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NO. 167/60

Knowledge, politics and
development policy:
Reflections over four
decades

Desmond McNeill

DPU60 Reflections working paper series

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Caren Levy and Barbara Lipietz
London, June 2014

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Knowledge, politics and development policy: Reflections over four decades

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Abstract

The importance of knowledge and expertise for promoting development and poverty reduction has long been emphasized. Over the last forty years, the emphasis has changed somewhat: from training of local staff, to undertaking research – which may provide appropriate ‘evidence’ for decision-making. This is reflected in how the Development Planning Unit (DPU) itself has changed. When I joined in 1975, DPU was primarily involved in training, offering mid-career diploma and certificate courses for practitioners; now it is engaged in educating students at masters and PhD level. To what extent is such expertise – whether embodied in professional planners or disembodied, in the form of research findings – valued and made use of? This is the topic

of the paper, which begins with some broad reflections on the issue as a whole, followed by a more specific and detailed account of some empirical findings about whether and how local research was used in one specific context: the preparation of Poverty Reduction Strategy Papers (PRSPs) in East Africa. The study concluded that research played a rather limited role in policy-making in the four countries studied; and that local research substantially less. Higher education, whether at home or abroad, is hugely important in building up the knowledge and expertise that countries require for their development. But the expertise of young professionals, and the knowledge that research can bring, are not sufficiently utilized.

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1. Introduction

What sort of knowledge is needed in development policy? And how is such knowledge to be made use of? Despite the rhetoric about 'evidence-based decision making', powerful interests (or sometimes merely conservatism) too often replace this by 'decision-based evidence-making'. In this paper I use the findings from a study in which I was involved to underscore two more general points: that research is not sufficiently made use of in development planning, and that this is especially the case for studies undertaken by local researchers.

But I begin by reflecting on the massive changes that have occurred in higher education in the last four decades - reflected in how the Development Planning Unit (DPU) itself has changed. In numerical terms, the stock of highly qualified staff in developing countries has increased enormously; but, I suggest, this resource is still often under-utilised – whether one regards it as embodied knowledge (the skills and experience of the staff themselves) or disembodied, in the form of research findings.

2. On ‘counterpart training’ and embodied knowledge

In 1971, at the end of my two years in the Planning Division in the Ministry of Agriculture in Dar es Salaam, under the Voluntary Services Overseas scheme, my Tanzanian colleagues assured me that they would be dependent on aid for no more than the next five, perhaps ten, years. This proved not to be the case. At that time I was one of only a handful of graduates in the whole Ministry, which included also forestry and fisheries. Today, four decades later, there are so many university educated people that graduate unemployment has become a problem. But Tanzania still receives massive foreign aid; and foreign experts and consultants, now supplemented by NGOs, are present in large numbers, while the expertise of Tanzanians themselves is all too often under-utilised, even marginalized.

Ten years after my time in Tanzania, having spent two years as a British Government funded adviser in the Ministry of Local Government, Housing and Construction in Sri Lanka, I wrote a book called ‘The Contradictions of Foreign Aid’ (McNeill, 1981), seeking to communicate my frustration with the development assistance system. One aspect of this was the unbalanced relationship between ‘donor’ and ‘recipient’ country, presented as one of equal partnership but too often far from that in reality. My colleagues in the Ministry were extremely competent – more so than many visiting consultants or teams from development agencies – but they were at a disadvantage when the latter were so closely linked to the promise of major aid projects. Fortunately I was not expected to do any ‘counterpart training’ as part of my duties; this would have been quite inappropriate in view of their level of skills. I did, however, write a DPU Working Paper on this topic (McNeill 1980) based on my experience both as a consultant and as a member of DPU staff for seven years.¹ Some of the findings are still relevant today, and I will summarise them briefly.

I begin, in the paper, by reviewing my experience with ‘counterpart training’, which is what consultants are supposed to provide to local staff working with them. In each case the criterion for success that I adopt is to what extent the local staff would be, in my judgement, competent to carry out a similar exercise following the departure of the ‘foreign experts’. I conclude that – judged according to this criterion – such counterpart training does not work; and one of the main reasons is

that consultants have insufficient incentive to do it: meeting a tight deadline for the submission of their report within a fixed budget is their imperative. I then contrast this experience as a consultant with my work at DPU; not in the lecture halls in London but in the field, where we sought to undertake ‘on the job’ training. (I was at that time in charge of DPU’s Overseas Services, the training consultancy arm of the Unit). I refer in particular to three case studies, of which two may usefully be summarized here. The first was a housing study in Juba, South Sudan, funded by the British Overseas Development Administration (now DFID). Three local planners were attached full-time to our team, which consisted of six people, one of whom was in fact a DPU student from Latin America who had just graduated, and the staff from Juba were certainly interested in being involved. But we found that training them was a challenge, largely for the same reason that faces ‘regular’ consultants: a tight schedule (six weeks) and a great deal of work to get through. The solution was to assign one of our team specifically to focus on their training, rather than believe that it would be enough for them simply to participate. This certainly helped but it was not entirely satisfactory. The second case concerned the Amman Urban and Regional Planning Group. Here, the DPU was engaged by USAID (United States Agency for International Development) with an explicitly two-part task: to assist in preparing a plan for the Amman urban region and also to train the local staff of the recently established unit. This project was, in my view, very successful. The training inputs by DPU were spread over a period of one year and consisted of four training workshops in Amman, each of about three weeks’ duration and attended full-time by all junior staff and part-time by middle level and senior staff. The first three workshops were: “Project appraisal in the Regional Context”, “Programme Integration in the Regional Context”, and “Regional Plan Formulation”. The fourth workshop had the same title as the third, but involved more ‘on-the-job’ training than formal seminars and lectures. This was, in part, because the study, as is so often the case, faced the challenge of tight deadlines; and much of the final plan preparation was done outside office hours with only limited participation by local staff. The strengths and weaknesses of this example are spelled out in detail in the Working Paper, but I can certainly confirm that it was one of the most successful, and rewarding, training exercises that I have been

involved in. Some of the staff from Amman have still, I understand, maintained contact with the DPU, decades later.

This experience also underlined, for me, an important point which I argue in the Working Paper: that while training of local staff is very desirable in the case of, for example, an economic feasibility study, it is absolutely essential when preparing an urban or regional plan. This is because the plan document itself is of little use unless local staff both understand and agree with the contents of the plan. To quote the Working Paper directly:

“Training, or institution-building, is an extremely important element in the provision of aid from multilateral and bilateral donors to Third World countries; counterpart training as a method of providing such training has been a failure; in certain types of projects – namely planning studies – the active involvement of local counterparts is not just important, it is crucial.” (McNeill, 1980, 26)

And:

“A planning study must be viewed not as a project of specified duration, ending in the production of a document, but rather as the building of a planning institution, capable of carrying out the process of planning.” (McNeill, 1980, 29)

How much has the situation changed in the last 30 years? I am not very well qualified to judge, since I have moved from the world of professional training, which is what I was mainly involved in at the DPU, to (mainly) academic research - at the Centre for Development and the Environment (SUM) University of Oslo. But I notice, from my recent visit to London, that the nature of the DPU's students has changed significantly. When I joined in 1975, the courses consisted of a one-year Diploma

Course for post-experience students, and a number of short Certificate Courses for senior staff. The introduction of a Masters Course, which began soon after this, was quite controversial – being regarded by some as an unwelcome shift in the direction of academia. Today, I understand, there are still very many Masters students, but also a very large number taking doctorates. Apparently, a Masters degree is a must for many professional careers, and where a Masters degree used to be enough, a PhD is now necessary – or at least advantageous – in many cases. In brief, the ‘bar’ has been raised very considerably over the years.

If this simply means that the knowledge and expertise of professional planners in the South is now much higher than 30 years ago, this is all to the good. I will not here discuss the controversial issue of whether a PhD may actually make one less rather than more well-placed to work as a professional planner - and no doubt many DPU alumni in fact go on to work as researchers rather than planners; my concern is whether this enormous increase in the numbers of highly educated personnel has altered, as much as it surely should, the extent to which knowledge is utilized in the making of development policy.

This brings me to the second issue which I wish to discuss: the question of research – and whose research counts. The explosion in the number of postgraduates from the South has, surely, led to a huge increase in the amount of research undertaken by these same people, relating to their own countries. To what extent is this – what I will here call ‘domestic research’ used in development policy? Do we find the same phenomenon – of ‘raising the bar’ – applying also in this situation, so that research studies by foreign academics are more highly valued than those by local academics? To discuss this question I will draw on the results of a research project which I undertook in East Africa a few years ago, together with several Norwegian and local researchers, “The Politics of Evidence: Domestic Research and National Poverty Reduction Strategies.”²

NOTES TO CHAPTER 2

1. After Tanzania I worked as an economic consultant for four years, then the DPU from 1975 to 1984, including a 20 month break in Sri Lanka.

2. This study was carried out together with co-researchers in Norway, Kenya, Tanzania, Malawi and Uganda, under the auspices of the GDN Bridging Research and Policy Project.

3. Knowledge for development: a case study from East Africa

In recent years, the issue of 'knowledge for development', and more specifically 'evidence-based decision-making', has risen high on the development agenda. The World Bank in fact redefined itself, under the leadership of James Wolfensohn, as 'the knowledge bank, underlining both its commitment to the importance of 'knowledge' and – at the same time – the leadership role which it sought to take in relation to other development agencies.

At the same time, in terms of policy instruments, for heavily indebted developing countries³ attention has centred on Poverty Reduction Strategy Papers (PRSPs).⁴ These arose as part of the reaction against the 'Washington consensus' of the 1980s and the increased focus on poverty as the central core issue for development agencies. In brief, for poor countries, the preparation of a PRSP was made a necessary precondition for obtaining funding from the World Bank. PRSPs rapidly established themselves as the key policy document in most poor countries. And considerable attention has focused on the process by which they are prepared, where a dominant issue has been the 'ownership' of the document; that is, to what extent do development policies truly reflect domestic priorities? Yet these two issues – knowledge and national ownership – are rarely linked. A great deal has recently been written about PRSPs, concerned with participation in the process of policy-making;⁵ but almost nothing on the role of research in this process; not simply whether relevant research is used to inform these documents (as would be expected from a 'knowledge bank'), but also, and more specifically, whether research undertaken by local academics is given greater, or lesser, weight than 'foreign' research.

The purpose of the study, which I will now summarise, was to begin filling this gap. More specifically, our aim was to study to what extent research – and especially research carried out by citizens of the country concerned (what we call 'domestic research') – is used in PRSP documents.

The PRSPs may best be understood as the outcome of two processes in international development assistance in response to a renewed focus on poverty reduction as the central issue. One is the increasing commitment by bilateral and multilateral donors to co-ordinate their policies and their financial support. The other process is the HIPC (heavily indebted poor country) Initiative, un-

der which countries are granted debt relief provided they prepare a comprehensive framework of national development policies which demonstrates a serious commitment to the reduction of poverty. This commitment is more specifically manifested in the form of a 'Poverty Reduction Strategy Paper'. These strategic documents are to be prepared by each country, following a process within the country in which the different stakeholders are actively involved, so as to ensure genuine 'ownership' of the resulting document.

The countries we chose to study were Uganda, Tanzania, Kenya and Malawi. These differ significantly in two respects: the relative capacity of national research, and the extent of progress in the PRSP process. Both Kenya and, to a lesser extent, Tanzania have relatively strong domestic research capacity in their universities and in research institutions. As regards the PRSP process, Malawi is the weakest of the four; Uganda was the first country to prepare a PRSP⁶, and it is the revised version that is relevant to study. At the other extreme, Kenya is not a HIPC country, and therefore does not formally have a PRSP; but they have prepared a comparable document entitled Economic Recovery Strategy for Wealth and Employment Creation 2003–2007.

In order to make the study manageable, it had to be rather narrowly focused – on only a few issues. To select these we applied the following criteria:

1. An issue which is of major significance for poverty reduction in the particular country: i.e. it is national in scope, directly affecting the well-being of a large proportion of the population.
2. An issue which has featured strongly in the PRS process. Ideally, the issue features strongly in the PRS paper itself – the formal document of the PRS process. Failing this, it features strongly in the reports from the Technical Working Groups – background papers, sector work etc – or in the discussions concerning the drafts.
3. An issue which is demonstrably controversial, in both policy and research terms: 'Controversial in policy terms' implies that powerful groups take up contrasting positions on the issue. 'Controversial in research terms' implies that there exist serious arguments, based on research (whether local

or not) in support of two or more contrasting conclusions. Ideally (for the case to be of maximum interest for our study) the contrasting policy positions are not simply reflections of direct material interest (for example wage levels for civil servants) but reflect a more complex mix of interests and discourses.

4. An issue regarding which local researchers have made a contribution (whether or not this has been used). Empirical evidence should be provided - preferably in the form of articles, reports, etc. - of local research which is relevant to the issue.

These four criteria provided a good basis for selection, but it was notable that criterion 2 proved extremely powerful. In other words, there were remarkably few issues which 'featured strongly in the PRS process'. Indeed, it was a significant conclusion from our detailed examination of PRSP documents that they contained very few clear and explicit statements of policy; they were for the most part rather unspecific.⁷

On the basis of this exercise we chose the following topics for detailed study:

- Tanzania and Kenya: primary school fees.
- Uganda: land tenure (especially the issue of spousal co-ownership).
- Malawi: Land tenure; and the privatisation of ADMARC, the agricultural marketing corporation.

The methodology used was qualitative. The study began with a rapid assessment of the research resources of each country in this field - drawing on in-country knowledge, and international sources. We studied written works - both research studies and policy documents - relevant to the topics selected; obtained both from the internet and in-country. More specifically, the sources of information and methods used were as follows.

The PRS documents themselves were a major source of information; not merely the final Poverty Reduction Strategy Papers, but also earlier drafts, reports of Working Groups, and minutes/reports from meetings held in the capital city and outside to discuss PRSPs with international, national and local organisations and individuals. Of particular interest was to identify changes in the text between draft and final versions, including the inclusion or exclusion of references to research or other documents.

Other documents collected and analysed were papers, books, reports prepared by researchers, especially local researchers. This was not limited to research referred to in the policy documents listed above but rather an

overview of relevant (mainly domestic) research; for example, in Tanzania, research on primary school fees and primary education more generally. This included relevant articles from journals and conference presentations, working papers, commissioned studies etc.

We also collected some other background information, for example data about institutions and researchers in each country; this was largely from brochures and websites. A major source of information was the interviews we carried out with three categories of interviewee: policymakers, researchers, and stakeholders (mainly donors and NGOs). In total we interviewed 43 people, fairly evenly divided both between countries and between the three categories.

Policy-makers consisted principally of senior civil servants and members of parliament. For this group, the key question was "Have they made use of research in their work?" (In general; in relation to the PRSP process; and/or in relation to the specific issue that our study focuses on, e.g. primary education).

Researchers included both academics at university and staff of applied research institutions. For this group, key questions were: "Do they participate in dialogue with policy-makers: in general; and in relation to the PRSP process?"; "Do they believe, and can they demonstrate, that they have exerted influence?" In some cases the line between the academics and consultants/NGOs was blurred. An example is a researcher from EPRC (Economic Policy Research Centre), Makerere, who was a member of the relevant PRSP sub-committee and whose paper is quoted in the PRSP. A counter-example is provided by Tanzania, where several interviewees stated that there was an uneasy relationship between researchers and policy-makers that could be traced back to President Nyerere's skeptical attitude towards the *wasomi* ("the learned").

In the case of NGOs, key questions were: "Have they used research (their own or others') in their participation in the PRSP process?"; "What is their opinion of whether research - especially domestic research - is used in PRSPs?" Examples where such research was used are provided by NGOs in Uganda, concerning spousal co-ownership, and Oxfam supported studies in Malawi (on ADMARC) and, perhaps, in Tanzania (on primary school fees). The NGO coalition *Elimu Yetu* confirmed that research findings were drawn upon in the formulation of the poverty reduction strategy after the elections but not as a justification for including the abolition of primary school fees in the election manifesto of the winning NARC coalition of parties.

In the case of development agencies (the other main 'stakeholders') key questions were: "Have they financed research which has, or has not, had an influence?";

“Have they used research findings in their participation in the PRSP process?”; “What is their opinion of whether research (especially domestic research) is used in PRSPs?” An example (rather outdated) was a study funded by DfID on land in Malawi. More recent – and specifically in the context of PRSPs – was the study on ADMARC funded by World Bank. (Counter-examples could be given in relation to the same issue, since there have been innumerable earlier studies of ADMARC – to little effect).

As far as possible we used ‘triangulation’ methods to check whether the accounts from these different sources match. For example, in the case of ADMARC, we interviewed people who had commissioned and used the study, both in the World Bank and in government; people who had been involved in undertaking some of the studies; and NGOs who had contested the issue.

In the four countries, there are many types of what may be broadly defined as research, ranging from journal articles based on doctoral dissertations, through applied research studies, to consultancy studies – and not excluding statistical data (from household surveys etc). These vary especially in terms of:

- Depth of research (time and resources used, competence of researchers, extent of quality control, etc)
- Independence of research (from basic academic research, through commissioned reports, to studies explicitly promoting a cause).

But it is also increasingly necessary to include what some would call ‘alternative’ knowledge, from participatory research, rapid rural appraisals, opinion surveys, focus groups, etc. Although mainstream knowledge is still given more weight, ‘alternative’ knowledge may have gained some influence in recent years, thanks, largely, to the involvement of NGOs.

By international standards, the scale of domestic research – both the size of the community and its output – was very small. By African standards, however, it ranged from relatively large (in the case of Kenya) to rather small (in Malawi). These two cases exemplify the two extremes among the four countries studied; and the data in relation to these two may be briefly summarised: first regarding the size of the research community, and then the extent of research on the specific issues chosen.

Kenya has a larger research community than most other African countries, in most disciplines. The institutions of research and higher learning form the backbone: six public and 13 private universities. Recently, a number of autonomous public, quasi-public and private research institutions have sprung up, some with a broad portfolio while others are sector-specific. Some act as policy

think tanks for government and others are consulting companies staffed by competent professionals, many of whom with a background from universities and research outfits. In Malawi, there are only two universities. The University of Malawi comprises five constituent colleges: Chancellor College in Zomba for social scientists, lawyers and teachers; Bunda College of Agriculture not far from Lilongwe for agriculturalists; the Malawi Polytechnic in Blantyre for engineers and technicians; the College of Medicine in Blantyre for medical personnel; and Kamuzu College of Nursing in Lilongwe for nurses. The Centre for Social Research, at Chancellor College, has until recently been virtually the only applied research institution, although this situation has now changed slightly. Recently a new university, University of Mzuzu, was established at Mzuzu, the capital of the northern region but it is still in its early stages of development.

In Kenya, there exists a substantial body of evidence concerning primary education fees: a great number of publications (mostly in the format of reports, occasional and working papers) containing a wealth of empirical data, and the major Report of the Commission of Inquiry into the Education System of Kenya. These publications emanate largely from independent institutions. Whether commissioned or not these publications have been fed into the public debate and formed the basis for dialogue with policy makers. In Malawi, concerning land tenure, three major studies were undertaken in the 1990s by foreign consultants, funded by donors. There was also a Presidential Commission on land. These reports make reference to a few research studies: a few undertaken by Malawians, others by foreign personnel. Official current policy is well articulated in the recent “Malawi National Land Policy”, which draws substantially on research undertaken in neighbouring countries and elsewhere in the world.

The four countries in this study are all heavily dependent on foreign aid; and policy decisions are heavily influenced by foreign actors. The strength of the national research capacity in the four countries varies considerably, but researchers have little opportunity to conduct basic research, and strong incentives to undertake consultancies. The introduction of PRSPs has significantly changed the process of preparing plans, and increased the role of NGOs in policy-making; but in terms of the use of local research the impact has been rather slight. Our case study findings may be summarised as follows:

Primary school fees: both in Tanzania and in Kenya there was a major change in policy: the removal of primary school fees. This change cannot, however, be attributed to research, whether local or international. In Tanzania, researchers who favoured this policy were earlier told by national policy-makers that there was no point in advocating it since the donors (and especially World Bank) would not approve it. Then, following the sudden

international focus on primary education, donors began to favour the removal of primary school fees; and Tanzania followed suit. In Kenya, the situation was similar – in that they too were confronted by a sudden change in international wisdom – but the political context was rather different. The decision to remove fees was ‘populist’, introduced by the newly elected government; but it enjoyed the support of donors. Here, however, some respected local researchers argued the case for modest school fees in order to ensure an adequate level of quality. The populist move notwithstanding, in comparative terms the already existing body of research in Kenya, probably played a greater role in Kenya than in Tanzania. In brief, these two cases exemplify the considerable power of donors, and especially the World Bank, in policy-making; and the limited power of evidence in decision-making.

Women's land rights in Uganda: here the process of decision-making was very different. It was initially a highly politicised process in which donors did not play a significant part, but where NGOs, both national and international, played the major role and (almost) succeeded in bringing about the desired legislation - independently of the PRSP process. When, subsequently, the preparation of the revised PRSP was under way, the issue was included. This time the NGOs were less active politically but more explicitly sought ‘evidence’ to support their case. This case exemplifies the increased role of NGOs, and the relative power of lobbying as against evidence in bringing about policy change.

Privatisation of ADMARC, Malawi: this is a case of evidence being produced specifically in the context of the PRSP process. Two independent reports were prepared on the same issue - one by World Bank and the other by OXFAM – which came to much the same conclusion. The process of disseminating and debating the World Bank report was, however, not well handled; this could otherwise have offered an excellent example of how evidence may be used to transcend conflicting interests and identify a middle ground policy. This case exemplifies suspicions about World Bank influence, and the importance of process (dissemination of a study) as much as product (production of a study) where an issue is controversial in political terms.

Our study found that the legitimacy of the research undertaken, and of the recommendations made, relies not only on the quality of the work but very much on the reputation of the person concerned. In all four countries, there are informal (and in some cases more formalised) networks linking researchers and decision-makers - es-

pecially senior civil servants. This is not least because of personal ties. The number of researchers in a country necessarily has some influence on the nature and extent of these networks. In Malawi, to take the extreme example, the total number of economists with PhDs is very small - perhaps 30. A substantial proportion of these work in government or as researchers. Virtually all have been educated at, and several have taught at, Chancellor College but acquired their PhDs abroad. A good example of a formal network is the Malawi Economic Justice Network (MEJN) which has played an important role in PRSP debates. This is an umbrella group with local chapters in ten districts, comprising some 100 NGOs, including churches, and a professional association, the Economics Association of Malawi (ECAMA) which includes academics, and even government personnel. MEJN has also established Task Forces on specific topics (land, ADMARC, the environment, etc.).

There are also important links between the national and the international arenas. A rather small elite has connections both within the country and outside: built partly on postgraduate studies undertaken abroad, and partly on missions, study tours and attendance at conferences and workshops. In both cases, donors play a major role; most of these trips are funded by donor money, and frequent destinations are Washington or capital cities such as London or Paris. This elite may move between the bureaucracy in their own country, a university or think-tank in their own country, and a position in, for example, the World Bank.⁸ The few who enjoy trust and respect both in the national and the international network are exceptionally well placed to influence policy. Think-tanks play a significant role here. Some have been established with support from sources such as World Bank, and the Africa Capacity Building Foundation. A good example is the Economic and Social Research Foundation (ESRF) in Tanzania, founded in 1993. Think-tanks such as this strengthen links between national researchers (mainly economists) and policy-makers at national and international level. But according to our interviewees, there is no tradition for knowledge-based policy making in Tanzania, and most politicians and senior bureaucrats have viewed the research community with a lot of scepticism. This is said to be improving somewhat lately, with the emphasis on analytical work in the PRS-process. But this has not prevented a feeling among all senior educational experts interviewed of not being listened to. In their view, the government changed its mind on school fees only after the World Bank had changed its view; and as one observer sharply commented: “World Bank never listen to indigenous thinkers”.

NOTES TO CHAPTER 3

3. Those qualifying for HIPC debt relief (Highly Indebted Poor Countries).

4. Nancy Birdsall, John Williamson and Brian Deese, *Delivering on Debt Relief: From IMF Gold to a New Aid Architecture*, Washington D.C.: Institute for International Economics, 2002; Jan Joost Teunissen and Age Akkerman (eds.), *HIPC Debt Relief: Myths and Reality*, The Hague: Forum on Debt and Development (FONDAD), 2004.

5. For example, David Booth (ed.), *Fighting Poverty in Africa: Are PRSPs Making a Difference?* London: Overseas Development Institute, 2003.

6. More accurately, a PEAP – Poverty Eradication Action Plan – which became renamed as a PRSP.

7. With the benefit of hindsight, we may note that this may have

introduced a bias into the selection. Those instances where a very clear policy is stated in the PRSP may tend to be those instances where it is important to mark such a policy very explicitly. These may be precisely those which are most controversial; where it is seen as important to assert a clear line. This is perfectly legitimate. They may be instances where a sharp change in policy is being established. This is also perfectly legitimate; but it may occur where a change in policy is a response to pressure – and hence perhaps ideologically driven, and not well supported by research.

8. For example, in Malawi, one senior civil servant moved to the World Bank, but was subsequently seconded back to the government, funded by USAID.

4. Reflections

Policy-making and implementation are not neat, discrete categories – the latter faithfully following the former in logical sequence. Policy statements leave wide scope for discretion to the implementers, who continuously interpret the policy, and adapt it to the specific circumstances at hand. This interpretation may be affected by bureaucratic incompetence and/or inadequate resources, infrastructure or expertise. Also, interested parties and pressure groups are likely to intervene in the process and endeavour to negotiate certain interpretations in their favour. Indeed, they may even ‘sabotage’ the implementation of policies with which they disagree, either by delaying action or deliberately distorting the policy import. (Stone, Maxwell and Keeting, 2001: 9.) The failure of the system to translate policies into effective implementation strategies was noted by many of those we interviewed. To quote a paper written by one of them: “It is that skill in translating otherwise excellent policy statements into feasible educational practices which seems to be a critical missing link in Tanzania” (Omari, 1994: 1).

While it appears that the PRS process has created new spaces for debate, and for additional ‘knowledge’ to enter, how these spaces operate is very much determined by those who convene, and who participate. Here, the donors still exert considerable influence. Aid dependence is high in three of the four countries, and still significant in the fourth – Kenya – which is the least poor of the four.⁹ And the influence from donors, and especially the World Bank and IMF, is considerable. In the earlier years of structural adjustment, influence was exerted rather directly: with conditions attached to loans and grants which had very specific implications for policy decisions. With the replacement of structural adjustment by PRSPs, there is some evidence of a shift from very direct influence (conditionality) to more indirect influence. But donors are still very powerful actors, and World Bank still the dominant donor – partly by virtue of their financial resources, and partly by virtue of the leadership role they often take on with regard to other donors.

In summary, even where space is created for debate and discussion, it appears that ‘knowledge’ – in the form of research – has a rather limited role, to judge from these case studies. And this is not an isolated conclusion. The case study cited here was one of about 20 undertaken under the ‘Bridging Research and Policy’ project of the Global Development Network, with financial support from the World Bank. All but one of these studies, which were

undertaken in many different (poor and medium income) countries of the world, revealed a similar story: research is used to only a very limited extent, or on a selective basis, in the making of policy. This will not come as a great surprise to those who have worked both as academics and consultants in the developing world. (And one should certainly not suppose that the phenomenon is limited to these countries). But it was interesting that the conclusion was so consistently confirmed across a wide range of countries and issues. The ‘gap’ between research and policy is wide; in part because this is politically convenient.

If researchers in general are marginalised, local researchers are often still more so. And this situation is increasingly unacceptable. Many poor countries, especially in Africa, are still very dependent on aid and are heavily influenced by ‘foreign’ ideas and policies regarding development policy and planning. Four decades ago it could be credibly argued that human resources in these countries, in terms of university educated personnel, were very limited, and that it was therefore necessary to make substantial use of knowledge and expertise from outside the country. That situation has now changed enormously – thanks, in part to the contributions of innumerable university departments such as the DPU. Many of those educated at universities (both foreign and local) are now obtaining doctoral degrees, and undertaking research which can be of relevance and value in their own countries. But is this research being used to good effect? The short answer appears to be ‘no’. I suggest that there are three main reasons, on which I will briefly elaborate:

- Because research is to only a very limited extent used for policy-making, despite all the calls for ‘evidence’;
- Because local researchers have only limited opportunities to undertake serious research;
- And because the research that they publish is often undervalued by comparison with studies undertaken by foreign researchers.

Debates about the ‘gap’ between research and policy have continued for years, and are unlikely to cease, with each side blaming the other. Researchers are frustrated that policy-makers do not read their work; and policy-makers complain that researchers’ work is too academic, not relevant, etc. Proposed solutions, such as even short-

er Executive Summaries, simple bullet points, and 'best practice' guides are often rejected by researchers.¹⁰ I include myself in this number; in my experience one may establish a reputation as a reputable source of advice (an 'expert') by writing academic articles and books, but the best way to connect with policy-makers is in person, not in writing. But what if the policy-maker does not want to listen (or read)? Here, NGOs can often play a valuable role, if the individual researcher is reluctant to enter the political fray - or is perhaps unwilling to make the sorts of simplifying compromises that may be necessary to communicate effectively.

Turning more specifically to the underuse of local researchers, it is relevant to note that they have only limited opportunities to undertake serious research, once they return to their own country after completing a doctoral degree. In many countries, certainly in Africa, university staff - especially the younger ones - are not only given a very heavy teaching load, they are also under pressure (institutional or financial) to undertake consultancies. They may never, or at least not for many years, have the opportunity to undertake the sort of serious, in-depth research that is involved in writing a Ph.D. Fieldwork has to be done in short periods between long semesters, perhaps with limited funding. Foreign researchers may visit and collaborate with local researchers; indeed such collaboration may be a formal requirement for them to be allowed to undertake research. In some cases such collaboration is built on well-established relations and brings mutual benefit to both. But it is, regrettably, not unusual for this to be an unequal partnership, with the foreign researcher bet-

ter placed in terms of both time and financial resources. (Another situation which can also, unfortunately, arise is where a local researcher - knowing that his or her involvement is a prerequisite for the foreign researcher obtaining a grant - performs as a virtually sleeping partner).

The third problem - that the research published by local researchers is often undervalued by comparison with studies undertaken by foreign researchers - may be linked to the second point just made. But this bias can certainly not be justified simply in terms of research quality. The work of local researchers is, ironically, often far less visible. Local academic journals may be few, and published irregularly. A few local researchers will manage to get on the international circuit. But this can be expensive to participate in, and open to a privileged minority. The rest have limited opportunity to present their work. The mere fact that local researchers have the very considerable benefit of a deep knowledge of the country about which they are writing should be sufficient to promote their work; but this is often not the case. A few 'stars' establish an international reputation, but the majority of their colleagues may find that being a 'local researcher' is no advantage, and can often be a disadvantage. This is regrettable for the individual researcher: frustrating for their academic career, but frustrating also because they are limited in the contribution they can make to the development of their country. And it is certainly regrettable for their country, which fails to make adequate use of this valuable resource and encourages the continuing influence of outsiders who often lack specialized local knowledge.

NOTES TO CHAPTER 4

9. Aid as % of GNI in 2003: Malawi 29.8%, Tanzania 16.3 %, Uganda 15.6%, Kenya 3.4%
Aid as % of gross capital formation in 2003: Malawi 358.0 %, Tanzania 87.0 %, Uganda 73.7 %, Kenya 26.0 % (World Bank

Indicators 2005)

10. I have recently tried an alternative written format: so-called 'Stories from Aidland', which were published in *The Broker*. See: <http://www.thebrokeronline.eu/About-The-Broker>

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