CMI BRIEF

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Research for development

The Norwegian development research community is growing and thriving, but some of the old tensions with policy making remain.

EVALUATION OF NORWEGIAN DEVELOPMENT RESEARCH

In 2007, the Research Council of Norway (RCN) undertook a comprehensive evaluation of Norwegian development research, led by Eva Birkeland of Statistics Norway and with senior scholars like Øyvind Østerud, Gøran Hyden, and Arne Bigsten among the team members. It found that

- The total volume of Norwegian development research is large, well-funded and adequately staffed. 320 staff members devote more than half their research time to development research.
- Development research is spread out among quite a large number of institutions (fragmented structure).
- It provides research of high quality: publications score quite high on originality, solidity and scholarly relevance. Quality is higher in the largest institutions.
- Some thematic areas score higher on citation or appear in more highly ranked journals. "Rights, Security and Democracy" is a strong area, "Economic Growth and Poverty Reduction" likewise. More generally, Norwegian researchers excel in research on human rights, armed conflict, displacement of people and natural resource issues. Also, governance, marginalization and gender issues receive much emphasis.
- Internationalization is high on the agenda, but needs to be improved when it comes to cooperation with outstanding research institutions in the US and Europe.
- Areas that may be regarded as overlooked include the effects of globalization and

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independent research on critical aid issues.

- The share of funding allocated to independent researcher-initiated research seems to be quite low.
- There are close interconnections between research expertise and policy processes. A high proportion of the research is directed in some way at user needs.
- Main recommendations were the following: (a) to reconsider the research agenda and boundaries; (b) to improve researcher-user relations; and (c) to allocate more funding through open calls for proposals based on academic quality criteria only.

The Birkeland report may not have been widely read, but it got us off the sick list. Some of you will remember that we had been hammered by Terje Tvedt who in 2003 argued that those of us who do non-European research (and he counted around 1000) had become completely dependent on Norwegian aid money and priorities, producing endless reports of limited value. Even those who worked with university-to-university collaboration (under the NUFU program), were by Tvedt considered aid workers and government funded development diplomats, evaluated in terms of whether or not they produce good aid, not good science.

Many colleagues bought this story, may be not so much because they thought the development field was much different from say environmental research or, for that matter, cancer research, in terms of dependence, but because of a general skepticism to what was considered interdisciplinary, slightly tainted and therefore second-class research. For such reasons, Norwegian development research, despite enjoying a high level of interest and financial support, was boxed into a corner from where it has had difficulty emerging. The Birkeland report brought us back into the ring.

Since 2007, Norad has continued to increase its allocation to the NCR (the budget for 2012 is more than NOK 183 mill), but has not expanded the scope of researcher-initiated research the way it was recommended by the Birkeland report. What is perceived of as relevant research for development continues to be broadened, the Norwegian research community continues to disseminate its findings (if you consider media appearances, it must be one of the most active research communities in Norway), it continues to grow, and, therefore, rejection rates in the NCR continue to be high.

THE RESEARCH COMMUNITY

What kind of research community are we talking about? Terje Tvedt defined it as “research on non-European areas”. The Birkeland report used a definition which confines the field to the social sciences. In this view, although a technologist or a pharmacist may make tremendous contributions to poverty reduction by improving technology and medicines, it is only regarded as “development research” if it in addition contributes to the understanding of societal processes. For this meeting, we use the broader concept of “research on development”, and it is important to note that the Norwegian research landscape includes world-class scholars and institutions in areas like global health, climate research and agriculture. My own examples, however, will be drawn mainly from the social sciences.

In fact, the majority of social scientists who carry out non-European research do not identify themselves as ‘development researchers’ although they may definitely see themselves as doing policy-relevant research. Increasingly, they engage in inter/multi-disciplinary projects but primarily as economists, anthropologists or political scientists who relate to the discourse within their disciplines, try to publish in the best journals (of their disciplines), may not read White Papers on aid and may not visit Norwegian embassies except if they lose their passports - yet they produce much valuable and relevant work. They include two of the largest anthropology departments in Europe (Oslo and Bergen). To claim that their curiosity is steered and guided by aid bureaucrats (Tvedt) makes no sense to me.

I am bringing this up because it is necessary to take a broad view of the concept of development research and what may justifiably belong to it. There is a constant need for the research community to rethink the boundaries of research with regard to (a) its scope, and (b) its focus - just as foreign aid programs have become increasingly politicized and part of demanding agendas with a need for better analysis on all levels.

During the last 40 years there have been many such changes which are really about the assumptions we make about our objects of study, but also about new and changing objects of study. For instance, peacebuilding was not a central part of our aid efforts some years back. Such changes have affected the position of different disciplines as well, from the dominance of economics when we thought we knew what developing countries needed, to the current strong position of political scientists, because we think it is important to “get politics right” and because a steadily increasing share of Norwegian aid funds since the Balkan wars in the 1990s are allocated to countries in conflict.

I was fortunate to receive a copy of an application for EU funding written by Thomas Hylland Eriksen. Its title is “Overheating” and it links three sets of converging crises of this century, those of (a) finance/economy, (b) climate/environment, and (c) culture/identity. The idea is to do major case studies in five different parts of the world, where the inter-linkages are traced between global, regional and local levels, including local interpretations, trust/mistrust of the local effects of these global crises.

Hylland Eriksen (who received funding) considers his project to be in the area of macro-anthropological history, but this kind of research is also not only relevant for our aid and foreign policy efforts, but also for our own society. We live in a new world in the sense that many more people today are much more connected than ever before in history – in addition to developments like emerging powers, the possible decline of the West, etc. Globalization links the world in new ways, and entails new linkages between society, security and environment that research funded as part of the foreign aid budget typically does not address today. This means that finding a single or more coherent focus for research for development may not be possible, although this might actually be a blessing.

At a time when it becomes increasingly difficult to draw clear boundaries between research and training as required to solve problems in the so-called South, on the one hand, and, on the other hand, the many different kinds of research that are needed to confront a host of global and other issues that involve and affect countries in both the North and the South, development research is still perceived as being primarily in the domain of development cooperation rather than within the domain of overall research policy. Given that in Norway, the different ministries have a sectoral responsibility for research that goes beyond their own needs, MFA/Norad will hopefully continue to increase research allocations, but there are several global issues beyond climate change that need be lifted much higher up on the general Norwegian research policy agenda.

RESEARCH AND POLICY

Then to the next question: Are research capacities in Norway used to inform development policy?

First, insights generated by research on development, plus practical experience, have contributed considerably to what we know about developing countries. Investments in research have also, along with other measures, contributed to dramatic advances in developing countries in areas such as agricultural production, health, education and life expectancy, and provided important inputs into national economic and social policy management.

Secondly, it is difficult to measure the use of research. Much research is being used without this being advertised or without those who use it even being aware of that they are using it. And after all, the number of PhD holders in Norad/MFA has been increasing.

However, old problems and tensions remain. An evaluation commissioned by Norad in 2011 found that the basic problem was less the limited supply of independent research, than inadequate demand for it. Policy-makers confirmed generally poorly developed links between research and policy and their explanations also tend to coincide with those provided by development researchers. The report describes a sense of frustration and disconnection between development researchers and development actors.

It is an old story with no simple answers. One of the best analyses I have read on the subject was done for Sida in 2001 and led by Nobel laureate in economics Elinor Ostrom. In the report, the well-known problems of high turnover, lack of accountability and generally, learning problems are analyzed. One statement on the particular incentive structure that applies may be telling: 'Few Sida staff members who were interviewed believe that the fate of their project will impact their career' (p.149). This is i.a. related to the many linkages and distance between the Sida desk officer in Stockholm and say a poor peasant in Kenya.

The Birkeland report argued that there is a need for better structures for input on policy formulation but that researchers and policy makers should meet in other arenas other than the funding arena. This will always be welcome, but there are other factors at play as well. Thus the strict enforcement of complicated tender rules may increase 'insourcing' in Norad at the expense of commissioning work to researchers. It is also somewhat paradoxical that contacts between research institutions and Norad seem to have been reduced after Norad took on primarily advisory functions. There are no longer framework agreements with research institutions and because of tender rules, research institutions compete only for small assignments. However, in the area of evaluations, which has been dominated by consultancy companies during the last ten years or so, there may be new openings because of higher Norad ambitions, and at the MFA, funding for research related to 'peace and reconciliation' is mostly allocated to researchers. But my general feeling is that we are simply less in touch, at least those of us who are not based in Oslo.

The relationship between the research community and policymakers is a complex one and cannot be reduced either to the inabilities of researchers to communicate their findings or the constraints of policymakers as mentioned above. More generally, may be research and policy advice that tells a story of complexity, which generates findings that are difficult to operationalize, and that identifies less than optimal choices will more easily and quietly be left to one side.

This issue has two sides to it. First, development research should not be judged exclusively in terms of its direct, or instant, contribution to development; that is, solely according to whether it provides managerial 'tools' or not. In fact, an

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important part of the 'tools' which researchers give to decision-makers will be to expose the difficulties, the contradictions, the conflicts of interest in a situation, so that false hopes of easy solutions should not mislead. It is an instrumentalist fallacy to think that this would be obtained by making very specific demands on research.

A second important question is why certain empirical claims (and methods) is sometimes being privileged at the expense of other research, even though they may be based on narrow evidence (sometimes 'soft opinion'), but they are being translated into apparent fact by constant repetition, even by laying claim to 'hard science'. There are many examples, one being Paul Collier's work on civil war recurrence. His research findings, f.ex, that after a conflict, on average, countries face a 50% risk of renewed conflict during the next five years, were widely accepted (and there is reason to believe that it legitimized a number of policy decisions) despite it being refuted by several researchers, including CMI researchers Suhrke and Samset. In a recent paper, Cramer and Goodhand discusses this example as well as how the policy processes of international agencies have engaged with, shaped and selectively used research to justify particular 'state-building' and counter-narcotics interventions in Afghanistan. The question is posed whether 'evidence-based policy' is often replaced by 'policy-based evidence'.[5]

The implication of this discussion, however, is not that donor agencies (like Norad) do not need instrumental, often short-term research designed to address immediate problems. Such research may include baseline studies, monitoring and evaluation, but also research of a more technical nature, e.g. what seeds are best adapted to a particular environment, what diagnostic test is most appropriate for particular diseases, or what materials are best suited for road construction. Much of the important research in the field of development is of this kind.

Rather, the implication is that the political community must 'work with two horses'. One is harnessed for sharpening and solving problems posed by policy makers to inform their decisions. Such research may be of short-term (including purely instrumental) or longer-term (including 'strategic' research) and may help to redefine problems by challenging preconceptions. The other horse is let loose to roam for itself in the expectation that it will bring forth new discoveries, provide new answers and identify problems not yet thought of by policy makers.

The issue of "drawing rights" of those who fund research must be seen in this perspective. It does not mean that funding agencies should refrain from exercising influence on research allocations. In addition to drawing upon research to address immediate problems, there is also a case to be made for more extensive use of 'strategic research'. Such research lies somewhere in between basic and applied research, being basic in structure (i.e. aiming at expansion of basic knowledge and understanding), but deriving its motivation and perspective from the potential use of its findings. I do not share the view that thematic research – particularly when it is broadly defined - is always less original and innovative than what is called 'free projects' in the RCN. However, the point is, and whoever pays for it in the end, it remains important that there are sufficient funds for 'other horses to roam', in order to provide possibilities for innovative, critical research to emerge.

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