcher needs to work out how best to navigate and undertake these solutions.

From the perspective of early career researchers who do not want to continue the self-perpetuating progression of the academic ivory tower, we hope this blog will at the very least spark ongoing dialogue about how best to bridge these gaps, catalyse partnerships, and perhaps even make an impact in the real world. Of course, there are other pressures on early career academics and universities, particularly those surrounding funding strategies. But that is a conversation for another time…
Finally, please do share your experiences, thoughts and examples, and we look forward to hearing from you and expanding this debate!

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Note: This article gives the views of the author, and not the position of the Impact of Social Science blog, nor of the London School of Economics. Please review our Comments Policy if you have any concerns on posting a comment below.

About the Authors

Elizabeth Harrison *is a final year PhD student at the Sustainability Research Institute, University of Leeds and is* *researching the multi-level governance complexities of community-based natural resource management in Zimbabwe with a central focus on the role of local stakeholders in the management and conservation of key natural resources. Elizabeth's thesis aims to ultimately shed light on the wider institutional processes affecting natural resource management impacts and in doing so provide recommendations for the design and implementation of new community-based natural resource management type projects in sub-Saharan Africa. Elizabeth tweets @EPHarrison and blogs here.*

Eleanor Jew *is a final year PhD student at the Sustainability Research Institute, University of Leeds and is researching the impacts of land use change in the miombo woodlands of south-west Tanzania. Interviews and surveys were used to understand the drivers of land use change, and biodiversity surveys determined the impact of these changes upon vegetation, butterfly, bird, and mammal populations. Eleanor's thesis aims to provide the empirical evidence that will inform future land management plans for miombo woodlands.*

Thomas Smith *is a first year PhD student at the School of Geography, University of Leeds and is investigating the reasons behind business involvement in biodiversity, focussing on the factors that determine which projects they become involved in, and how they choose to become involved. Tom plans to use case studies based in developing countries to explore different forms of intervention.*

Iqbal Ahmed *is a PhD student at the School of Geography, University of Leeds and is investigating how participation in policy-making process of the urban child workers in Bangladesh could improve their livelihoods. Iqbal is from Bangladesh but has lived most of his adult life in the U.S. He has written for National Public Radio (NPR), The Diplomatic Courier, Foreign Policy in Focus, and others on various global affairs issues.*

Sarah Peck *is a PhD student at the School of Geography, University of Sheffield and is currently undertaking collaborative research that aims to explore civil society within postcolonial settings, encompassing the formal, informal and everyday elements of spaces for environmental activism. Through a participatory research approach this project also hopes to consider how civil society, considering its many intricacies and trajectories, can best be supported from the outside by international organisations, the complexities associated with this kind of support and the role ethnographic research has to play in this process.*

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An overview of the day's proceedings can be found on the Centre for Global Development blog.

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