

Exploring the effectiveness of development research with a monitoring and learning approach

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There is a growing demand for better understanding of the link between research, policy and practice in development. This article provides findings from a study that aimed to gain insights into how researchers engage with their non-academic partners. It draws on experiences from the National Centre of Competence in Research North–South programme, a development research network of Swiss, African, Asian and Latin American institutions. Conceptually, this study is concerned with research effectiveness as a means to identify knowledge useful for society. Research can be improved and adapted when monitoring the effects of interactions between researchers and non-academic partners. Therefore, a monitoring and learning approach was chosen. This study reveals researchers' strategies in engaging with non-academic partners and points to framing conditions considered decisive for successful interactions. It concludes that researchers need to systematically analyse the socio-political context in which they intervene. By providing insights from the ground and reflecting on them in the light of the latest theoretical concepts, this article contributes to the emerging literature founded on practice-based experience.

Introduction

There is a growing demand for better understanding of the link between research, policy and practice in development as well as in other disciplines. Nowadays, many researchers in the North and the South are challenged by a threefold task. They not only carry out research and teach but increasingly offer services to society as well. This move towards the non-academic realm of policy and practice is referred to under different names in the literature. Some have coined it a 'third mission' for universities (Göransson *et al.* 2009), some interpret interaction with policy and practice as 'policy entrepreneurship' (Court and Maxwell 2005), whereas others define the integration of academic and non-academic knowledge as 'transdisciplinarity' (Lieven and Maasen 2007, Hirsch Hadorn *et al.* 2008). All these approaches signify the growing interest of scholars and practitioners in the complexities of research–policy dialogues. This article is intended as a contribution to the field of research for development, arguing that it is vital for researchers to understand the changing role of science for society to make research available effectively.

We report on a study of the links between research, policy and practice, drawing on the experiences of an international research network of Swiss, African, Asian and Latin

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American institutions. The aim was to assess, on the one hand, the factors that contribute to links between researchers and non-academic partners. On the other hand, it also identified the delivery of concrete products for society resulting from these links. Much of the broad literature on the dialogue between research, policy and practice reflects experiences in Northern contexts, whereas considerably less information is available on situations in developing countries (Court and Young 2006). This study aims to explore the research–policy link in the South by providing insights from the ground on how researchers systematically work towards enhancing the use of scientific knowledge in policy and in practice.

Understanding, monitoring and enhancing effectiveness

Before presenting the study, we will first discuss our understanding of effectiveness and our reasons for using monitoring and learning as a means to enhance research effectiveness.

Effectiveness

How can the effectiveness of development research for society be improved? To answer this question, we need to have an understanding of what it means to be effective. Research effectiveness at the intersection of science and society denominates in broad terms the delivery of products for non-academic audiences (Davis and Carden 1998). The use of scientific knowledge in terms of technological application, social services, decision-making or policy inputs may be of a direct or indirect nature. Some researchers strive for immediate use of their findings by creating tools and instruments that are directly applicable. Others have a long-term perspective on research relevance for society and focus instead on initiating new debates or broadening the horizon of stakeholders. Nevertheless, all hope that their research finds its way to social actors and is put to good use. In this sense, effectiveness as a concept not only looks at how researchers interact with society but also explores the positive (and negative) effects of this interaction, both in society and in research.

We follow those scholars who point to the ability to share knowledge successfully through multiple relationships (Davis and Carden 1998). In other words, research effectiveness is about creating good conditions for dialogue between actors in different fields. Important factors for creating good conditions are that participating partners are able to act in accordance with their roles and that different types of knowledge may be encountered equally (Pohl *et al.* 2010). Non-academic partners are invited to join in a dialogue on what the research topic should be as well as how the results are to be interpreted and used. Development researchers should, therefore, establish networks with partners in the social and political environments in which research intervenes.

Effectiveness of research as a result of dynamic networks contrasts with an understanding of effectiveness as a result of knowledge transfers (Glaser *et al.* 1983, Rogers 1995, as cited in Simmons *et al.* 2002). According to this concept, researchers start disseminating their results only after having completed a research project. A causal chain from research to dissemination, validation and implementation is assumed. Yet, this concept has been subjected to fundamental criticism. One criticism is that this form of interaction does not sufficiently consider the needs and timeframes of possible consumers of academic knowledge. Another cites the false idea of a linear translation of knowledge from research to policy. Such an assumption underestimates the complexity of research and

policy processes (Ramalingam *et al.* 2008) and ignores the issues of timing. With knowledge transfer, the time lag between research and research use increases, and it becomes difficult to attribute the influence of evidence to political or social decision-making (Carden 2004).

We claim that research effectiveness should overcome these limitations of knowledge transfer. We understand both policy and research to be open systems that are subject to multiple influences and changing dynamics. Iverson noted that complex systems present a serious obstacle for attribution (Iverson 2003, as cited in Carden 2004). This means that it is difficult to show that a change in development is a result of research activities. Instead of trying to provide evidence for causal links between these realms, therefore, it is more appropriate to assume plausible links between research and policy (Herweg and Steiner 2002, Horton and MacKay 2003).

Monitoring and learning

Effectiveness is closely linked with monitoring and evaluation. By monitoring the effects of interaction, strategies can be adapted and improved, thereby enhancing effectiveness. Yet, monitoring and evaluation is differently applied in research and in international development. In research, it is generally limited to the scientific standards of peer review and the citation of publications. In international development, evaluation questions address larger and more complex issues of social relevance, political influence and economic benefit. As development research claims to respond to such issues, a new, innovative field emerges when the techniques of international development are adapted for the purpose of assessing the effectiveness of development research for society. Furthermore, monitoring and evaluation is primarily used in international development as an instrument for donors to ensure the accountability of projects (DAC Working Party on Aid Evaluation 2001). Yet, it adds value when it supports researchers in learning about their own effectiveness.

Among the variety of monitoring and evaluation instruments applied to development, Outcome Mapping is an approach that actively engages researchers in better understanding their influence on policy and practice at the planning stage (Hovland 2007). They are involved in the design of a monitoring framework and evaluation plan and actively promote self-assessment. Outcome Mapping as established by the International Development Research Centre (IDRC) is an interpretative framework for evaluating development programmes (Earl *et al.* 2001). Its strength lies in the fact that the focus is shifted away from assessing the products or the impacts of the programme. Outcomes are defined as ‘changes in the behaviour, relationship, activities or actions of the people, groups and organizations with whom a programme works directly’ (Earl *et al.* 2001, p. 1). Partners are those individuals, groups and organisations to whom the programme is directly linked and with whom it anticipates opportunities for influence.

The Research and Policy in Development Programme (RAPID) of the Overseas Development Institute (ODI) recently developed an approach for researchers to become more effective in policy dialogues applying the techniques of Outcome Mapping. The RAPID Outcome Mapping Approach (ROMA) is also rooted in the organisation’s experience on how research-based evidence can inform policy processes (Ramalingam 2006, Young and Mendizabal 2009, Hearn 2010).¹ This approach starts from the assumption that research evidence can effectively contribute to policy. At the same time, it acknowledges that scientific evidence is only one among a broad range of factors that influence policymaking. For this reason, researchers need to develop a holistic understanding of the complex policy process in order to acquire the necessary skills to communicate and

translate scientific results. ROMA includes various steps that gradually inform researchers about the context they are working in to allow them to make strategic choices about their engagement. Researchers learn to systematically explore the political environment of the research and to identify their non-academic partners and the changes they expect to effect. Furthermore, they develop an engagement strategy, analyse their capacities for effecting change and establish a monitoring and learning framework.

Context

The shift in focus from classical research achievements such as publications and citations to the changing practices of partners as suggested by ROMA has various consequences. The first is that researchers become aware of non-academic stakeholders such as NGOs, governmental bodies or social movements. These actors may be important partners with whom researchers collaborate directly. The second consequence is that researchers identify political allies in the socio-political environment. The effect of scientific arguments – generally of minor importance in political settings – is significantly strengthened when combined with the struggles of other groups. We consider the explicit focus on various non-academic partners to be a fundamental starting point for enhancing the effectiveness of development research.

Closely related to the focus on non-academic partners is exploration of the socio-political context in which these partners are embedded. Researchers should look not only at how individuals are influenced but also at how systems are transformed (Carden 2009). Based on an analysis of case studies, Carden recommends classifying these contexts according to their capacity to absorb research results:

- (1) Clear government demand: In this context, non-academic partners want knowledge and are willing and capable to act on it.
- (2) Government interest in research, but leadership absent: Policy issues are known to the partners and are considered important, but the structures to implement recommendations from research are missing.
- (3) Government interest in research, but with a capacity shortfall: Again, the relevance of policy issues is acknowledged by the partners, but they have not invested the necessary resources in capacity for adoption or implementation.
- (4) A new or emerging issue activates research but leaves policymakers uninterested: Researchers achieve significant advances in addressing development problems, but partners remain indifferent or even adverse.
- (5) Government treats research with disinterest, or hostility: Here the policy window is closed because partners are absorbed by other priorities or may even have a hostile attitude towards research contributions.

Carden states that the success of research influence is only partly dependent on the quality of findings. Much is determined by the character of the receptivity to research in the socio-political context. This innovative approach has inspired our study of the international development research network.

Research effectiveness of the NCCR North–South

The National Centre of Competence in Research (NCCR) North–South is an international research partnership programme between Swiss universities and partners in Africa, Asia

and Latin America (www.north-south.unibe.ch 2010). With a network of more than 350 researchers active in about 40 countries, this programme is dedicated to global change and sustainable development in different fields. Research embraces topics such as livelihoods, institutions, conflicts, health, sanitation, economy, governance and sustainable use of natural resources. For analysing the effectiveness of the programme in interacting with non-academic partners, it is useful to consider the institutional setting and the conceptual background. The NCCR North–South is jointly funded by the Swiss National Science Foundation (SNSF) and the Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation (SDC). With SDC as a donor, the emphasis is on the generation and dissemination of development-relevant knowledge. Furthermore, the principle of targeted research as defined by the SNSF imposes an obligation to develop links with potential users of research results (SNSF 1999).² The NCCR North–South responds to these demands by conducting transdisciplinary research that explicitly seeks collaboration between academic and non-academic partners to link scientific and practical knowledge when dealing with development problems (Hurni *et al.* 2004, 2010). Over a period of years, researchers have established numerous individual and institutional interfaces of policy and practice both in Switzerland and abroad, in which insights are exchanged and from which new knowledge emerges (Zingerli *et al.* 2009).

Our study was conducted within the framework of this large programme with the aim of achieving better understanding of how effectively researchers engaged at the interface between research, policy and practice both in Switzerland and abroad (Michel *et al.* 2010). Four principal questions guided the study:

- (1) What are the outcomes of NCCR North–South activities?
- (2) Who are the non-academic partners researchers engage with?
- (3) What are the researchers' engagement strategies?
- (4) What are the enabling factors that contribute to effective dialogues between researchers and non-academic partners?

The study used a number of methods, including developing a tool for data collection, collecting written and oral data and analysing and selecting case studies. It started with the design of a worksheet on outcomes that contained basic elements of Outcome Mapping. Senior researchers were asked to use the worksheet to describe one outcome, the corresponding non-academic partner, possible indicators of the outcome, the reasons for the outcome and what they considered their own contribution. Finally, they were asked about contextual factors that contributed positively to the outcome. Semi-structured interviews with these individuals took place subsequently to collect more detailed narratives. The interviews were based on the written information provided on the worksheet. The data were analysed and organised according to a predefined analytical framework inspired by the Outcome Mapping and ROMA (Earl *et al.* 2001, Carden 2009, Young and Mendizabal 2009). Based on this dataset, four case studies were selected for a more in-depth analysis. Additional information was gathered for these case studies through the analysis of internal as well as external documents and additional contacts with partners.

Qualitative information was provided based on 23 completed worksheets on researchers' engagements with policymakers, practitioners or local communities. Thematically these examples deal with topics as diverse as governance, conflict, livelihoods, globalisation, health, sanitation, natural resources and sustainability in general. The research was disciplinarily rooted in the social, natural and engineering sciences. The examples came from Chad, Egypt, Ethiopia, Sudan, Kenya, Tanzania, Kyrgyzstan, India,

Nepal, Pakistan, Laos, Thailand, Vietnam, Costa Rica, Mexico, Bolivia and Switzerland, with some cases located in multiple countries.

Findings: outcomes, partners, engagement strategies and socio-political contexts

One of the strengths of the NCCR North–South framework lies in multiple opportunities for exchange and mutual learning among academic and non-academic partners from the South and the North. Although this has been pointed out since the beginning of the programme (Hurni *et al.* 2004), our study of the effectiveness of research partnerships explored for the first time the wealth of experience that researchers gained through working with non-academic actors. This section discusses the outcomes that researchers achieved in interacting with policy and practice and introduces the type of non-academic partners researchers engaged with. The diversity of the engagement strategies they applied is discussed. The section concludes with the socio-political contexts in which research–policy dialogues were embedded.

Outcomes

Our reflection on research effectiveness starts with an analysis of the changing practices that result from collaboration with researchers. Outcome is understood here as behaviour change grounded in the analytical framework of Outcome Mapping (Earl *et al.* 2001).

There are various outcomes of development research identified in the NCCR North–South study, ranging from minor exchanges of experience to more complex, long-lasting and binding forms of interaction with non-academic partners. Most respondents revealed a rich practice of engagement that evolved over the years and left its mark on their partners and themselves. Academic institutions became appreciated as valuable sources of information, whose research news was published in the non-scientific media and was read by the respective audiences of these publications. This public interest – measurable by the number of invitations received or non-academic texts published – is an important sign for researchers that they are being heard beyond academic borders. Besides the minor exchanges of experience, our findings also revealed much greater recognition of research by policymakers and practitioners. This ranged from influencing fundamental decisions in development organisations to contributing to legal changes at the local, sub-national or national level. One example is the social service for mobile pastoralists established in Chad with the help of the NCCR North–South. Studies on the health of mobile pastoralists and their animals were conducted in a partnership between research institutions from the Global North and South.³ One striking finding was that cattle were better covered by vaccination than were women and children. As a result, researchers initiated regular exchanges and seminars with the concerned population and with local and central authorities to inform them about insufficient access of the pastoralist population to human health services. This eventually led to a joint vaccination campaign for animals and humans. The Chadian government decided to implement an inter-sectoral programme focusing on the health of the nomadic population. This principle of inter-sectoral cooperation, promoted by NCCR North–South researchers, has a high potential in least developed countries, not only in Chad but also in other regions. Since the successful implementation of the joint vaccination service in Chad, the model has also been applied in Mauritania, Mali, Ethiopia, Kyrgyzstan and Mongolia.

At least three conclusions can be drawn from the case study on health and similar examples in the NCCR North–South study. The first conclusion is that outcomes do not

depend only on the researchers' knowledge and engagement but largely on the willingness of the partners. Indeed, excellent research and timely dissemination are important prerequisites. But fundamental changes in behaviour such as the implementation of an inter-sectoral programme for mobile pastoralists in Chad require a strong political will on the part of the government; they cannot be attributed solely to the engagement of researchers. Hence, researchers can influence changes but they cannot determine them. Instead of a causal link we therefore rather speak of a plausible link between research and policy as researchers can contribute to policy but they cannot cause political decisions to be taken. The second conclusion relates to the need to define partners and expected outcomes from the beginning of the project (Young and Mendizabal 2009). Our study confirmed the need for early identification of partners and objectives but simultaneously found that researchers should flexibly adapt their plans in the course of time. Significant changes most often depend on a set of favourable circumstances such as beneficial policy opportunity or a strong alliance between various actors. The role of researchers must therefore be considered in the broader framework of the policy environment so that they are able to flexibly pursue unforeseen courses of action. Finally, the third conclusion concerns the relatedness of minor and major outcomes. Analysis of the case studies showed that significant changes such as the introduction of the inter-sectoral programme are always the result of many small changes, for example, better trained midwives as a consequence of a workshop. Researchers need both short- and long-term perspectives with clear links in the chain of expected immediate, midterm and long-term outcomes. This helps to maintain a continuous and goal-oriented dialogue with policymakers and practitioners.

Non-academic partners

Non-academic partners are those individuals, groups and organisations to whom the research programme is directly linked and with whom it anticipates opportunities for influence (Earl *et al.* 2001). Characterisation of these partners is heavily dependent on the social realm in which they act. Strategies for informing policy and practice need to be adjusted accordingly.

The NCCR North–South study identified three types of non-academic partners: policymakers, development actors and local communities. Policymakers act in a political context, for example, a parliament, and are responsible for legislative processes, whereas development actors are concerned with the duties of governmental and non-governmental agencies that conduct development projects and programmes. In contrast to these partners, who are often embedded in national and international relations, local communities are generally more closely related to regional concerns and the problems of individual livelihoods. When researchers engage with non-academic partners, collaboration may focus on one type of partner but may well include various partners simultaneously.

One example of engagement with a diversity of actors – policymakers, development actors and local communities – is research on risk management in Bolivia. Bolivia is a mountainous country where rural and urban highland and lowland communities are exposed to multiple natural disaster risks such as floods, earthquakes and droughts. Despite existing laws at the national level, insufficient risk management exists at the local level. NCCR North–South research revealed that risk management mechanisms for facing the threats were incomplete, with local governments focusing on emergency actions instead of risk prevention. Researchers started collaborating with powerful local NGOs to put research insights into practice.⁴ Strategies for risk management were developed in six rural communities within several departments, and a resilience study was conducted in

various neighbourhoods of the city of La Paz. Researchers organised workshops to compile vulnerability maps in collaboration with local people. Additionally, they helped to establish municipal emergency operation centres and contingency plans. They selected municipalities according to criteria such as prevailing risks within the municipality, political openness of the government towards NGOs and research and functioning structures within the municipality and political continuity. In addition to work at the municipal level, researchers built alliances with national institutions. A most significant aspect of this collaboration was that researchers offered services in exchange for data. Researchers trained the staffs of the national service of meteorology and hydrology and the seismological observatory in data management for compiling risk and vulnerability maps, thereby accessing relevant data for research on natural disasters.⁵ This approach was essential for trust building.

Interaction between researchers and their non-academic partners in Bolivia is representative of many NCCR North–South relationships. Researchers selected their social counterparts strategically by carefully analysing the political and social environment. Research intervention started with partners who showed a positive attitude towards research, whereas sceptical partners were targeted at a later stage. Trust building took time in Bolivia but resulted in fruitful and long-lasting partnerships with ministries, NGOs, sub-national authorities and local people. A central element in trust building was the services researchers offered, such as training and advice, in exchange for information. Many informants stated that engaging with non-academic partners was a time-consuming and demanding task but a rewarding one.

Engagement strategies

When asked about the reasons for successfully collaborating with non-academics, respondents frequently mentioned their creativity and efforts in communicating research results beyond academia. Researchers wishing to maximise the effectiveness of science for policy or practice indeed need to be strategic, systematic and flexible in how they communicate with policymakers and society (Young and Mendizabal 2009).

The NCCR North–South study provides detailed descriptions of essential elements of engagement. These elements can be positioned on a continuum between research and application, with activities close to research at one pole and activities close to research use at the other (see Figure 1). The elements of the NCCR North–South engagement strategy are characterised as follows:

- Disseminating research results beyond a scientific audience: Research results are consciously translated to audiences outside the scientific realm and communicated in media and read by policymakers, development practitioners and local communities. Disseminating research results in the right format and reader-friendly language is seen as a precondition for being perceived as a legitimate partner and for gaining reputation as a provider of relevant information. In Central Asia, for example, a newspaper and a radio programme were produced to inform local communities about the latest research insights into livestock and pasture management.
- Networking with policymakers, development practitioners and local communities: Networking means that researchers proactively explain the policy relevance of research insights to key persons who could possibly use the results. Some researchers conduct a careful stakeholder assessment before starting a dialogue, as they did, for example, in Tanzania. They networked with partners to bring the most important decision-makers to a roundtable to negotiate the sustainable use of forest resources.

- **Dedicated sharing and mutual learning events:** Sharing and learning refers to the multiple ways academic and non-academic stakeholders are brought together on an equal footing to exchange ideas and to learn collectively. This might be the realisation of a workshop, a format that is used for almost every research topic covered in the NCCR North–South. One example is the regular exchange researchers organised in Chad with the local population and the local and central authorities to share ideas on how to solve the problem of insufficient access of the pastoralist population to human health services.
- **Advising decision-makers:** By contrast with networking, which depends on a proactive researcher, advice is given on demand. Researchers who are able to maintain close and trusting relationships with policymakers offer regular counsel on policy matters. This includes activities from spontaneous briefings to short- or even long-term mandates. Two examples are mandates on natural resources and health services by member institutions of the NCCR North–South.⁶
- **Teaching:** Capacity development is a specific way of translating research results into policy and implementation. Researchers are sometimes assigned to teach in their fields of competence, for example, in the field of data management in the case of risk management in Bolivia. Expanding the capacity of target groups through teaching is an efficient way to build strong links between partners and empower people. Yet it differs greatly from sharing and mutual learning, as knowledge exchange during teaching takes place in hierarchical structures.
- **Implementing research:** Some researchers, besides generating knowledge and tools for decision-making, take the lead in implementing research results. Implementation plans are developed, tested and – in the absence of concrete leadership in the policy or development sector – realised. The NCCR North–South provides a specific and frequently used funding scheme for researchers to make progress towards implementation of research findings.⁷ Researchers temporarily cross the borders of academia and cooperate in the practical application of research results.
- **Lobbying and advocacy:** Lobbying and advocacy are often used when policy and implementation actors show indifference or even hostility towards research. Close links to civil society organisations and the media are necessary to draw public attention to certain issues and to increase the pressure on decision-makers. For example, in Nepal, the Dalit movement was supported by researchers campaigning for the rights of the landless at a moment of political turmoil.

Elements of the NCCR North–South engagement strategy on how to influence policy, implementation and local communities are used by all members of the research programme in part, although not in totality. Most researchers consciously disseminate research results, network with non-academic audiences and offer services for sharing and mutual learning. Some successfully advise or teach, whereas a few are dedicated to implementing research results or lobbying and advocacy. What counts for all is that the choice of a certain strategy, as opposed to others, must be grounded in analysis of the socio-political context in which non-academic actors are embedded.

Socio-political and social context

To achieve enhanced effectiveness, researchers need a clear understanding of the context in which their policymaking allies are acting. According to the experiences of the IDRC, governments and policy communities can be sorted into various categories of research

and policy interaction (Carden 2009). These range from favourable contexts with a clear policy demand to less favourable contexts where governments and policy communities treat research with disinterest or even hostility.

The NCCR North–South study provided indications about the various contexts in which researchers and their policymaking allies act. A think tank on land issues in Nepal established by academics is an example of researchers working in a context of clear policy demand. In Nepal, land has always been the most contested natural resource. Land reform, debates, peasant movements and land-based research at different levels address land-related problems. But actions have not been coordinated, and collective responses to undertaking land reform and management have been constrained. In this context, researchers in the NCCR North–South successfully carried out research on land-related issues for a number of years (Pyakuryal *et al.* 2008, Upreti *et al.* 2008). Their publications became popular, and researchers were asked to translate their books from English into Nepali. They received invitations to speak at important events such as the meetings of the national land reform commission and on radio and television. As a response to the growing policy demand, researchers decided to form a Consortium for Land Research and Policy Dialogue (COLARP) in association with Nepali academic institutions, policymakers, NGOs and activists.⁸ Today, this think tank helps to bridge the gap between research, policy and implementation concerning land-related issues by feeding ongoing research results on poor farmers and landless communities into formulations of land policy. COLARP is a unique combination of academic and non-academic institutions, which successfully formulates responses to land-related issues. With this think tank, NCCR North–South researchers were able to fully explore the potential of the high demand for research results in Nepal.

Although this example accounts for the ability of researchers to strategically adapt to a given environment, collection of data on the socio-political contexts in this study proved to be rather incomplete. There are many indirect references to policymaking contexts, but the data were often too limited to deduce general conclusions. This has several consequences. Firstly, systematic assessment of the contextual factors suggested by Carden, which differentiates between five types of contexts, could not be applied to the study (Carden 2009). Secondly, we were unable to fully explore the different characteristics of the realms – the political, the social and the local – in which non-academic partners are embedded. And thirdly, we were also unable to draw conclusions about alliances between researchers and political partners in the socio-political context. The study did not generate enough information to understand exactly with whom researchers allied to enhance the political weight of scientific arguments. This lack of data needs to be overcome in future assessments on the effectiveness of the NCCR North–South research.

There are various interpretations of the fact that information on the socio-political context, including political stakeholders, was insufficiently provided in the study. One is that researchers are simply unaware of how much context matters. But we rather believe that many researchers implicitly engage with contextual matters without reflecting on them systematically. Yet the NCCR North–South study makes clear that researchers who claim to produce development-relevant knowledge need to carefully analyse the socio-political environments in which their non-academic counterparts are embedded.

Conclusions and recommendations

The NCCR North–South study aimed at better understanding the strategies of researchers in influencing policy and practice by exploring how researchers engaged with

non-academic partners. Summarising the wealth of experience and practice, the contributions of this study to the emerging literature on practice-based insights about the effectiveness of development research are encapsulated in the following graph (Figure 1). On the upper level (white boxes), the graph visualises the engagement strategies of researchers as described in the previous section.

On the lower level (grey boxes), the graph presents four framing conditions that we consider decisive for successful and sustainable interaction of academic and non-academic partners at the interface of research, policy and practice. These framing conditions are as follows:

- Research orientation: Most respondents in the NCCR North–South study considered that their research was highly relevant for their partners because it dealt with real problems of unsustainable development. Research topics were defined in cooperation with partners to ensure that their concerns were addressed from the beginning. Orienting research towards social concerns was considered an important reason for achieving meaningful outcomes.
- Choice of partners: The choice of academic and non-academic partners significantly influences the policy dialogue of researchers. NCCR North–South researchers aiming to inform policymakers, development actors and local communities need to carefully select partners with whom they want to interact. Strategies of interaction are adapted according to the research receptivity of the partners. Links to strategic partners need to be viewed in a long-term perspective to achieve consolidated and trustworthy relations.

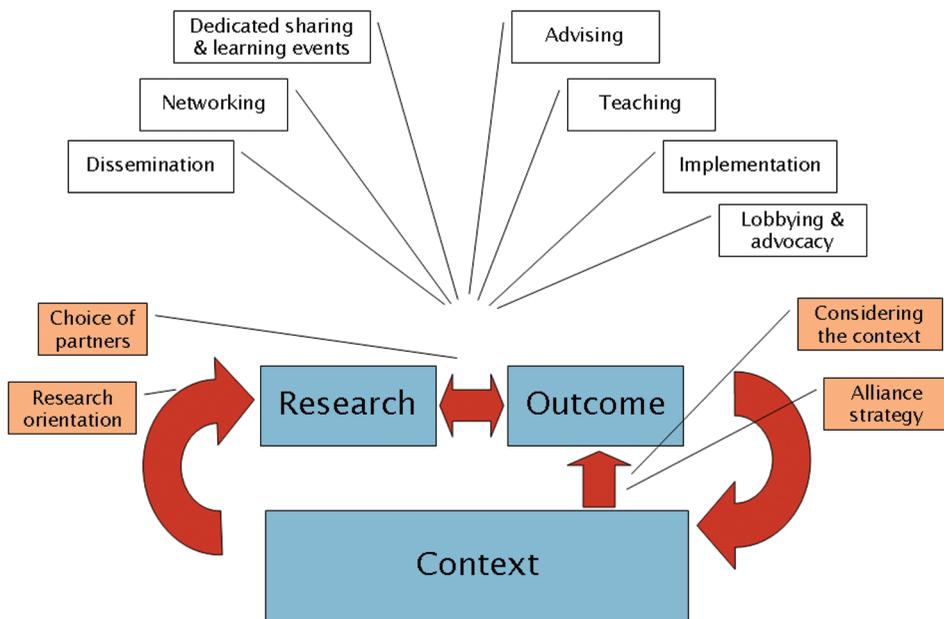


Figure 1. Engagement strategies of researchers and framing conditions for effective policy dialogues at the interface of research, policy and practice.

Source: Claudia Michel, Eva Heim.

- Consideration of the context: A clear understanding of the social and political environment in which the researchers' partners are acting is necessary to raise the power of scientific arguments. Analysis of the context might be grounded in the categorisation developed by Carden (2009) or it might be based on techniques developed by ODI (Ramalingam 2006, Young and Mendizabal 2009).⁹
- Alliance strategy: Researchers need to be conscious that research is only one factor among many in influencing decision-making. In their attempts to inform policy and implementation, therefore, they should proactively seek collaboration with other actors with an influence on policymaking to strengthen their voice. Alliance strategy requires careful selection of these partners.

We conclude with two recommendations. Firstly, we recommend that more empirical research is necessary on exploring the effectiveness of development research and on other topics of targeted research. There is a growing theoretical debate on the relationship between research, policy and practice and new concepts are emerging that provide a better grasp of the context of researchers' policy dialogue (Carden 2009, Young and Mendizabal 2009). Yet empirical studies to test and validate these theoretical contributions are missing. Most probably they exist but are often not published at all or appear only in grey literature. Secondly, we recommend that the links between research and the context should be brought into sharper focus in the future. This means that researchers are aware that research is only one factor among many that influence policy and practice, whereas other social forces may exercise more power over decision-making. It also implies that researchers actively search for allies to strengthen the influence of science on policy and on practice. The NCCR North–South study revealed that researchers often did not engage in sufficient strategic analysis of the policy context in which their non-academic partners were acting. Being unaware of the research receptivity of the government and policy community may lead to inadequate engagement strategies. For the same reason, alliance strategies may be deficient or fail.

In the case of the NCCR North–South, we believe that many researchers have great potential and rich experience in networking and partnering, but this knowledge could be better shared within and beyond the programme. In this spirit, our study of the effectiveness of NCCR North–South research is one step in a longer process of learning how to engage with policy and practice from a research perspective. We are therefore eager to seize the opportunity of our experience to engage with scholars from development research to explore the potential of monitoring and learning as a way of enhancing the effectiveness of development research networks.

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Notes

1. The Research and Policy in Development Programme (RAPID) of the Overseas Development Institute (ODI) is a programme that works at the intersection of research, policy and practice (<http://www.odi.org.uk/work/programmes/rapid/default.asp>; 02 July 2010).

2. Targeted research as defined by the SNSF means that researchers and potential users of research results should be closely linked to facilitate knowledge and technology transfers from research to policy and practice. For more details see <http://www.snf.ch>; 03 August 2010.
3. Collaborating NCCR North–South researchers came from the Swiss TPH (<http://www.swisstph.ch/de.html>; 29 July 2010) and the CSRS from Côte d'Ivoire (<http://www.csrs.ch/>; 29 July 2010). The non-academic partners were national and district veterinary and health administration and services as well as nomadic people. On the national level, the Chadian Ministry of Planning as well as the Ministries of Health and Livestock were involved. For more details on this case see Schelling *et al.* (2008).
4. Institutional Partners of the NCCR North–South researchers were the Centro de Investigación para el Desarrollo (CIDES), Fundación La Paz, Fundación para el Desarrollo Participativo Comunitario (FUNDEPCO), OXFAM International, UNICEF Bolivia. See also Quiroga *et al.* (2008).
5. Servicio nacional de Meteorología e Hidrología SENAMI (<http://www.senamhi.gov.bo/>; 29 July 2010), Observatorio San Calixto (<http://www.observatoriosancalixto.org/home.html>; 29 July 2010).
6. For the mandate on natural resources to CDE, see <http://www.cde.unibe.ch>; 30 April 2010. For the health services offered by Swiss TPH, see <http://www.swisstph.ch>; 30 April 2010.
7. A practice-oriented component of the NCCR North–South are Partnership Actions for Mitigating Syndromes (PAMS). These are projects of limited financial scope and duration, implemented by NCCR North–South researchers in collaboration with local actors. For more details, see <http://www.north-south.unibe.ch/content.php/page/id/228>; 03 August 2010. See also Outcome Highlights: <http://www.north-south.unibe.ch/content.php/page/id/315>; 20 August 2010.
8. The partners of the NCCR North–South researchers in Nepal are Kathmandu University, Tribhuvan University, High Level Land Reform Commission, Ministry of Land Reform and Management, National Land Rights Forum, Nepal Institute of Development Studies and Community Self-Reliance Centre Nepal.
9. ODI developed a specific framework to map the political context. It differentiates between the political context, links, evidence and external influences (ODI 2004).

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