

# **Demanding Innovation**

*articulating policies for demand-led research capacity building*

An international policy seminar organized by  
ECDPM and DGIS (Netherlands Ministry of Foreign Affairs/Development  
Cooperation)

Maastricht, 10-12 October 2001

## **Opening Address**

**Dr Thandika Mkandawire,**

**Director**

**United Nations Research Institute for Social Development  
(Geneva, Switzerland)**

---

Mr. Chairman, Ladies and Gentlemen,

I am honoured to be asked to make a keynote speech at this gathering. Let me begin with a number of caveats. First, my views are coloured by the African research experience—although, upon reading the report, I found striking similarities between the African experience and those of other parts of the world. Second, my background is mainly in the social sciences.

From the documents sent to me, it is clear that some important changes are taking place in the donor community. A new approach being adopted—with an emphasis on long-term, demand driven research—and this is a major improvement over past practice. It is reducing the “short-termism” that has made serious research difficult in the poor countries. It is also encouraging sensitivity to local research needs and priorities, and allowing greater “local ownership” of research agendas.

This said, there are many issues that, while acceptable at a general abstract level, need to be fleshed out or made more concrete. Many of the new terms and concepts being used—such as demand-driven, development-oriented, participatory, etc.—are far from unproblematic, and they often have different meanings for different actors.

### **Who are the demanders?**

That research should in some way be related to demand seems to be an eminently sensible proposition. Of course, this should not be construed as suggesting that *only* demand-driven research should be funded. We know of much knowledge that was acquired through serendipity or scientific curiosity, and for which there was no obvious “demand” at the time of discovery.

Let me play the economist for a moment. “Demand” is not the same thing as “need”. Who demands? Before we embrace demand-drivenness, we have to be aware of the multiple and potentially contradictory positions of the demanders. Which of these demanders we privilege depends on a wide range of things, including our understanding of development, the legitimacy of the demanders, and their ability to make known their demands.

### Governments

Governments want to have access to research findings. But in recent years, most governments have shown little interest in research—either because they feel they are no longer in control of things, or because donors bring along with them consultants who do all the research.

Governments are generally described as the spoilers—for their censorship, starving research of funds, misuse of research knowledge, etc. However, we should bear in mind that governments are major players—probably still the most important players—in capacity building. Usually both independent centers and university-based research rely on the human resources and infrastructure that governments provide.

### Donors

Some of the demand for research comes from donors themselves. Increasingly this demand has taken the form of consultancies, whose effects on the development of research capacity are widely bemoaned and the reaction to which has partly encouraged new donor initiatives in long-term, demand-driven research.

One major problem with donor support of research is its partiality and “one-thing-at-a-time” approach. Research institutions are part of a complex system of learning, knowledge generation and dissemination. This system is composed of universities, independent centers, individual researchers, users, and research networks (national, regional and international). However, as a result of changes in donor perceptions or priorities, there is a tendency to prioritize one of these components at a time—often at the expense of the system as a whole. In the 1960s it was universities, then research networks in the 1980s, independent centers in the 1990s, and perhaps back to universities now. I believe this is unfortunate, for it unnecessarily fragments what is in fact a *whole*. It is incumbent upon researchers and national governments to insist on a holistic view of a country’s research infrastructure or system, even as each component individually fights to defend its own turf.

### NGOs

NGOs are also an important source of demand. And it is partly from them that we have heard the most vocal calls for participatory and

demand-driven research processes. Their insistence that the affected groups or communities be heard is welcome.

#### Private sector

With the growing importance of the private sector, we will have to pay greater attention to the role of the private sector in research in the developing countries.

The problem of the private sector has already cropped up, for example, with respect to local knowledge and patenting of genes by pharmaceutical companies.

#### International organizations

International agencies such as my own also make demands on researchers. International organizations influence demand for research not only through consultancies and fellowships but also through their legitimation of certain research themes. Various major UN conferences have acted as focussing devices for research prioritization, suggesting to researchers that certain themes were of international significance or, at least, a la mode.

#### Society at large

There is considerable interest by society large in knowledge about national affairs. The link between society at large and research results may be through media channels or social movements, for example. Which demand is articulated by a society depends on power relations within it.

#### Research community (within and without)

The research community affects the demand for research in many ways—the paradigms it adheres to, its political agenda, its internal organization and its social standing.

#### Individual researchers

Researchers are a major driving force behind the directions taken by research. They are driven by the quest for knowledge, social commitments, a desire for personal glory, and material incentives. Individual researchers in pursuit of their own idiosyncratic research agenda may condition the direction of research, especially if they happen to hold key positions or be prolific scholars.

#### Future generations

Policy makers and researchers also worry about what they bequeath to the next generation. Yet concern for the demands of the living may

cause those of future generations to be ignored. Local communities are much less likely to be concerned with intertemporal distribution issues.

The users of research results are not always the same as the demanders. Those who demand research may find the results unpalatable, unrealistic or not priorities.

### **Problems of developmentalism**

Foreign aid is often intended for development, and consequently donors focus their funding on “development”. Their new argument seems to be that one is free to carry out research in anything, as long as it is “development-oriented”. (This brings to mind the infamous advertising about the Ford Motor Company: you could buy their cars in any colour you wanted, as long as it was black.)

This approach may be justified from the donor point of view, given the fact that their aid money is for development, but it may severely restrict the concerns and intellectual horizons of the researcher. We should recall that poor countries are not merely “developing countries”. They are nation states, historical entities, spiritual, moral and political communities. And nothing says that the development agenda should always be the primary preoccupation of these societies. Even if donors held that these countries could use their own money any way they liked, but that donor funds had to be developmental, participatory, etc., given the state of financing of research in these countries, the developmental agenda is likely to drown everything else, rendering autonomy rather meaningless.

### Multidisciplinarity of development

This is an important objective but poses serious problems for researchers. Because professional recognition is still largely through the disciplines, individual scholars take great risk in being multidisciplinary. There is also the presumption that multidisciplinary demands much less in-depth knowledge of any particular discipline than does a monodisciplinary approach. The truth is that strong multidisciplinary is very demanding in terms of skills. Otherwise, multidisciplinary easily degenerates into the lowest common denominator. This weakness has in many ways marred development studies.

### Participation

My Institute was among the first to talk about participatory processes. There seems to be little awareness of the problematic nature of participatory processes that have been identified in areas where non-governmental organizations interact with local communities. It is my suspicion that these problems are likely to be compounded in the research environment.

### Micro-projectizing

“Micro-projectizing” tends to make participation a tool for improving projects, rather than an aspect of citizenship. Paradoxically, while most donors take the dominant macroeconomic model as given—and consequently do not allocate much funding to research processes likely to question that model—they contribute to the creation of conditions in which researchers direct their attention to micro-level concerns.

It is not always the case that those familiar with local knowledge are necessarily the right ones for “scaling-up”, which may require not only knowledge about the specific locality or context within which specific lessons were learned, but also knowledge of the new contexts to which this knowledge is to be transferred.

### Inherent asymmetry

Researchers usually come with considerable knowledge—if not of the local situation, then at least of situations similar to the local one. They also are part of an elite, or are perceived as such by the local population. It should be clear that if researchers were not presumed to possess such knowledge there would be no point in having them in the community.

### Sustainability-accountability paradox

On the one hand, sustainability requires progressive integration of the products and effects of intervention into ongoing processes—that is, local ownership and support. On the other hand, accountability demands that the effects of NGOs or researchers must be “visible” and “attributable” To satisfy donors, NGOs deliberately or unconsciously “ring fence” projects to show the effects of specific inputs.

Participation, in being mainstreamed, has become a statutory requirement by donors and thus increased the possibility that such participation becomes a formulaic tyranny.

The ability to enhance local capacity is not as widespread as is often assumed.

### Representativeness and the legitimacy of participants

One unresolved problem is deciding on who sets the national or local research agenda. Although knowledge is quintessentially a public good, it is highly contested because it is a source of power.

### Distribution of benefits

Researchers usually have little to say on the distribution or use of their knowledge, and we should have no illusion that participation in the generation of knowledge guarantees that one will share in the benefits

of that knowledge. In many cases, the decisive influences on distribution may lie outside the site at which knowledge is generated.

### Pitfalls of intellectual populism

One form this takes is the search for instant knowledge. The danger is that this often leads to poor research, and tends to nourish the view that poor research is good enough for the poor. My own view is that research for the poor must be of the highest quality, because errors are extremely costly when problems and challenges are acute.

### **The University**

Writing about research without fully taking into account the university system is like writing Hamlet without the prince. Yet there is a certain hostility or scepticism about the university.

Donors like the autonomy of researchers with respect to universities, because it frees research projects from local academic politics and bureaucracies. While it is acknowledged that programmes firmly based within universities have a greater chance of sustainability upon termination of donor support, it is generally true that programmes that are not bogged down by the baggage of organizational and academic responsibilities are more attractive to donors—not only because they have more opportunities to establish a research track record, but also because they are *less* autonomous from donors.

The greater the autonomy of research networks from local institutions, the more dependent they are on donor support and the more attentive they are to donor discourses and donor preferences. This may be reflected in the focus on themes of importance to donors at any particular time—poverty, gender, governance, etc.

Furthermore, one should not forget that these arrangements affect the governance structures of universities and contribute to institutional coherence, in which the donor funded projects are presumably islands of high productivity.

Much useful research ultimately relies on universities as producers of research capacity, as hosts, as researchers, etc. But their attitude seems to be similar to that of the doves at the cathedral: they love the cathedral, but tend to leave droppings on it.

### **Conclusion**

- (a) the growing realization that recipients must influence research agenda is welcome
- (b) although demand-research is important, it is not as easily identified as it would seem nor is it the only research that should be funded.
- (c) it is important to have a holistic view of a country's research system

(d) we should be aware that concepts borrowed from other aspects of the development discourse are problematic, to say the least.