

PRESENTATION FOR THE CONFERENCE ‘KNOWLEDGE ON THE MOVE’
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Importance of knowledge

Ladies and gentlemen, good morning to you all. As we have heard explain, the knowledge needs of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs are changing. It is not only the minister who needs advice on the evidence base of his policies. Policy officers at various levels need to be able to access and apply knowledge rapidly in multiple contexts. This trend is not limited to the Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs, nor is it limited to policy makers in general. Many practitioners feel this need as well, and so does the private sector. In fact, these changing needs are indicative of a much wider trend that is actually global in nature. Knowledge is becoming more and more important. Worldwide the economy and society at large are becoming more knowledge intensive. Knowledge and innovation are increasingly recognized as important ingredients for economic and social development. Knowledge is on the move. It is becoming abundantly available and is conquering the world at a rapid pace, but unfortunately it does so unevenly and passes by specific countries and population groups.

Importance of knowledge capacity

The growing importance of knowledge, and the deepening of knowledge society, makes that knowledge capacity is becoming more and more vital for development. With this I mean the capacity to access and interpret knowledge, to mould and adapt it to different contexts, to create new knowledge, to share and communicate it, and to apply and use it. It also is the capacity to engage with all those who have a stake in the generation and use of knowledge. Knowledge capacity strongly depends upon the way the system of knowledge and innovation is organized in society, the institutions, the interaction, the infrastructure and the policies regarding science and innovation.

Importance of research capacity

When it comes to knowledge capacity, science and research have an indispensable role to play. Not because research would be the only source of new knowledge or science would be the only form of high quality knowledge. No, it is indispensable because research (science in the making) implies a continuous process of reflection on methods of knowledge production, on rules and criteria for proper thinking and reasoning, on reliability and validity of knowledge. Scientific research contributes to the generalization and standardization of knowledge, lifting it beyond specific environments. It allows for obtaining knowledge from a specific context and adjusting and applying it in a different context without losing essential meaning and significance. The importance of this should not be underestimated in a globalizing world. Research capacity, therefore, is a core and indispensable element of knowledge capacity at large, just like knowledge capacity is vital for development.

Importance of independent and critical reflection

For knowledge capacity to blossom, a country needs a strong and independent knowledge system with sufficient research capacity. It needs a community of scholars and scientists who can set a long term research agenda and who have both the position and capacity for independent and critical reflection. For sure this community needs to be properly embedded in society at large and should be able to engage with multiple stakeholders in the interest of valorization of knowledge and endogenous innovation. But this community should not be at the back and call of policy makers or the private sector.

Brain drain

Unfortunately, we have to observe that in many of the poorest developing countries such capacity for independent science and critical reflection is fragmented and rapidly deteriorating. The effects of brain drain can be quite devastating. Again we see knowledge on the move, but this time not in the sense of knowledge spreading globally but rather in the sense of knowledge capacity concentrating in institutes and centers of excellence in the richer countries. In fact we observe a process of knowledge resources being mobilized according to the needs of global markets, leading to a concentration of resources in the hands of the dominant global market players. To mention but one example, there are more African scientists and engineers working in the United States than on the entire African continent.

Marginalization and exclusion undermine capacity

Globally speaking, we witness a process of marginalization and exclusion in terms of knowledge capacity. Deteriorating knowledge capacity means not only a reduced ability to produce new knowledge but also a reduced capacity to tap into and adjust knowledge from elsewhere. It makes a country dependent not only on external knowledge but also on foreign ability to adjust and apply such knowledge. In short, it undermines ownership. It undermines the capacity to independently develop a knowledge or research agenda. It even undermines the ability to recognize the importance of knowledge capacity for development. This should make us pause and reflect on the implications for ownership and demand orientation.

Track-record of policy makers and practitioners

International development cooperation is slow in rising to this challenge. In fact, I feel that the donor side, be they policy makers or practitioners (and I feel entitled to say this because I have been there, in both camps), does not have a very strong record when it comes to strengthening knowledge and research capacity. Quite often the emphasis has been on mobilizing capacity for operational research, short-term policy agendas, and harnessing local knowledge capacity for consultancies, rapid appraisals, evaluations and such. More often than not this has undermined rather than strengthened the ability for independent and critical reflection and agenda setting. Only very few donors have persistently focused on long term institutional capacity development in the field of research.

Lack of attention for knowledge in poverty reduction strategies

But the recipient side equally shows limited attention for strengthening knowledge and innovation systems. More often than not, government officials are not particularly pleased with independent and critical voices. Critical research hardly plays a role in the development and formulation of poverty reduction strategies. Nor do knowledge and research figure very prominently in the content and choices of these strategies itself. Apparently it is not recognized as a priority. The need for it does not find an expression in demand. And the donors again follow suit. Aligning, under the framework of the Paris Declaration, with the national development priorities, donors equally disregard knowledge capacity and especially research capacity as a priority area. So the changes the donors and practitioners feel themselves in terms of their own knowledge and learning needs are not reflected in a new development focus.

Researchers in developing countries being pulled apart

Researchers in developing countries find themselves in another fix. The landscape of science and research is itself changing under the pressures of globalization. More and more often research takes place in the context of international networks and exchange. This offers new

possibilities for researchers in developing countries, but not necessarily in the interest of local development. The internationalization of research strengthens the pull factor of the centers of excellence in the North. If not causing brain drain directly, it nevertheless pulls the orientation of researchers in developing countries towards international research agendas, which are not necessarily geared to local development needs or priorities. This makes that their research becomes less embedded in the societal context. This drains energy away from the national systems of innovation and weakens the valorization of knowledge in the local context. On the other hand, many researchers in developing countries also feel the lure or pressure to become involved in commissioned research on behalf of donors or international development NGOs. In this sense, researchers feel pulled in opposite directions.

Local and global dimension of development

I feel it is necessary to see these tendencies against the backdrop of changes in the global context of development and international cooperation. Poverty takes on new forms. It is increasingly recognized that problems of poverty and exclusion are not limited to developing countries. The so-called developed world faces problems that used to be associated with the Third World. Development, then, has both global and local dimensions and development challenges are everywhere. I want to point out that this opens up endless possibilities for new research agendas, for new partnerships and alliances. Acknowledging that development problems are not limited to the South can make us realize that solutions are not limited to the North. Yet, by and large the world of development cooperation does not seem eager to embrace this wider, global dimension. Development cooperation continues to focus on specific countries. It continues to work with the list of the OECD Development Assistance Committee of least developed countries, neatly limiting development problems and hence development cooperation efforts to specific geographical locations. In fact, with the attention for ownership and alignment, this focus has become stronger.

Research for development in confusion

So we find yet another contradiction. International development cooperation moves in one direction while international research cooperation moves in another. The field of research for development finds itself caught in between and the same holds for individual researchers, for donors and policy makers, and for practitioners dealing with this field. Research for development is being tossed now this way and now that, not knowing where to look or where to go. The death of research for development has occasionally been announced. More numerous have been the calls to re-invent and rejuvenate it.

The overall complex picture

At this point let me pause and invite you to sit back and let sink in what I have just said. Roll back in your minds the picture I have just painted. About knowledge becoming more important and spreading globally and knowledge capacity becoming concentrated leading to exclusion and marginalization. How the growing importance of knowledge is reflected in new knowledge and learning needs amongst donors and practitioners, yet it is not reflected in new development priorities. How deteriorating knowledge capacity leads to disabled ownership and misguided demand, yet how donors continue to focus on development priorities formulated under this handicap. How development cooperation and research cooperation move in opposite directions. How researchers and the field of research for development as such are pulled apart because of this. How international development cooperation runs the risk of being blind to the global dimensions of development because of the very definitions, modalities and instruments it uses.

Interlocking problems and challenge to analyze this

Look at this picture. Isn't it an intriguing set of questions and dilemma's? What a complex knot of interlocking problems and contradictions. And what a challenge to try and unravel this knot to come up with new vistas and new solutions. Isn't it just perfect to be able to take a few days out of our busy schedules to reflect on this, to discuss and analyze this, to exchange and share with peers and colleagues who have an intimate knowledge of this field?

Welcome to the conference

Ladies and gentlemen, I welcome you to the conference 'Knowledge on the Move'. As your convener it is my privilege and great pleasure to do so. I feel honored that you have responded to my call in such large numbers. Let me assure you that we have quite an interesting crowd of people here. There is a wide variety of scholars and scientists, many of you leading figures in your field. There is a rather unique representation of research donors, and you'll find we have a good cross section of practitioners and development NGOs.

Objectives of the conference

We have an interesting two days ahead of us. During these days we will take stock of past experiences and lessons learned. We will discuss the positioning of research for development, we will look into enhancing research capacity in the context of innovation systems, and we will reflect on the implications for ownership and alliances. This will be the backbone of the content of this conference. But beyond that I hope we will contribute to a new spirit, to generate new enthusiasm for research for development, and to break new ground in proposing new modalities and partnerships.

Challenge and best wishes

I invite you all, in fact I challenge you to rise to the occasion and make this conference into a memorable event. I wish you all penetrating insights, vibrant discussions and a joyful exchange of ideas. Thank you.