The NGO-Academia interface: obstacles to collaboration, lessons from systems thinking and suggested ways forward

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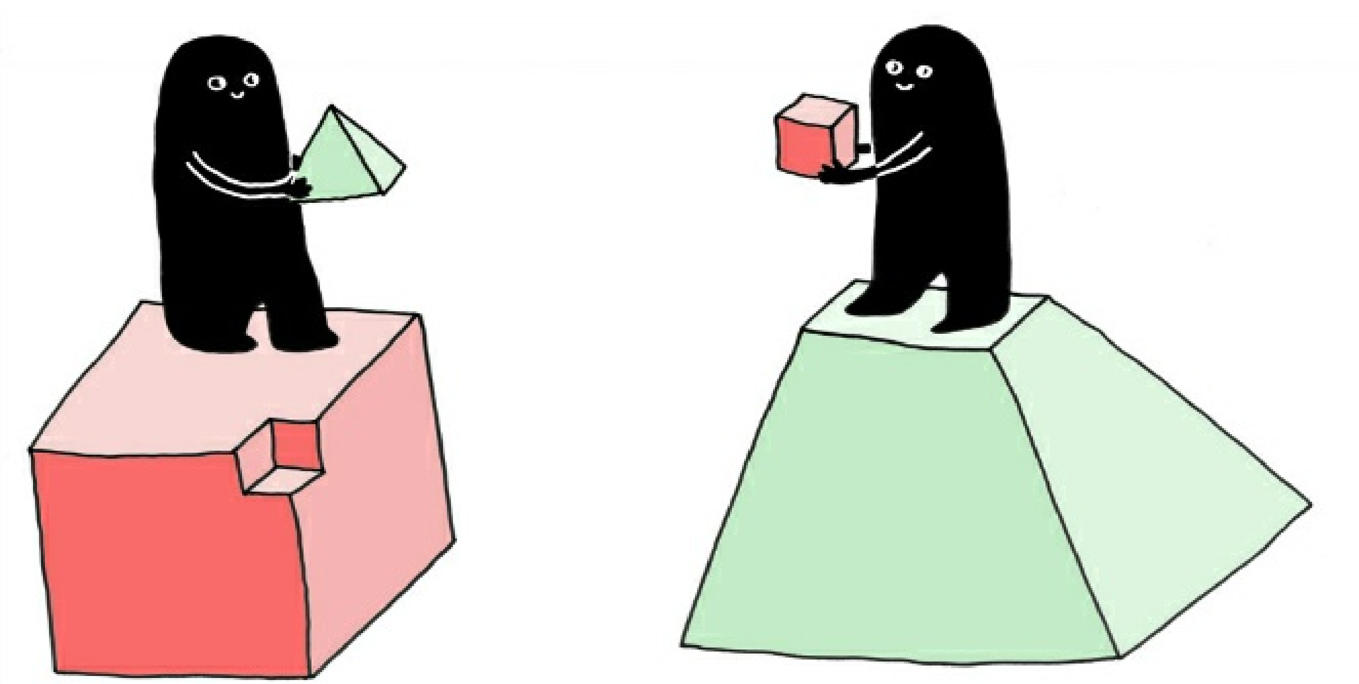
Collaboration between non-governmental organisations and academia ought to be easy, yet remains difficult in practice. ***Duncan Green*** *outlines the present obstacles to collaboration, from competing incentives to differing degrees of urgency, explains what might be learnt from less linear, systems thinking approaches, before setting out a series of recommendations for academics, NGOs and funders.*

The case for partnership between international non-governmental organisations (INGOs) and academia to advance development knowledge is strong. INGOs bring presence on the ground – through their own operations or long-term local partnerships – and communication and advocacy skills (not always academics' strong point). Academia contributes research skills and credibility, and a long-term reflective perspective that the more frenetic forms of operational work and activism often lack.

In practice, however, such partnerships have proven remarkably difficult, partly because INGOs and academia are *too* complementary – there is so little overlap between their respective worlds that it is often difficult to find ways to work together.



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Obstacles to collaboration

- ***Impact vs publication***: while funding incentives push academics towards collaboration with INGOs and other actors able to deliver the elusive "impact", other disciplinary and career pressures appear to push in the opposite direction. The rather closed nature of academia's epistemic communities, buttressed by shared and often exclusive language and common assumptions, deters would-be collaborators, while the pressure to publish in peer-reviewed journals and acquire a reputation within a given discipline shift incentives away from collaboration with "outsiders".

- ***Urgency vs "wait and see"***: INGOs' focus is urgent, immediate and often in response to events. They prefer moving quickly and loudly – reaching as many people as possible and influencing them – without necessarily having time for slower forms of academic engagement. Academics work to a different rhythm, both in terms of the issues and the way they respond to them. When Oxfam won some research funding with the Institute of Development Studies (IDS) to explore food price volatility, it was top of our advocacy agenda. But food prices calmed down, the campaigns spotlight moved on, and the resulting research, though interesting, struggled to stay connected to Oxfam's evolving agenda. For small NGOs, whether national or international, research support is absent when it is most needed – during the design and implementation of projects. Instead, researchers often only show up when the organisation has developed some "good practice" and then only to document the outcomes.
- ***Status quo vs originality***: INGOs do need good research to tell them what is going well or badly, what they need to do more or less of, etc. But also (and increasingly) they need targeted research to help prove to donors that they represent value for money. This often means validating the status quo. Researchers, on the other hand, may be looking to find a new angle, move a debate on and (perhaps too cynical?) make a name for themselves amongst their peers. These agendas can occasionally be complementary but in practice often lead to tension, with INGOs experiencing researchers as unhealthily preoccupied with "taking down" success stories and attacking aid agencies' performance and legitimacy, often on the flimsiest of evidence.
- ***Thinking vs talking***: research is *very* underfunded in INGOs and is distributed across organisations. At Oxfam GB, the policy research team behind its high-profile research papers on inequality for Davos, and other impressive work, has just eight staff. By contrast, the Oxfam head of research, Irene Guijt, has calculated that countries belonging to the OECD have 5.5 million full time academics. There are lots of smart researchers working in a variety of roles elsewhere within Oxfam but even then, by one calculation, across the whole of Oxfam International, research staff amount to just 7% of communications staff. Hardly surprising, then, that it is hard to engage with academics, even if only to make meetings to explore options.

Systems thinking approaches

Some of the problems that arise in the academic–INGO interface stem from overly linear approaches to what is, in effect, an ideas and knowledge *ecosystem.* In such contexts, systems thinking can help identify bottlenecks and suggest possible ways forward.

Getting beyond supply and demand to convening and brokering

Supply-driven is the norm in development research – "experts" churning out policy papers, briefings, books, blogs, etc. Being truly demand-driven is hard even to imagine – an NGO or university department submitting themselves to a public poll on what should be researched? But increasingly in areas such as governance or value chains, we try and move beyond both supply and demand to a convening/brokering role, bringing together different "unusual suspects". What would that look like in research? Action research, with an agenda that emerges from an interaction between communities and researchers? Natural science seems further ahead on this point: when the Dutch National Research Agenda ran a nationwide citizen survey of research questions they wanted science to look at, 12,000 questions were submitted and clustered into 140 questions, under seven or eight themes. To the organisers' surprise, many citizens asked quite deep questions.

Most studies identify a need for "knowledge brokers" not only to bridge the gap between the realms of science and policy, but also to synthesise and transform evidence into an effective and usable form for policy and practice. An essential feature of knowledge brokers is that they understand the cultures of both worlds. Often, this role is performed by third-sector organisations of various types (from lobbyists to thinktanks to respected research funders). Some academics can transcend this divide. A few universities employ specialist knowledge brokers but their long-term effectiveness is often constrained by low status, insecure contracts and lack of career pathways. Whoever plays this crucial intermediary role, it appears that it is currently under-resourced within and beyond the university system. In the development sector, the nearest thing to an embedded gateway is the Governance and Social Development Resource Centre (GSDRC), run by Birmingham University and the IDS and largely funded by the Department for International Development. It conducts literature and evidence reviews on a range of topics, drawing evidence from both academic literature and non-academic institutions.

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Critical junctures

Anyone involved in advocacy knows that the openness of policymakers to new ideas is episodic, and linked to things such as changes of administration, scandals, crises and failures; known in the political science literature as critical junctures. Currently, thinktanks are reasonably good at responding to the windows of opportunity presented by such moments, updating and repackaging previous research for newly attentive policymakers or providing rapid informed commentary. In contrast, universities are often much more sluggish, trapped by the long cycle of research and dissemination and with few incentives to drop or adapt existing work to respond to new opportunities. What would need to change in terms of incentives or leadership to make universities as agile as thinktanks?

Precedents: history and positive deviance

The development community spends little time thinking about what has already worked, either historically or today. Research could really help fill in historical gaps, whether on campaigns or redistribution. It also makes little use of "positive deviance" approaches, which identify positive outliers: where good things are already happening in the system, for example identifying and studying villages with lower than average rates of maternal mortality and then trying to find out why.

Feedback, adaptation and course correction

In systems, initial interventions are likely to have to be tweaked or totally overhauled in light of feedback from experience or events. Yet both academics and INGOs still portray their research papers as tablets of stone – the last word on any given topic. Digital technology allows us to make them all "living documents", subject to periodic revision. At the very least, publishing drafts of all papers for comments both improves quality and builds bridges between researchers, practitioners and policymakers.

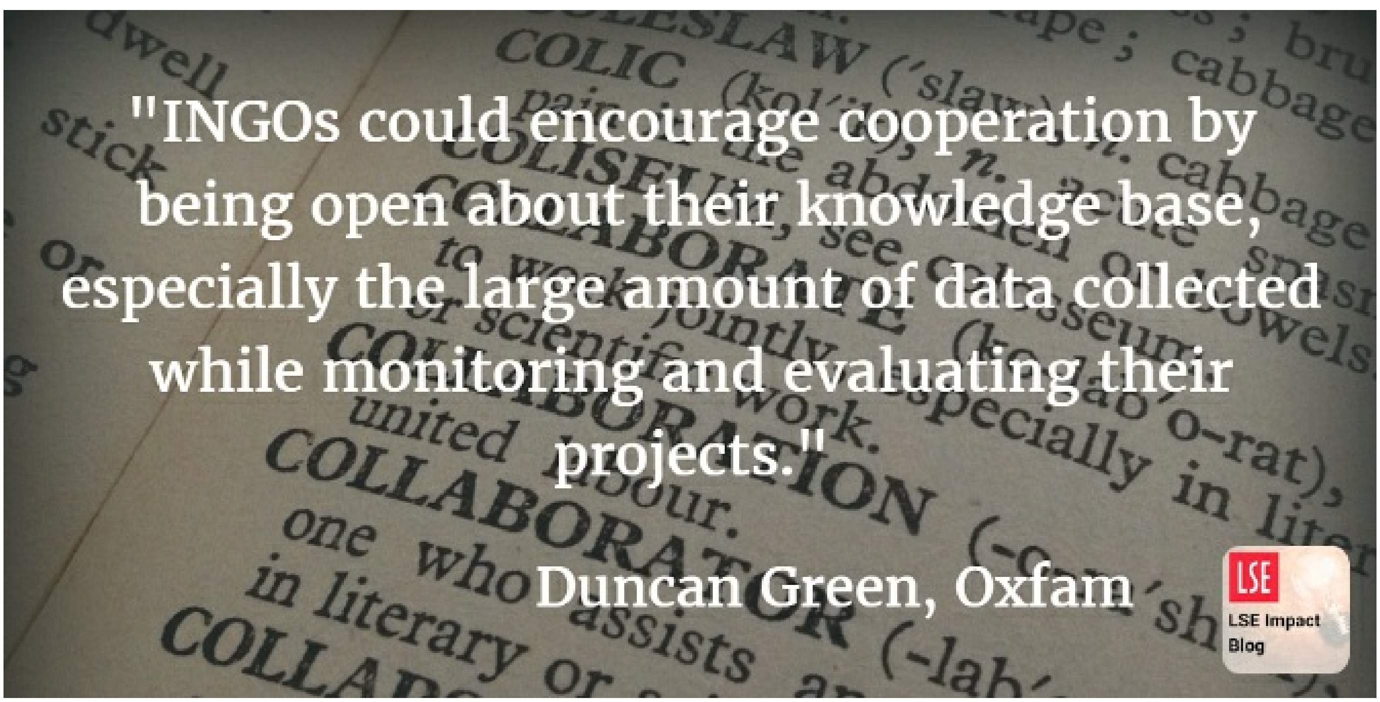
Ways forward

Based on all of the above, a number of ideas emerge for consideration by academics, INGOs and funders of research.

Suggestions for academics

Comments on previous blog posts provided a wealth of practical advice to academics on how to work more productively with INGOs. These include the following:

- Create research ideas and proposals collaboratively. This means talking to each other early on, rather than academics looking for NGOs to help their dissemination, or NGOs commissioning academics to undertake policy-based evidence making.
- Don't just criticise and point to gaps – understand the reasons for them (gaps in both NGO programmes and their research capacity) and propose solutions. Work to recognise practitioners' strengths and knowledge.
- Make research relevant to real people in communities. This means proper discussions and dialogue at design, research and analysis stages, disseminated drafts and discussing findings locally on publication.
- Set up reflection spaces in universities where NGO practitioners can go to take time out and be supported to reflect on and write up their experiences, network with others, and gain new insights on their work.
- Catalyse more exchange of personnel in both directions. Universities could replicate my own Professor in Practice position at the London School of Economics and Political Science, while INGOs could appoint honorary fellows, who could help guide their thinking in return for access to their work.



Suggestions for INGOs

In addition to collaborating in the ways discussed above, INGOs could encourage cooperation by:

- Being open about their knowledge base, especially the large amount of data collected while monitoring and evaluating their projects. Oxfam now makes its impact evaluation survey data free to download.
- Finding cost-effective ways of cooperating through long-term but loose networks maintained over time, which can be activated when necessary (e.g. in response to events or new priorities). This is less time-intensive than establishing dense and time-consuming networks that often peter out for lack of resources.
- Setting up arm's-length, collaborative watchdogs on particular institutions or issues with a research function, that maintain a network of academics and activists, as well as maintaining institutional knowledge. Good examples are the Bretton Woods Project or Control Arms.
- Building bridges at all levels of the knowledge "food chain": INGOs need to go beyond the academic big names and conference attractions to build links with early career researchers. For example, Transparency International has set up a programme called Campus for Transparency that matchmakes a Transparency International chapter or staff member who has a specific research need with a university MA programme or student who would then deliver this specific research product as part of their study requirement.

Suggestions for funders

By insisting on evidence of impact, and supporting partnerships and consortia involving both researchers and practitioners, governments and aid donor funders already contribute significantly to bridging the academic–INGO divide. But they could do more, including the following:

- Innovative financing – for example, offering 50/50 funding: half for programmes on the ground, half for research. At the moment donors seem to fund one or the other (research with a few links to practitioners, or programmes with a bit of money for monitoring, evaluation and learning), which misses a chance to foster deeper links.
- They could also fund intermediary organisations with a mandate to build bridges between the two worlds. There is more about this in last year's Carnegie UK InterAction report.

This post is an edited version of a short series of posts that originally appeared on the author's From Poverty to Power blog and is published here with permission. The original posts are based on a chapter the author contributed to the recent IDS publication, The Social Realities of Knowledge for Development, summarised here by James Georgalakis. You can download this chapter here.

Note: This article gives the views of the author, and not the position of the LSE Impact 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 author

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