



Building capacity for locally led development research

By Hemant Ojha
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Community consultation on forest management, near Banepa, Nepal, 2019

For the past 20 years, I have been engaged with the question of how developing countries' capacity for research for development can be strengthened. I confronted this in Nepal and more generally across South Asia. I argue that while developing countries have made significant strides in research capacity, donors have missed important opportunities to accelerate impact in this area.

Almost without exception, development donors put capacity building as a key outcome in every development program they fund. Capacity strengthening received a further boost in 2015 with the United Nations' Sustainable Development Goals. All of the 17 goals have capacity development objectives embedded, with Goal 17 having an explicit target to "enhance international support for implementing effective and targeted capacity building in developing countries to support national plans to implement all sustainable development goals, including through North-South, South-South and triangular cooperation" ([SDG 17.9](#)). However, rarely has this desire been translated into results.

In view of such limited success, the ['how' question of capacity development](#) has become a major issue of debate in aid cooperation. Views differ between aid providers and receivers, and also across lines of development approach and ideologies. For example, human rights activists advocate for investing in awareness, agency and alliances; sectoral experts emphasise technical capacity; and development economists argue for a national database and capacity to manage it.

Of course, all of these aspects need strengthening, but my experience suggests that we need a different focus. I believe locally led research and development knowledge is key.

Let me use the example of Nepal's community forestry development to show how investing

in locally led research leads to useful development outcomes. Our recent paper explains how a [new system of resource governance emerged](#) through four decades of effort in action learning and capacity building.

When Nepal's mountains faced massive land degradation in the 1970s, development partners from the Global North rushed to the country to support establishing large-scale plantations. However, this effort failed, as it was designed by external experts and implemented by a highly top-down government agency.

This failure led to critical reflection among development partners and national decision-makers, who then agreed to take a community-based approach to forest restoration and management. Donors invested in building local capacity to analyse problems and experiment with new solutions. This effort, over time, led to a major development success in the country, with the establishment of a nationwide community forestry system.

This was helped in the 1990s by the advent of a democratic system that created a conducive space for critical and independent research. Development partners began to support a multi-actor approach to forestry governance.

Research NGOs became strong players in the process of knowledge generation around community forestry development. A community of 'critical action intellectuals' - defined as people who contribute to systemic change through their intellectual work and political engagement - grew in number and influence. They were able to not only empower communities, but also challenge the dominant policy actors to create more democratic decision-making.

In another recently published paper, I and my co-authors have documented [three case studies from Nepal, Kenya and Central America](#), where we have gathered evidence of development partners working with locally based critical action intellectuals, with transformative outcomes. We used the Nepal case as a framework to explore parallels in Africa and Central America.

In Kenya, an environmental sciences professor, Wangari Maathai, became the champion of greening Kenya's rural landscapes and tackling the rights of local people including women. Her work was recognised through a Nobel Prize, and has had significant influence on Kenya's environmental policy and management landscape.

Similarly, other scholars created new institutions to pursue critical and action-oriented research, and produced critical analysis of the development problems as well as policy responses. They were able to build international partnerships in various ways, and various

forms of development assistance were key to supporting their vision.

The Central American story focuses on indigenous people fighting for recognition of their rights to land. Locally based researchers and lawyers in Guatemala have assisted communities to defend their land rights in the face of increasing commercial pressures such as oil palm plantations. This story reinforces that locally based action research can lead to wider impact.

How can development partners support and strengthen locally led research for development? There are at least six ways.

First, development partners should incorporate local research capacity throughout development cooperation. Whether a development program is about fisheries or family planning, partners can allocate part of their investment to identifying and supporting locally based knowledge workers to undertake research, assessments, case studies, and policy analysis on key themes and issues related to the program. Decisions on these investments should be independent of the implementation of the program, so that space for independent analysis is reserved.

Second, development partners cannot directly confront the political or economic roots of development problems, but they can support local knowledge workers to do so. Development partners can agree with national governments to make an investment in research and policy analysis independent of their programs. Policy analysis and strategic planning led by local experts can generate contextually grounded solutions, which can ultimately increase the impact of a program.

Third, research-related investments should also explicitly support practice-based and transdisciplinary knowledge development. Too often, following the boundaries of academic disciplines does not lead to any usable knowledge.

Fourth, different countries and cultures have their own ways of creating and articulating evidence in decision-making, and donors can support local researchers to produce culturally grounded and policy-relevant knowledge which can better inform local practical discourse about change.

Fifth, development donors should support cross-institutional interactions and knowledge exchange among NGOs, academics, practitioners and policy actors. Such a knowledge interface can lead to new ideas and more appropriate development solutions.

Finally, in the globalised world, a huge potential for knowledge exchange and capacity development is arising around the ways in which diasporic intellectual associations have

emerged in the Global North. These associations can be an important bridge for development cooperation between the Global North and the Global South.

To conclude, many developing countries have strong potential for in-country development management and policy research. Development partners should focus on how emerging local capacity can be further strengthened, so that development policy and practice are stimulated by locally rooted knowledge and ideas. There is of course value in South-North collaboration for knowledge development, but the emphasis should be on locally led research partnerships.

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