

Knowledge in Development: Fostering Knowledge Generation in the Global South

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by

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Who produces the knowledge some believe we have about development? And who consumes it? Plentiful experiential evidence suggests that ideas about development are largely produced in the developed countries, and crucially, legitimated in them. They are also often peddled in Southern countries by Northern institutions, where to varying degrees they receive ‘take up’.

Without the legitimization provided by Northern institutions (whether universities, aid organizations or think tanks) those ideas that are produced in the South fail to capture broader attention, and can even fail to enjoy much influence in their home countries. Moreover, there is reason to believe that the ideas which gain prominence are not necessarily the ‘best’ but rather those which happen to be selected through the prevailing selection mechanisms, involving (sometimes subtly and sometimes grossly) politicized institutions and biased media.

Development has flourished as an institutionalized discourse and as a set of practices for 60 years. However, ideas about development continue disproportionately to be produced in certain places, and authority is largely bestowed upon them in those same places. The fads which serially sweep the world of development theorists and practitioners (for instance, currently the idea that randomized trials are necessary to evaluate the effectiveness of development interventions or that ‘aid’ is counterproductive) invariably emanate from the North. This fact about the flow of ideas draws little attention. That inattention seems at first surprising, but the studied disregard of the obvious is not altogether unexpected in a field characterized by enthusiastic use of euphemisms (among the least bewildering of which are ‘technical cooperation’ and ‘capacity building’).

An empirical study of who produces the reigning ideas in development studies (and by extension in development policy), and to what extent these ideas gain currency because of where they are produced and who first favor them, cries out to be done. ([A recent article](#) by a group of World Bank researchers gives some measure of a related but distinct problem – the disproportionate attention paid in economics journals to the North.) However, the empirical researchers littering elite academic and policy institutions who are busily attempting to identify with statistical precision the effects of the latest micro-intervention are not very interested in this.

What are the barriers to a more equitable world pattern of ideas production, legitimization and dissemination? As importantly, what effects would we expect that a more equitable pattern would have?

The current, and sadly entrenched, inequalities in ideas production have their origins in international differences in the resources devoted to research (whether 'basic' or applied), weaknesses in the academic and policy institutions in the South, even in those countries which are now gaining in importance, and path-dependent reasons for the lock-in of the position at the global commanding heights of ideas production arrogated by Northern metropolitan centers.

Invigoration of Southern academic and policy institutions can be aided by material resources but often requires other contributions. The interpersonally interdependent 'team based' nature of much intellectual production makes it hard to establish or revive intellectual institutions without careful and extended nurturing. The subordination of these institutions to political establishments, national or international (often abetted by a financing model in which projects and consultancies are made essential to the survival of both institutions and individuals) has corrupted or destroyed once flourishing educational and research institutions (of which it is not hard to provide a long list) or made for unfertile soil. There is of course some shared responsibility here.

Some years ago the World Bank helped to establish the Global Development Network as an ostensibly independent initiative to foster research on development in the South. In fact, the Bank was unwilling to un-tether the apron strings, maintaining a subservient organization in perpetual tutelage to the Bank's ideas as to what constitutes good research. The same is true of various donor driven research initiatives in specific regions (such as Sub-Saharan Africa). The real solution is to create independent regional research funds with permanent endowments or with financing tied to transparent formulae which are independent of donor whims. These research funds can in turn seed independent institutions which have the power to question, criticize, produce and legitimate ideas through bona fide intellectual scrutiny. Competition in the production and dissemination of ideas can turn development economists from 'yes men in the halls of political economy' (to borrow George Stigler's memorable phrase) to real servants of society.