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EDITORIAL

‘Knowing Development, Developing Knowledge?’ Introduction to a Special Issue

Facing multiple knowledge encounters in development

The articles in this special issue give a flavor of the overall theme ‘Knowing development, developing knowledge’, the title of the second Nordic Conference for Development Research held in Finland in November 2013. The conference provided a meeting place for different epistemic communities revolving around ‘development’. Nearly 300 academics, policy-makers, non-governmental organization-practitioners and consultants gathered to address the dilemmas of knowledge production in and for development. Thus, the conference itself manifested, as well as analyzed, the elements of knowledge encounters in development (cf. Long, 2001). These encounters included those between different academic disciplines, research and policy, theory and practice, different knowledges, and between the perceived North and South, to mention a few.

This special issue offers a small selection of over 150 papers presented at the conference: 6 original research articles examine knowledge in development from different angles (Ahmad, Benjaminsen, Daniel, Jerstad, Käkönen et al., Maasilta and Haavisto), one more policy-oriented article (Linden) analyzes the collaboration between researchers and development policy decision-making, and 5 shorter debate articles (Chambers, Hyden, Mosse, Ndidde, and Richey) feature the invited keynotes of the conference.

Knowledge is among the most pertinent issues in development research. Unquestionably, the development research itself is an effort of producing knowledge considered relevant to the phenomena under the umbrella of ‘development’ (see Mosse, this issue). Being a multidisciplinary endeavor, development research has not been left untouched by the ‘paradigm wars’ (Snow, 1959) between sciences and humanities in general, and between social sciences and economics in particular. Taken the complexity of ‘development’, its knowledge production over history has encountered demands to cover a variety of levels, ranging from detailed analysis of the local processes to global phenomena, from actors to structures (Hydén, this issue). Consequently, the palette of theoretical frameworks, methodological approaches, and issues considered relevant is comprehensive. The need of combining several methods for the sake of triangulation (Ahmed, this issue) resonating with the so-called mixed methods approach is prevalent also in the development research. Moreover, the knowledge in development tends to translate into policy and interventionist

practice. The notion of development inherently presupposes some kind of immanent or intentional change (cf. Cowen and Shenton, 1996). Consequently, the definitions of development and the implied nature of change have been at the center of the field. The different economic, societal, and local conceptualizations of development have been more or less theoretically and empirically informed by different disciplines. An additional angle to development is its normative aspiration, the urge to support 'good' development and to produce knowledge in order to enhance transformation perceived desirable.

In parallel with the academic sphere, development practice has encountered increasing pressures on knowledge production as well. The era of evidence-based policy and results-based management conveys growing knowledge demands to development actors. Questions such as 'does development aid really work?' are continuously posed by donors, politicians, and the general public. The multilateral, bilateral, and non-governmental development organizations have actively searched for novel approaches of more systematic knowledge production through their monitoring, evaluation, and impact assessment exercises. However, the question remains whether the evidence production conducted by the research community feeds into policy-making and practice. Linden's contribution sheds light on the difficulties of the interaction between the evidence-producing researchers and policy-makers.

At least since Ferguson's *Anti-Politics Machine* (1990), development scholars have paid attention to the tendency of the development apparatus to frame knowledge in technical terms rather than addressing situations with all their complexities and political nuances. The contributions by Benjaminsen and Kähkönen et al. analyze such depoliticization processes in regard to climate change policies and interventions in different contexts. In the same vein, Jerstad explores the materiality of local knowledge especially in regard to weather. Their results remind us – once again – that development interventions do not enter a vacuum but rather encounter existing local livelihoods, values, experiences, and ecosystems.

Consequently, in development research and practice, different knowledges and their prioritization is continuously contested to the extent that in the conference it was suggested that one should avoid using knowledge in singular form, but rather acknowledge its plurality. For example, the experimental methods in impact assessment set quite different criteria for the quality of knowledge production than the participatory method prioritizing the analytic potential of community members (Chambers, this issue). Both development research and practice have faced the critique of appreciating Western, scientific knowledge(s) over local knowledge and epistemologies. The debate contribution by Alice Ndidde, a Ugandan researcher and evaluation practitioner, tackles the leveraging of certain kinds of expert knowledges in the context of development evaluation, and the article by Marguerite Daniel explores the iatrogenic violence emerging as an unintended consequence of humanitarian interventions. Such prioritization of knowledge can also be shown in the silences and issues that never enter the agenda of development research (see Chambers, this issue).

Thus, the dynamics of North–South power relations are part and parcel of development research, be they related to the selection of research topics, methodologies, or the dynamics of designed development interventions. Additionally, the knowledge/power relations are central to how realities from the South are represented in the media. Maasilta and Haavisto's article addresses the question of political voice and the ability to be listened to in the media coverage of the 'Kony 2012 campaign'. Further, Richey's debate article shows how the images of development and our reactions toward it are increasingly shaped by affective labor of aggressive development campaigning: intentional use of esthetics and binary modes of 'helper'/'someone in need of help' to produce and modify emotional experiences of development through appeals, advertisements, and mobile product families tapping on desires, consumerism, and commodification of development/humanitarianism.

All in all, development research, policy, and practice are dynamic and intertwining fields characterized by continuous knowledge encounters. Some claim that there are remarkable epistemic gaps between academic research and practice resulting from their different knowledge practices, with consequent impossibilities to translate from one knowledge register into another (cf. Green, 2012). While development practice is driven by a belief in manageability, possibility of positive change and existing hope, some sections of development research are driven by the need for critical thinking, and varying degrees of cynicism toward the very possibility of change or hope. In this special issue, we explicitly want to appreciate multiple knowledge encounters and give room to different types of contributions. The articles represent multiple disciplines,¹ approaches to knowledge, and authors' position in development research.

Epistemologies, evidence, and ethics

The Nordic Conference for Development Research and this subsequent publication reflect the current situation of development research. In the contemporary era of effectiveness, development policy and practice are under increasing pressure to produce rigorous knowledge to be used in effective decision-making. Indeed, also the academic pressure emphasizes rapid knowledge production and dissemination in the high-ranked journals. Both research and practice are under continuous struggles over knowledge hegemonies and subjected to different forms of governmentality and the general 'audit culture' (Strathern, 2000). Finally, the existence of the very research object of 'development' has been challenged in reference to changing global constellations. However, we claim, even if the registers and categories might change, that the challenges of whose knowledge is included and how knowledge is supposed to be produced, used, and disseminated remain relevant in attempts to address the global challenges.

¹Unfortunately, we did not succeed to receive the invited articles tackling with economics and randomized trial perspectives, and thus, the disciplinary focus of the thematic issues is on social sciences, anthropology and communication.

To conclude, we propose three lenses to the lessons learned from the conference and this thematic issue in regard to the knowledge production in contemporary development research: epistemologies, evidence, and ethics. These three aspects open room for a rich debate and invite reconsideration:

- *Epistemologies*. How do we define knowledge and the rules of knowledge production in multidisciplinary development research? What about the non-scientific epistemologies and their appreciation?
- *Evidence*. What counts as evidence? What are the epistemological grounds for different kinds of evidence produced by development actors? How the evidence is evaluated and used in policy-making and program design?
- *Ethics*. How do we combine the ethical agendas with our epistemologies and need for evidence? Is there still room for notions such as inequality, vulnerability, solidarity, and hegemony? How the ethical standards of development research and practice are defined?

In the concluding plenary discussion at the Conference, the former director of Dag Hammarskjöld Foundation, Henning Melber stated: ‘a lot has been talked about development, less about knowledge’. The majority of the conference papers tackled with issues perceived relevant to development, rather than analyzing the very notion of knowledge in development. Therefore, we suggest a further debated on these unescapable questions of epistemologies, evidence, and ethics in development research. The articles in this issue provide some insights to these central conundrums. We wish the avenues opened in the contributions will be followed by vivid and continuous debates in all the knowledge encounters relevant to development.

Marjaana Jauhola and Tiina Kontinen

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