

# Drivers of Knowledge Production: Research Partnerships for Sustainable Development

Nicola Borregaard *RIDES, Chile*

**A**s the World Summit on Sustainable Development takes place, there are numerous evaluations of what has been done to achieve more sustainable patterns of living. Politicians, governments and industry are under scrutiny as well as NGOs and society as a whole. The research community is sometimes forgotten in these evaluations, probably because it undertakes most of these analyses itself and forgets the self-portrait. The reality is that research has contributed directly or indirectly to most of the initiatives undertaken by NGOs, government and industry for sustainable development. However, as the link is seldom obvious, it is valid to ask *how far* research has effectively contributed to sustainable development, *whether* it has done so in an efficient way, and *to what extent* research reflects and responds to the concerns of the different groups in society. It is time to think through the patronage and governance of research for sustainable development, and the distribution of its costs and benefits.

Does research succeed in integrating local demands into global agendas and issues and *vice versa*? Is research ultimately meeting the needs of environmental improvement, more equity and economic growth? In order to live up to this challenge, research has to be submitted to a process that involves all stakeholders.

The interaction and co-operation between the scientific community, politicians and the public in general

stands at the heart of Agenda 21's Chapter 31. The often-heard call for 'independent' research does not imply a separation from the stakeholders, rather it implies a balanced consideration of the roles and perspectives of the different stakeholders. Indeed, the construction of partnerships at all levels to drive the research agenda seems essential. As one participant in the recent IIED International Workshop on Research Partnerships for Sustainable Development stated: 'Knowledge is power, but the importance of stakeholders has to be recognised.'

In a preliminary exercise we conducted a survey and analysis in three countries regarding research on sustainable development: Argentina, Chile and Pakistan. We also looked at some international institutions. The main issues that arise from this analysis are summarised below. As the findings are not based on an exhaustive survey, what is presented here does not have any aim beyond stimulating a discussion on these important issues. However, it was clear at the IIED workshop that many of our findings have strong resonance elsewhere, too.

## 1. Existing research agendas and their deficiencies

Agenda setting is not a clear, orderly process and the drivers behind research are thus extremely difficult to identify. It takes a long time to understand the complex relationships and interactions between the different drivers and actors

### KEY CHALLENGES:

- Although no-one would contest the importance of research for decision-making processes – as inputs to policy-making, to production and action, and to social relations – there is also a common feeling that research is often not as useful as it should be
- For the agenda setting process it is crucial that there is more interaction between the different stakeholders, especially between (local) users and researchers
- Using national bodies as intermediaries to channel international resources to other national and local actors – researchers and users who set their own agendas – might be one way to establish the links between national and international actors and agendas
- the predominant future challenge is the synthesis and dissemination of existing ideas and information and the creation of research networks, rather than the generation of new knowledge

involved. However, the outcome of the agenda setting process reflects the following shortcomings.

In general even though the individual institutions – funders, users and research institutes – have their agendas, these are often vague or broad, and co-operation between institutions on shared agendas is rare. As a consequence, clear overall research agendas on sustainable development seldom occur at the national level.

Themes are not generally strategic and long term, even though sustainable development is oriented to the long term and research should help to guide this process. Most research institutes state that their research is oriented at the medium term, and less at long and short term issues. Rather than analysing ‘sustainable development’ in general, they focus on concrete issues such as water and air contamination and natural resource exploitation. Local development has also played a role, but there seem to be few research centres that integrate local and global issues. It is interesting to see that the agendas in Pakistan (which could be considered as driven more by international donor interests) emphasise Multilateral Environmental Agreements and national strategies on sustainable development – themes that are much less significant in the Argentine and Chilean cases (which have been less heavily influenced by international donors). On the other hand the themes of the research agendas do seem to reflect national priorities – in Pakistan poverty alleviation, and in Chile trade liberalisation and export promotion, and trade and environment.

There is a lack of research on sustainability issues – the current agendas still contain few ‘sustainable development’ elements, in that they are not directed at integrating the three basic dimensions of sustainable development. For example, whereas ‘poverty’ is mentioned by numerous research centres as one of their main focuses, the integration of poverty and environmental issues was not mentioned by any research centre as among the five most important themes they investigate.

There is a lack of co-operation not only amongst researchers but also amongst users of research and even more so between researchers, users and funders – it seems that research agendas come about through an implicit rather than an explicit process.

There is a lack of local research – even though there are significant donor programmes at local level, and there is significant demand at the level of the users for local research. If there has been progress in this area in recent years, which one might suspect, it has certainly not been sufficiently documented. Indeed, there is a lack of systematisation and dissemination of existing research.

## 2. Different actors as drivers of research

In the country studies different actors were identified as dominant drivers of research agendas. Whereas in Argentina and in Pakistan funders apparently play a decisive role in defining agendas, in Chile the national government seems more important.

In all cases, funding is shifting towards international sources. This situation is even more significant considering that the primary sources of funding are already international, and it imposes a clear challenge to

international funders effectively to capture national and local concerns. In Chile, international funding comes from foundations and intergovernmental organisations; in Pakistan, mainly from bilateral aid. In Argentina it is felt that “the funders’ influence on policy makers or the research population is seldom transparent or widely disclosed.” And “the dominant trend seems to be the research findings’ upwards delivery towards international agencies who then have institutionalised channels for the application or enforcement of policy recommendations upon Southern governments with their seal of approval, but without participation, feedback or previous validation from local researchers”. However, recognising that international donors play such an important role in agenda setting, it is necessary to examine different cases.

‘Innovation’ is often an important criterion for funding research – perhaps this is why our survey showed that new research is not felt to be the most pressing need. Instead, the systematisation and dissemination of existing research is considered to be crucial. As Crewe and Young put it in their recently published report ‘Bridging Research and Pro-Poor Policy: Context, Links and Evidence’:

*Since funders and publishers often put pressure on researchers to make fresh contributions to knowledge, the emphasis of their studies is to produce original and scholarly, rather than useful, knowledge.*

In their report ‘Lessons from Twenty Years of Research Support in the Central Andes’ Weber and Mujica describe the process of IDRC-funded research in the Central Andes, and emphasise the importance of the funders in agenda setting:

*By the 1980s, IDRC staff began to challenge researchers to think more broadly about local communities and their production activities.*

However, in long term research processes that integrate different stakeholders, this situation is not destined to remain a one-way relationship. The same authors state:

*All these groups (local researchers, international researchers, funders, local communities and policy makers) have worked together over the past 20 years, they have shaped and influenced each others thinking and perspectives.*

Political parties can also be drivers of the research agenda. However, at least in the case of developing countries, they have maintained themselves at the margin, with very few exceptions – including for example the (ab)use of the Kuznets curve argument, stating that environmental improvement is automatically brought about through an increase in GNP per capita.

Most of those interviewed agreed that demand-driven research is on the increase – but demand is not equal to need! It may merely imply that research is getting more heavily dependent on funders’ or users’ agendas rather than on the research centres’ own agendas.

## 3. Local involvement in research

Local involvement is not only about implementing research locally, but also about capturing local concerns to feed into the definition of the research agenda, and about how local knowledge feeds into the research itself. And it is also about realising the value of local groups as counterparts.

If there has been significant progress on local implementation, the current challenge is to reflect local knowledge and experience in global dynamics and policy-making. Just as international research institutes increasingly value national partners, national institutes should value local counterparts. As indicated by one respondent, a local NGO representative, to this project's questionnaire:

*Researchers in general do not value the knowledge we have on the local communities. They arrive to the scene and apply their methodologies as if everything was the same everywhere.*

Crewe and Young remind us, however, that it is not only the researchers who have to be aware of the potential benefits of collaboration with local groups. The latter often forget about the added value that researchers can bring, and have leapt from the local to global, armed only with anecdotes rather than substantiated analysis:

*NGOs seem to have a more beneficial influence if they ensure high quality research by developing imaginative research methods, systematising their learning and sharing more constructively with other agencies.*

Constructively sharing research early in agenda setting, rather than during project implementation, would help to identify actual needs and design more appropriate research agendas.

#### 4. Networks among research institutes

There is no one global network serving the spectrum of research centres, rather a number of networks and alliances that address different areas and subjects within the sustainable development field.

Networks among research institutes themselves are essential to:

- access and secure money
- keep abreast and informed of issues
- pool expertise
- spread understanding
- work through others to have policy influence
- build capacity for long term aims, and
- share an agenda, stay in touch, and see what emerges

Survey participants have emphasised that such networks are useful for sharing experiences, developing common positions, and for capacity building.

The best known global networks related to sustainable development are probably the Research on Knowledge Systems Programme (established by the IDRC), the Global Development Network, the Global Knowledge Partnership, and the Sustainable Development Communications Network, Canada (which maintains the Network for Sustainable Development, OneWorld.net). Each of these has different objectives, but all are oriented at a strengthening of research for development (or sustainable development) by fostering partnerships, networking and exchange of expertise and information.

Whereas these networks help in systematisation, providing for example well-functioning data banks on

existing research institutes, they have not been used more explicitly for the definition of research agendas.

It is interesting to note that many directors of research institutes that are part of these global networks are not even aware of their membership or participation. Thus, in many cases, the participation can be considered relatively passive, with limited awareness about the resources and tools provided by such networks. However, beyond the provision of data banks they are considered useful for the overall identification of success stories and lessons, for defining research priorities, and for systematising research on multi- and inter-disciplinary themes.

Thematically oriented networks such as the Grupo Zapallar, a Latin American network of experts in trade and environment, the Consultative Group on Sustainable Development Indicators, or the Climate Change Knowledge Network could be more relevant for the concrete exchange of experiences, information and definition of research agendas.

Whereas national research centers participate in different networks at the international level, national networks in developing countries are comparatively rare as demonstrated in the country cases.

More recently, new types of network are evolving between developing country research centers and industrialised country research institutes. One of the first examples of these networks is the Regional and International Network Group, Ring, founded in 1992. Others include IISD's Knowledge Networks, or the Access Initiative of the World Resources Institute. The predominant characteristic of these new types of networks is that they are effective, with all members active, and, most importantly, national and international research institutes participating on an equal basis, even though they assume different functions. International institutes are, as a rule, key to accessing funding sources, and tend to set the general thematic framework under which the networks operate. However, at present such co-operation between research centres is still in its infancy.

#### 5. Networks between research institutes, users and funders

Networks involving both research centres and users of research are rare, even though they are considered key in bringing developing country research organisations closer to the global agenda and to international organisations – as well as in bringing local stakeholders closer to research and policy, and in inserting local knowledge into international agendas. Initial attempts have recently begun: for example, UNCTAD and UNEP, through their Capacity Building Task Force on Trade, Environment and Development (CBTF) programme are bringing together a group of organisations to form a loose research 'network'. These types of interactions are important in filling a crucial gap by providing more direct, more permanent and thus more systematic links between UN institutions and the research community.

Other types of long term, permanent or formal relationships between funders, users and research centres are also uncommon. The main tool for communication and collaboration still seems to be seminars and conferences and international meetings. In almost all of these, academics participate with users and funders, private and public sector

representatives and NGOs, and a dialogue between them takes place. Modern communications technology plays little part in these relationships. It is also significant that advisory committees have become popular: the presence of researchers in users' committees is just as important as the presence of users and funders in the committees of research institutes. It will have to be analysed in how far there are more cost-effective approaches for co-operation, but the relative efficiency and equality of these approaches needs to be analysed.

Several main issues can be highlighted:

1. For the agenda setting process it is crucial that there is more interaction between the different stakeholders, especially between (local) users and researchers. There is a clear lack of engagement, transparency, and systematisation. Networks can form a solid base for more effective and efficient interaction. More permanent contact between research institutes and users could also be established through the creation of advisory committees in the research centres and in user institutions that do not currently have such committees, or a more equitable representation in cases where such committees already exist.
2. The lack of funding, especially from national sources in developing countries, requires attention. The trend towards greater funding by international sources is positive, but the lack of national funding creates instability. Furthermore, international funding is in general project-related and not a permanent or institutional source of funding. Using national bodies as intermediaries to channel international resources to other national and local actors – researchers and users who set their own agendas – might be one way to establish the links between national and international actors and agendas.
3. It appears that, at least at the level of international research centres and probably also at the level of national centres, there are signs of increased funding from business associations and large multinational companies. The implications of this change should be analysed in greater detail.
4. Efficiency could be increased by more systematically defining research agendas. The lack of national or international agendas is evident and certainly does not help to promote the necessary co-operation, transparency, and participation necessary for useful research and research that benefits different groups to an equal extent. It also results in inefficient duplication and gaps in capacities and programmes.
5. It is noteworthy that the vast majority of respondents to the questionnaires at the national level do not consider the generation of new knowledge to be the predominant future challenge. This is primarily seen to be the synthesis and dissemination of existing knowledge, and the creation of research networks. In fact, networking and partnerships are considered key for meeting these challenges.
6. Modern ways of communicating on research agendas and for maintaining interactions between funders, users and research institutes need to be devised. Seminars and conferences, the currently established means of interaction, are sporadic, expensive and time-consuming activities.
7. There is a dramatic dearth of systematic evaluations of research results and impacts. Even at the level of international research centres there are few permanent evaluations being carried out. Deficiencies in this context have significant repercussions on relations with users and funders and the whole agenda-setting process.
8. Finally, the definition of research agendas takes time and resources (just as any good project preparation does), given that many players have to be taken into consideration. Nevertheless, it pays off through the generation of more co-ordinated, and more clearly defined, needs-driven research that helps at each stage in the transition to sustainable development. ●



## About the Poverty and Environment Initiative

*The Poverty and Environment Initiative (PEI) aims to help countries strengthen their own capacities to fight poverty through sound and equitable environmental management. By building partnerships and supporting learning and knowledge-sharing at local, national and global levels, PEI focuses on promoting more effective ways to integrate the environmental priorities of the poor into national strategies and policy processes for poverty eradication and sustainable development. In collaboration with country-level and international partners, PEI support focuses on three broad areas:*

- (1) *participatory research and analysis of poverty-environment linkages and their cross-sectoral relationships;*
- (2) *multi-stakeholder processes for policy dialogue and design; and*
- (3) *indicators and monitoring of poverty-environment trends and policy outcomes.*

*PEI is co-ordinated by the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), and is supported by the UK Department for International Development (DFID) and the Directorate General for Development of the European Commission.*

**The International Institute for Environment and Development (IIED)** is an independent, non-profit research institute working in the field of sustainable development. The **Regional and International Networking Group (Ring)** is a global alliance of research and policy organisations that seeks to enhance and promote sustainable development through a programme of collaborative research, dissemination and policy advocacy. There are currently 14 Ring member organisations based in 5 continents.

**Contact:** Viv Davies, Ring Coordinator, IIED  
 3 Endsleigh Street, London WC1H 0DD  
 Tel: +44 (0)20 7388 2117 Fax: +44 (0)20 7304 4336  
 Websites: [www.iied.org](http://www.iied.org) • [www.ring-alliance.org](http://www.ring-alliance.org)  
 Email: [wssd@iied.org](mailto:wssd@iied.org) or [ring@iied.org](mailto:ring@iied.org)