

5 The Transformation of Policy Ideas: A Challenge for Development Research

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Abstract

Similar policy shocks have different effects on different groups or societies: while certain experiences will lead to change in some societies or states, this may not be the case in others. The reason for this is that individuals turn to collective ideas when confronted with new information that might affect their thinking and their actions; they do not simply react to the objective external world. As a consequence, knowledge that impacts on collective ideas can provide an important contribution to sustainable development. The present article looks at the connection between development policy and research from this perspective. It describes challenges linked to this interface, explaining the concept of collective policy ideas used by Legro (2000) and exploring the conditions for the transformation of these collective policy ideas. Feeling pressure to improve and justify their policies, development actors tend to focus their expectations on transformation knowledge, from which they expect the greatest added value. While this is understandable from the point of view described, such expectations are not equally applicable to all types of research. A neglect of other types of knowledge, such as systems or target knowledge, might prevent appropriate valorisation of the transformation of policy ideas. This argument is illustrated with examples from research on governance and conflict carried out within the Swiss National Centre of Competence in Research (NCCR) North-South programme.

Keywords: Development policy; knowledge transfer; policy ideas; governance; conflict.

5.1 Introduction

The transformation of reality first takes place in our heads: we will only be able to change an existing situation once we have realised that we ought to change it. The situation itself may consist of physically tangible facts like polluted water or damaged roads; or it may consist of less tangible items like obsolete political concepts or contested ideas. By ideas we mean mental constructs held by individuals that provide orientation for behaviour and policy (Tannenwald 2005, p 15). Typically, the material and the ideational are interlinked: there is a tangible fact and an idea behind it. This means that if we want to transform a given situation, we have to work on both ‘ideas’ and ‘facts’. And if we want to modify the way we transform a situation, we also have to work on our own ideas about it. This describes, in a nutshell, a crucial objective of, but also a challenge for, development research: it is about the transfer of knowledge into practice in the global North and South and about the type of knowledge produced.

Any presentation of the Swiss National Centre of Competence in Research (NCCR) North-South will include the objective of transferring research knowledge into development policy practice. Indeed, this is one of the programme’s major objectives and one main reason why the Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation (SDC) agreed to provide roughly half of the programme’s funding. In the course of action, this knowledge transfer objective has also become one of the most contested objectives of the programme. The reason is not that researchers were incapable or unwilling to disseminate their results to development practitioners. Nor is it a lack of interest among practitioners in what researchers produced. The discussions and tensions arose based on disparate expectations, diverging interests, and, at least partially, different perceptions about the value and the types of contribution that research could make to the work of development practitioners. Perception of the knowledge produced by local stakeholders constitutes another challenge for development research and has major implications for the valorisation of research results.

The present article does not focus on specific research results but on knowledge transfer in general, concentrating on research results that take the form of policy ideas. It argues that although ideas may seem of little use to some practitioners at first glance, knowledge in the form of ideas can, under certain circumstances, provide an important contribution to sustainable development. The article first looks at the connection between development policy

and research. It then describes some of the challenges linked to this interface, introducing the concept of collective policy ideas and exploring the conditions for their transformation. The argument is illustrated with examples from research on governance and conflict carried out within the NCCR North-South programme.

5.2 Development and research

Interlinkages between development and research-based knowledge are not a new phenomenon. Development policy has always been knowledge-based policy *par excellence*. On the one hand, this is due to the need for information about objectives to be followed and about appropriate instruments to be implemented in order to achieve these objectives. On the other hand, development policy has been a rather costly branch of public policy that generates effects not easily perceptible to domestic politicians and the broader public. It has therefore required ‘proof’ of its effectiveness to enhance its legitimacy and ensure its ongoing support by decision-making bodies. More than directly mandated evaluations, independent research is expected to provide unbiased and credible information in this regard. The need for proof of success of development policies increased after the end of the Cold War and the disappearance of the political objectives that had ultimately determined various forms of support to Third World countries during the East–West global division. It is therefore no coincidence that the debate about the effectiveness of development policy re-emerged a couple of years ago with greater intensity (Nuscheler 2008).

The Paris Declaration on Aid Effectiveness, which was adopted by the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD 2005), and the Code of Conduct of the European Union (EU), which was proposed by the European Commission (2007) and adopted by the Council of Ministers, are both aimed at technocratic improvements in development policy, such as enhanced concentration, harmonisation, and ownership. However, the ongoing debate about development policy extends much further: it challenges the effects and ultimately the *raison d'être* of development policy. More concretely, for example, it calls attention to the encouraging effects of aid on corruption and its hindering effects on democracy (Easterly 2006), and poses questions about the lack of economic impact of aid in cases where recipient states pursue poor policies (Burnside and Dollar 2000), or about the adverse effects brought about by the establishment of a ‘global knowledge architec-

ture' consisting of interchangeable development experts rotating around the globe (Kaiser 2003).

Under these circumstances, development actors' expectations of development research have grown. Even more than in earlier years, they are eager to obtain advice about how to improve their policies and programmes in order to meet measurable targets such as the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs). In a recent survey of major Western development agencies, seven out of nine respondents stated that there was pressure to demonstrate the impact of research, and six noted increased recognition of the importance of research as a tool for development. Among the most commonly noted trends were the greater emphasis on North–South partnerships, the pressure to demonstrate impact, and the growing emphasis on linking research to policy and practice (Barnard et al 2007, p 5).

These developments are generally positive from a research perspective, in terms of appreciation of research, the emphasis put on research partnerships, and especially expectations regarding the impact of research results on development practice. Other aspects are more problematic; they mainly concern the last item mentioned, that is, the impact on development practice, which can be understood in various ways. Research may under certain conditions indeed contribute to development effectiveness measured against agreed-upon development objectives. But it may also question more fundamental ideas of development practice and thereby render life more difficult for practitioners. Although in the long term this type of knowledge will also contribute to the effectiveness and legitimacy of development work, pressurised policy actors may not perceive it as doing so in the short run.

These partially diverging expectations have to be viewed against the background of the knowledge categorisation typical of transdisciplinary and development research, which separates the knowledge generated into three categories: systems knowledge, target knowledge, and transformation knowledge (ProClim 1997; Hirsch Hadorn et al 2008). Systems knowledge provides insights into general causalities and interactions. It is concerned with how and why processes occur and therefore looks at structures and underlying societal practices. Target knowledge concentrates on the roles, interests, options, and strategies of individual players. It incorporates best practices and stakeholder actions. Transformation knowledge, finally, focuses on the type of information that is useful for the implementation of policies with the objective of short-term change at the programme or project level.

It aims to provide insights into how best to achieve the transition from an observed to a desired situation. The first category represents the most general and least immediately applicable type of knowledge, while the third represents the most specific and policy-oriented type.

Feeling pressure to improve and justify their policies, development actors tend to focus their expectations on the third category, that is, transformation knowledge, from which they expect the greatest added value in view of the optimisation they intend. Such expectations have also been repeatedly voiced by SDC representatives with respect to the NCCR North-South. While this is understandable from the point of view described, such expectations are not equally applicable to all types of research, and – more important – a rigorous restriction of focus to this type of knowledge might ultimately prevent appropriate valorisation of research on the transformation of policy ideas, which per definition cannot be subsumed under this third category of knowledge.²

This hints at some more fundamental issues of knowledge translation and transfer from the sphere of research into the sphere of policy. These are addressed in the following section, giving special attention to the notion of policy ideas.

5.3 Striving for knowledge transfer

The NCCR North-South has committed itself to the core objective of generating knowledge for the mitigation of syndromes of global change (Hurni et al 2004). In an ideal world, the knowledge generated would be scientifically valid, accessible, and acceptable to decision-makers in the North and the South; they would design their policies according to this knowledge, which in turn would help to mitigate identified syndromes. However, the world we live in is not ideal.

The challenges posed by the interface between policy and research are not new. They have also been the subject of previous research. Patterns of interaction have been identified, and concepts and tools have been designed to help analyse this type of interaction. To mention just two examples relevant to the challenges encountered within the framework of development research: Coleman (1991) came to the conclusion that, except in highly consensual political cultures, the only decisions made primarily on the basis of research findings were politically unimportant ones. Hence for him, when

considering the role of policy research, it was essential to keep the primacy of politics firmly in mind. In a more recent publication, Court and Young (2003) evaluated fifty case studies of research transfers in the North and the South. One key insight was that the context in which ideas were circulated was the essential variable determining the quality of their transfer into policy. These authors found that the degree of receptiveness of the political system and the probability of policy change were a function of political demand and controversy, that is, prevailing narratives and discourses among policymakers and the extent of demand for new ideas were of key relevance.

Hence the main question in development research is how to assess the 'receptiveness' of a political system. Which kinds of prevailing demand and controversy are most conducive to a successful transfer of research ideas? Obviously, the objective of knowledge transfer cannot be merely to activate pre-existing similar ideas, as this would not lead to change but only to confirmation of established modes of thinking and acting.

This draws attention to the concept of policy ideas. In political science, research into the role of ideas, their power, and their categorisation has a long tradition; the same is true for the field of international relations (Goldstein and Keohane 1993). However, relatively little is known about how new ideas enter into policies. This pertains to the role of actors as well as to the content of policy ideas. In this respect, Legro (2000) developed an interesting approach to the conditions of change affecting policy ideas. Based on the sociological state of the art, he underlined the relevance of the respective societal or group context in which ideas are circulated. He assessed the fact that similar policy shocks seemed to have different effects on different groups or societies: while the same experiences led to change in some societies or states, this was not the case in others. His argument underlined the centrality of collective ideas when evaluating the propensity to change: individuals turn to collective ideas when confronted with new information that might affect their thinking and their actions; they do not simply react to the objective external world. Legro cites as one example a study by Sagan (1993) on nuclear safety in the US, according to which, during the Cold War, a series of military accidents occurred that contradicted the prioritisation of operational safety, but because none resulted in an actual nuclear disaster, hardly any policy change took place. The same was true for a series of false warnings on nuclear attacks in the 1960s and 1970s in the US, where defenders of the existing orthodoxy were able to highlight the success rather than the failure of the concept of nuclear deterrence. According to Legro (2000, p 428), "[...] in the absence

of socially undesirable results, change in ‘myths’ is difficult.” He came to the conclusion that change (in ideas) becomes more likely when (external) events generate consequences for societies that deviate from their collective expectations and when the consequences are starkly undesirable. In other words: when a collective, which functions according to an established set of collective ideas, is faced by unexpected developments that provoke strongly undesirable consequences, it will be more open to a change in policy ideas. What are the implications of this insight for the NCCR North-South?

5.4 Challenges and examples in the NCCR North-South

Development-oriented research implies the objective of knowledge transfer. The NCCR North-South addresses various collectives or publics. On one side is the ‘donor’ public in the North, which consists of development agencies, NGOs, and similar entities. On the other side is the ‘recipient’ public in the South, which is composed of national and local governments, additional stakeholders, NGOs, and others. While the general distinction between a ‘Northern’ and a ‘Southern’ public makes sense with regard to the different functions the respective publics have within development policy, in reality many more collectives and beliefs must be taken into account. This is especially relevant in the South, where not only different countries but also different political cultures and traditions and therefore different types of actor have to be addressed. Hence, when development research transcends the sphere of pure action-oriented transformation knowledge, it faces the challenge of providing compelling policy ideas to a variety of publics in the North and the South in order to achieve its objective of knowledge transfer. The following examples from the NCCR North-South illustrate this challenge. They are drawn from two research foci in the field of governance and conflict.

5.4.1 Drivers of resource-related conflict in the Horn of Africa

Research on environmental conflict started from the assumption that changes in the environment, be they of climatic origin or not, would significantly influence the likelihood of violent conflicts among the stakeholders affected (see also Goetschel and Péclard 2011, in this volume). However, research results proved this original assumption to be wrong. With regard to land resources in the Horn of Africa, the type of resource use and the practices and institutions linked to it – which affect the intensity of tensions and the propen-

sity for conflict among the parties concerned – were much more important than the environment. Hence, without down-playing the general gravity of global warming, research results suggest that in order to mitigate the consequences of resource-related conflicts, policy reforms in the recipient countries are needed first and foremost. These may affect policies concerned with regulation of resource use, land entitlement practices, and designation of property rights (Hagmann 2005; Hagmann and Alemmaya Mulugeta 2008). What are the implications of these insights for knowledge transfer? Development actors in the North should be familiarised with the idea that a direct link between environmental policy and peace-building does not exist, at least not in a way that can be influenced through programme activities. Instead, policy reforms and, more generally speaking, governance issues should be given the highest priority. In the South – in this concrete case, in Ethiopia – political actors need to be convinced that humanitarian and environmental issues cannot be approached without looking at policy and governance.

5.4.2 Perception of conflict in the Horn of Africa and Central Asia

Regarding the specific issue of cattle raiding, research showed that violence per se is perceived as less of a problem by the affected nomadic populations than it is by Northern development actors. Nomadic groups identified the roles of national and local governmental representatives and the cleavages promoted by them as the primary causes of tensions and insecurity within their populations (Alemmaya Mulugeta 2008). Looking at water conflicts in Central Asia, research results demonstrated how distant the visions shared by international donors and NGOs were from the perspectives of local stakeholders, concerning both general political and societal objectives as well as specific perspectives on water issues. International development agencies act according to their visions of peaceful development of the societies concerned. On this basis, they include local actors in participatory processes designed to promote societal developments that fit their own visions of peace and harmony, which, however, do not correspond to those of the local stakeholders concerned (Bichsel 2008). In both of these cases, the major challenge in knowledge transfer consists of transforming existing development conceptions among Northern development actors, both state and non-state, as their programmes and activities are based on misconceptions of the local contexts in which they operate. This concerns intra-societal relations and particularly issues of conflict and violence.

5.4.3 National identity and statehood in West Africa and the Horn of Africa

Another research focus covered the issue of so-called weak or fragile states. This item became increasingly important on the agenda of international development and peace-building policies after the 9/11 attacks on the New York Twin Towers. The common assumption is that states or regions where the official (central) state is contested or diffused are particularly prone to violent conflict, and that they might even turn into breeding grounds for international terrorism. Research on these issues is still ongoing, but has by now already revealed highly differentiated situations from case to case. One of the most interesting common features observed in diverse parts of West Africa and the Horn of Africa are ongoing negotiations among local actors to define national identity and statehood (Hagmann and Péclard 2010). Examples of this quest include deeply rooted discussions about the preparation of a popular census in South Sudan (Santschi 2008), the struggle among the various factions in the civil war that has characterised Côte d'Ivoire since the beginning of the 1990s (Yéré 2008), and persisting debates on the process of decentralisation in Ethiopia.³ In all three cases, technical questions about how to best structure and organise a state are at stake, including administrative challenges linked to devolution or decentralisation processes. But the reform challenges do not stop at the administrative level, and the core issue is not necessarily strengthening the formal state. In this type of situation, it is essential to take better account of the variety of political actors, formal and informal, and the processes in which state power is articulated and negotiated *de facto*. From a knowledge transfer perspective, information about these elements is a key to understanding the sociopolitical topography in which development policies are implemented. However, this perspective presumes the readiness of development actors to take into consideration a large variety of statehoods and to adapt their objectives, policies, and instruments accordingly. With regard to local stakeholders, it primarily presumes the openness of state authorities to recognising ongoing political processes of identity negotiation, as well as these state authorities' own interest in improving the quality of such processes with a view to eventually strengthening the state's legitimacy.

5.5 Implications of the transformation of policy ideas in practice

According to Legro (2000), the conditions for the transformation of policy ideas are not the same everywhere: their collective adoption by groups of actors depends on the ideas in place, their perceived consequences, and available alternatives. This finding confirms the need for a context-sensitive research approach followed by the NCCR North-South. At the same time, it sets clear boundaries to the understandable temptation of development actors to approach apparently similar issues in different contexts with the same policies and instruments. Comparison is a very important heuristic way of approaching both science and political reality. But when it comes to implementation, application of the same instruments to contexts that are less similar than assumed can lead to disappointing results. While this is less relevant when valorising action-oriented transformation knowledge, it becomes crucial when dealing with target or systems knowledge. In such cases, the transformation of policy ideas in place may be at stake. An approach that ignores existing context-specific collective ideas on the issues concerned will greatly reduce the chances of success.

For donor countries, the examples of research results mentioned imply that they might have to allow for a revision of the ideas governing their respective policies on development and even peace-building. One result might be that entire thematic or country programmes have to be revised, dropped, or enhanced. Even more is at stake for recipient countries. Research has revealed that while in certain cases programmes implemented with external support strengthen the interests of certain groups in the country, they are far from tackling the root causes of the problems observed. This would require fundamental policy changes which the respective governments may not be able or willing to make; faced with donor pressure, they may prefer dropping external support to completely reformulating national policies and dealing with the possible consequences for their own power and influence. In the terms of Legro (2000), the feared effects of new ideas can by far exceed the perceived negative outcome of holding on to traditional ideas – even when external support is being lost. Alternatively to giving up external support, recipient countries might of course simply turn to another donor.

Certain research results may also be perceived differently in the North and the South: what ‘the North’ sees as action-oriented transformation knowledge may well be seen as fundamental target or even systems knowledge by

‘the South’. Taking the case of decentralisation and federalism as an example, recommendations on how to ‘improve’ the decentralisation process may be seen as a technical issue by Northern development actors, while their Southern political partners may perceive them as fundamentally affecting state identity. Still, such situations and even tensions can promote new thinking and readjustment in both the North and the South. This is an additional function of development research: it should be recognised as having a comparative advantage in discovering and describing basic problems and also in pointing out possible pathways to, and means for, problem-solving without being accused of political bias.

At this point, it may be helpful to recall that the NCCR North-South itself was conceived around a policy idea: the concept of sustainable development. The report of the so-called Brundtland Commission coined the most famous definition of the term, characterising sustainable development as development that “meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs” (WCED 1987, p 24). Apart from the three dimensions of environmental, economic, and sociopolitical sustainability, the content of the objectives and the means required for their achievement remained open to discussion – and research! The relative vagueness of the concept of sustainable development undoubtedly was one of the reasons for its success as an idea that found widespread acceptance. The NCCR North-South set itself the objective of generating new insights into how to improve programmes and projects aiming to achieve sustainable development.

Therefore, while parts of the research programme generate action-oriented transformation knowledge, there is also a need to produce systems and target knowledge that may lead to the transformation of policy ideas. Taking into consideration the ongoing debate about the *raison d'être* of development policy, this kind of critical self-reflection is greatly needed for the sake of the recipient countries, but also for the sustainability of development policies themselves. Combining elements of ownership, partnership, transdisciplinarity, and impact orientation, the NCCR North-South research programme has the potential to bridge the gap between what may be labelled the ‘fundamentalistic critique’ of development, on the one hand, and the policy reform agenda, which is of a rather technocratic nature, on the other hand. This potential makes it a very timely, but also a very challenging undertaking, particularly in view of the diverging and insufficiently clarified mutual expectations about the types of knowledge to be produced and about the best way to

achieve knowledge that is satisfying to both researchers and practitioners. Looking back, it seems a blessing that no attempt was made to harmonise the various and partially diverging expectations at the outset of the programme. This might have either prevented research activities from starting or restricted the potential for the new and challenging types of insight that have been produced.

Nonetheless, after eight years some conclusions and suggestions seem appropriate. Compared with other dimensions of foreign policy, development policy has seen the most systematic attempts to achieve satisfying knowledge transfer from research into practice. Yet it still struggles with types of knowledge concerned with more fundamental policy issues and politics in the North and the South. Development policy actors must recognise the relevance of such types of knowledge for achieving their objectives. The fact that this type of input may not fit directly into a toolbox does not mean it is irrelevant for development. Certain core issues, such as those described in the fields of governance and conflict, have to be dealt with at the level of policy ideas. This does not mean that nothing can be done about them. The concept of collective policy ideas and their conditions of change helps to understand how research results that touch on fundamental political issues can be valorised. The transformation of such ideas requires a context-specific approach and a comparative advantage of new thinking over pre-existing collective ideas within the respective public. It also depends on the consequences expected by the stakeholders affected, whether in the North or in the South. These contextual factors can be influenced, though hardly by individual development actors on their own. If researchers make their ideational results even more accessible to practitioners and if development actors become more interested in this type of knowledge, then new avenues to knowledge transfer and development policy might open up, focusing on core issues of political societies in the North and the South.

Endnotes

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² I am aware that systems knowledge may also be of a technical nature, and that transformation knowledge may include more fundamental, normative elements. The use of this ‘trilogy’ of knowledge here reflects an ideal-type categorisation frequently used in literature.

³ In this context it is interesting to note that the Ethiopian government successfully applied to host the 5th International Conference on Federalism in Addis Abeba in December 2010: <http://www.ethiopianfederalism.org/>; accessed on 11 April 2011.

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