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International Institute for Environment and Development

OPINION

World Summit on Sustainable Development

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The Ring alliance of policy research organisations

Research Partnerships for Sustainable Development:

Report of an International Workshop

SD is a continuing process, with the potential to lead to wealth creation and the eradication of poverty. It will take very different forms, depending upon local livelihoods, sectoral contexts, existing institutions and resources. Universal analyses and standard solutions for SD will rarely be applicable. Therefore SD needs to be information- and knowledge-intensive.

Local knowledge and research capacities – and their engagement with policy-makers, producers and consumers on a continuing basis – are central requirements for SD. But they are often neglected or weak, and are poorly co-ordinated. More emphasis is needed on partnerships between researchers, policy-makers, advocacy groups, businesses and community organisations. Such partnerships are especially needed to generate a movement of 'bottom-up' research that engages and rewards the disadvantaged and their own knowledge systems. They are also needed between countries, to address the failings and opportunities for SD presented by inter-governmental processes.

The International Institute for Environment and Development (IIED) convened an international workshop at Queen's College, Cambridge University (17–19 July 2002), chaired by Sir Martin Holdgate, and held in collaboration with the Ring of policy research institutions, UN Department of Economic and Social Affairs, UNDP's Poverty and Environment Initiative, and the UN Foundation. Participants from North America, Latin America, Europe, Africa and Asia represented research institutions, governmental and inter-governmental organisations and NGO funders and users of research. At the request of Nitin Desai, Secretary General of the World Summit on Sustainable Development, the workshop identified ways to improve the role of research in the transition to sustainable development. It affirmed that:

1. Research is an important and integral component of the SD process, but has been comparatively neglected

SD is a process of transition that proceeds through innovation, leadership, and learning. Research can offer orderly mechanisms for achieving this. Effective research mechanisms are *both* embedded within policy processes *and* deeply rooted in understanding of local conditions, so that they are needs-driven and can deal with changing circumstances. This requires considerable investment and strong, acknowledged

KEY CHALLENGES:

- Sustainable development (SD) is a knowledge-intensive, long-term, learning process

- Although research and local knowledge mobilisation are important and integral components of the SD process, they have been comparatively neglected. This partly explains the lack of progress since Rio

- The trend of 'globalising' SD knowledge has helped in spreading certain information and ideas. But it can also overlook or even suppress local knowledge and research capacity, favour inappropriate, standardised solutions, and constrain real commitment and implementation

- Open, transparent and participatory partnerships are needed to promote the views of the disadvantaged, to enhance their own knowledge systems, to embrace and develop research capacities, and to ensure that these play integral roles in decision-making processes. Such partnerships are required from local to global levels

- There are particular needs – but currently inadequate opportunities – for research partnerships in key Agenda 21/ WSSD initiatives, notably national strategies for SD, poverty reduction strategies, multilateral environmental agreements, NEPAD and Type 2 partnerships.

mandates. Yet research capacities are often weak, or are neglected by other stakeholders. This may be one reason why there has been less progress since Rio than we would have liked.

Although improved means for 'participation' in SD decision-making have been emphasised recently, research has been comparatively marginalised. There is not always a clear understanding amongst the government, private sector and civil society 'pillars' of SD about the role of research in multi-stakeholder efforts to achieve the transition to SD. Consequently research may have neither a central role nor a continuing one. It is common that research institutions are increasingly marginalised during the process of developing any new SD initiative. If research does remain part of the initiative, this marginalisation can result in impossible research demands, where the scope of research plans become too narrow, too broad, too politicised, or too responsive to policy-makers' 'fashions' rather than local needs.

Research institutions themselves may neglect their role in SD – of offering means for the SD partners to make informed decisions – and end up dictating solutions, often influenced by the demands of their funders. Research institutions and networks need help in becoming more 'bottom-up' and 'needs-driven'. All of this requires the building of research partnerships that enable stakeholders to identify and develop their own solutions.

2. Research efforts should place a priority on engaging with more stakeholders than the powerful patrons of research – especially the disadvantaged and those who can help wealth creation

There is a complex system of drivers of research on environmental conservation, poverty eradication, and SD. This comprises policy-makers, advocacy groups, and researchers – as well as the general public who create a climate of concern about specific issues. All are as much in need of good research as 'decision-makers'. However, the more powerful research drivers (eg, development banks and government agencies) can be very selective about research subjects, specific researchers, and ways of conducting research. This can constrain the capacity of researchers to utilise and generate SD knowledge. Furthermore, such powerful groups are creating a trend for SD knowledge production to become globalised, with a worrying emphasis on standard analyses, standard solutions and the marginalisation of local and indigenous knowledge and research capacity.

Poverty concerns are key, yet they often enter the research and policy processes too indirectly (eg, through donor requirements) rather than through information and ideas from poor groups themselves. More engaged and equitable forms of research and communication are emerging from the many, albeit isolated, local cases of action research. Their legitimacy, effectiveness and efficiency need to be assessed and promoted amongst research drivers.

Economic growth concerns are equally key, and research needs to engage those who invest in, and develop, the key economic sectors that offer most potential for livelihood improvements.

There are many opportunities for researchers to build partnerships through multi-stakeholder policy initiatives. For example, national sustainable development strategies (NSDSs) offer an opportunity to involve researchers in the whole cycle of policy debate – from setting objectives, to experimentation, capacity development and investment, mainstreaming, review and implementation – as we note below.

3. Current policy initiatives for SD will be far more successful if they integrate research tasks

Greater efforts are required to ensure research is integral to initiatives that advance Agenda 21 and the WSSD. Two existing mechanisms are especially in need of improved research:

3.1 SD strategies at national level – notably PRSPs, NSDSs and conventional action plans

There is an 'epidemic' of strategies for poverty alleviation and environmental conservation, most of them with strong external drivers. But SD is a declared objective for all of them, and a potential theme to integrate them. Poverty Reduction Strategy Papers (PRSPs) are central to many World Bank and bilateral support programmes in HIPC countries, yet some PRSPs have not so much unleashed local knowledge and enriched local policy processes for SD as imposed conditionalities and values, recycled old data, and left assumptions unchallenged. More generally, there has been reluctance to cover the necessary transaction costs of participatory approaches to determining SD issues and solutions.

Most SD strategies declare that they will harness policy-makers and concerned stakeholders in a country-driven, continuing process of learning. This will work best if the right research institutions and local sources of knowledge are already in place and are mobilised by the strategy, or if the strategies themselves can be used to build them. Then a strategy will be in a position to proceed on the basis of the best existing research material, synthesising it, and developing research programmes to fill the key information/innovation gaps. Stronger emphasis could also be given to methodologies such as scenario development, which can bring researchers and stakeholders with disparate views together to develop common visions and approaches to eg, 'food futures'.

3.2 Improving the effectiveness of MEAs

Multilateral Environmental Agreements offer a means for SD, but their effectiveness relies on abilities to understand their local implications, to negotiate MEAs, to implement them, and to monitor their impacts. These are lacking. SD criteria are needed to guide coherence both within and between MEAs, and with other developmental frameworks such as NSDSs/PRSPs at the national level and WTO at the

international level. Again, these are lacking. All of this calls for engagement between research and policy-makers, for:

- developing SD criteria applicable to MEA processes and outcomes

- applying SD criteria in impact assessment of the effectiveness of MEAs, individually and together

- analysing the failures of the inter-governmental and national systems which compromise MEAs

- assessing local capacities for implementing MEAs in ways which would bring about SD

- feeding the above into agenda-setting for negotiations (gaps, overlaps, and needs for [re]negotiation)

These linked policy and research tasks need to be discussed, mandated and planned at the CoPs. Research partnerships spanning North and South (that accept that not all Northern and Southern positions can be identical) would be ideal for making progress. They would also help with other initiatives to improve global governance. For example – and more ambitiously – we need to work out how the development of the United Nations can be both serviced and challenged by research for SD. There is a growing need to put an effective policy imperative and associated research network in place for this.

3.3 Research needs to be engaged more fully in developing key WSSD initiatives
Local knowledge and research capacities need to be employed at an early stage in the following:

- The UN Secretary-General has identified water, energy, health, agriculture and biodiversity as of critical importance (WEHAB). In each of these areas, it is essential to have a clearer understanding of what is needed – and what works – at local, national and global levels to provide security in the provision of these goods and services.

- One of the principal outcomes of the WSSD process is the agreement of 'Type 2' partnerships to further implementation of internationally-agreed priorities. Their effectiveness will depend to a large extent on information and analysis being available to enable innovation and learning.

- The New Partnership for Africa's Development (NEPAD) promotes SD as a shared set of guiding principles for African countries. The head of the NEPAD Commission on Science and Technology, John Mugabe, has prioritised the translation of these goals into a programme of action which draws on African research and expertise.

4. Key institutions and methodologies need to be in place to enable all stakeholders to contribute to, and benefit from, research for SD
Knowledge utilisation and development is a flexible process, to which anyone should be able to contribute. In addition to the above, three issues stand out:

4.1 Issues of ownership of SD research/knowledge will need to be resolved, to improve the incentive to contribute knowledge to SD initiatives
For example, development banks and consultancy firms frequently use the knowledge generated by research institutions and local communities without returning anything directly to these sources of knowledge.

4.2 Communication is an inseparable part of research
Both research and communications communities can and should work together better, to improve services to other stakeholders. Key principles include:

- Minimise the information overloads which all stakeholders are facing, through better research peer review and coordination of communications

- Ensure policy-relevance, producing options that enable the policy process to take place, but avoiding policy prescriptions

- Ensure research communications are relevant to the context, are simple enough but not simplistic

- Build communications back-up and follow-up in research processes: the 'report right at the end' often helps neither the researcher nor the recipient in achieving good knowledge sharing

- Ensure attention to stakeholder empowerment in the process of 'disseminating a message' – it is not merely a question of choosing the right medium

- Consolidate research/communications programmes as far as possible – with a few, clear strategic objectives – to achieve more impact than many 'scattergun' activities.

4.3 Open, transparent and participatory research partnerships are needed to prioritise SD issues and relate them to policy-making processes
Partnerships between researchers can enhance economies of scale, offering means to complement capacities for research, participation and communications, to share intellectual resources and information, and to attain a higher policy profile. But there are costs, too, and there is a clear need to establish the rationale in each case. It would be valuable to compare the utility of different models of research partnerships, especially those that have been designed to link closely with policy (notably various MEA models, eg, IPCC, and CBD/SBSSTA), as well as those with a less direct link to policy (eg, the World Conservation Union, CGIAR and the Ring).

All successful research partnerships are built on trust. This trust building takes time, and users of research should examine how such partnerships have evolved, or whether they are merely opportunistic. Research organisations that have proven to be of value to policy makers and campaigners need to be identified and supported.

It is clear that SD also requires partnerships beyond just research institutions. Partnerships are also required with policy-makers, advocacy groups, businesses, NGOs and CBOs. With such stakeholders, the research community, whilst seeking means to improve demand-led SD research, cannot be purely passive and responsive. Research coalitions are needed for bottom-up research that engages and empowers the disadvantaged and draws upon and enhances their own knowledge systems. They are also needed between Northern and Southern countries to address the failings and opportunities for SD that are presented by inter-governmental structures. The research community needs to be prepared to react to inappropriate demands by clearly advocating better approaches. It needs to be fearless in disseminating insights into options for governance, policy and technology, but it must also recognise that it cannot dictate political and business decisions.

In short, the research community, with its stakeholders, needs to rethink both its objectives and its '4Rs' – its rights, responsibilities, rewards and relationships – so that it is increasingly fit to play its role in the transition to SD. ●

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.

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