COMMONWEALTH SCHOLARSHIPS

AccessEd and Commonwealth Scholarship Commission
Leaders in Sustainable Development Programme

Workshop: Writing for Development

Overarching workshop theme:

The world is facing dramatic changes and challenges. What is the role of development research in these times and what are the most pressing issues it needs to address? Is there a moral imperative for all researchers, regardless of their field, to engage with development principles?

Watch the video with the following questions in mind. These sub-themes will be discussed during the live follow-up session:

- Which Sustainable Development Goals are related to your own research?
- Language of development: what 'Devspeak' words have you come across previously? What development language 'faux pas' have you seen in literature or practice before?
- Which actors in development have you come across? How does your engagement approach change across these actors?
- Using PEST – a development framework and tool to analyse and monitor macro-environmental external factors that may have an impact on your research area. What are the factors that impact on your own research?

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ACCESS ED

Session pre-reading

Read the following article. What are the main challenges and controversies linked to the overarching workshop theme?

Article: Development researchers as advocates: eight tips for more engaged scholarship

Research impact has become a strategic priority for many research institutes around the world, with an increasing focus on "bridging the gap" between research and society and positioning research in a way that ensures the knowledge it produces can contribute to bringing about change. Development researchers often find themselves straddling two worlds: the academic sector on the one hand, and the development sector on the other. But is there a moral imperative for development researchers to bridge these two realms by acting as advocates in 'the real world'? If so, how can they best share knowledge in ways that contribute to solidarity, peace, and social justice?

Here are eight key takeaways:

1.Engage early on
Development research can help NGOs, policy-makers and other actors gain a contextualised and multi-faceted understanding of the dynamics of development. If researchers want their work to better inform programs and policies, they should interact with non-academic actors early on and allow them to help shape design objectives, recommends Adriano Nuvunga (Executive Director of the Centre for Democracy and Development, Mozambique). This will generate interest in the research that can improve research uptake later. It can also help to move away from extractive research models to approaches grounded in dialogue with local actors in which researchers spend more time with communities and talking to others.

2.Make it political
Research generally does not inform policy-making unless it's politicised. If researchers want policy-makers to engage with and use their research, they need to be willing to make it political and engage in political debates, says Dirk-Jan Koch (Chief Science Officer at the Netherlands Ministry of Foreign Affairs & Professor by Special Appointment International Trade & Development Cooperation at Radboud University).

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Researchers need to understand what is going on in the minds of policy-makers. Make time available to regularly use (social) media by writing blogs or op-eds on research relevant to policy-makers, and make sure to reach the right people. Despite the political sensitivity, Dirk-Jan for example wrote an op-ed about the unintended side-effects of development cooperation that focused on how Dutch aid given to Syrian rebels was passed on to Islamist militias in Syria.

3.Take a stand & be purposely passionate and provocative

Researchers seek to be objective and neutral when conducting research, but could embrace a bit more boldness and engage in activism when it comes to sharing their research and advocating for change in policy and practice. Sometimes simply sharing information is not enough. Researchers should find ways to appeal to hearts and minds, for example through storytelling that makes known the societal relevance of the research. By being "purposely passionate and provocative", research can get noticed by policy-makers and the general public more widely, notes Kristen Cheney (Associate Professor in Children and Youth Studies at ISS).

4.Spread the message far and wide & together with others

Researchers are generally expected to continually search for and share something new through their research. As a result, they tend to publish in academic journals and elsewhere and quickly move on to the next project. Yet advocacy and transformative change requires the opposite – namely long-term engagement – as such change takes time. If you want your research to contribute to change, you likely need to repeat the message again and again and to different audiences. Find networks of like-minded people, as this can help reach a critical mass of people who support a particular cause and can create enough momentum to sway politicians to act.

5.Beware of the politics of knowledge production

Development as we know it today is inextricably linked with European colonisation, leaving us with a system of dominant ways of knowing and the monopoly of 'useful knowledge' and 'expertise' by institutions in the 'Global North'. Lata Narayanaswamy (Associate Professor in the Politics of Global Development, University of Leeds) warns that we must not presume that there is a tangible thing called knowledge that is by definition valuable to share and to acknowledge that there are implied power hierarchies in how knowledge is produced and shared.

Careful consideration must be given to the why, what, and how of knowledge sharing. For example, practically speaking, what does the hegemonic position of the English language and the widespread use of digital technology mean in terms of inclusion and exclusion? Not only should knowledge sharing be coupled to clear action objectives, we must also think about how to engage research participants as co-creators, co-curators, and co-producers of knowledge.

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6.Move beyond a single identity

Traditional siloed research approaches in which one person conducts research, another communicates about the knowledge produced, and yet another is expected to do something with it, are outdated. Science-society collaboration can be strengthened if researchers start wearing different hats and assume multiple roles, for example by combining a position at a ministry and a university (as Dirk-Jan does), communicating about their research throughout the research process, or engaging in digital academic citizenship.

7.Become a digital academic citizen

Digital academic citizenship expands on the traditional perspective outlined above and is a way to engage in modern-day advocacy, comments Tobias Denskus (Associate Professor in Development Studies at Malmo University). Examples can be found on Twitter – which serves as a connector of ideas, communities, and platforms – where researchers are actively seeking and making themselves heard in certain debates: Dan Hicks (Professor of Contemporary Archeology at Oxford) for instance is often seen in the cancel culture debate in the UK, while Laura Hammond (Professor of Development Studies at the University of London) tweets about the impact of budget cuts on research and her relationship with partners in the Global South. Importantly, Twitter isn't used by them only to advocate their own research or organisations – they also use it to shed light on challenges and constraints faced by researchers, and on who they are and how they work toward overcoming societal injustices.

8.Collaborate for greater impact

Maximising the impact of research knowledge and insights requires a different, perhaps new modus operandi than many researchers are used to. Thinking of advocacy and impact as a linear process with inputs and outputs doesn't align with the complex reality of today's world and its 'wicked' problems. We need to acknowledge this complexity and not oversimplify or underestimate what is needed.

Researchers can, but don't need to go it alone. Oftentimes, colleagues working on research communication, uptake, and impact are ready to brainstorm and co-develop fitting strategies and plans to make sure knowledge is heard and applied. Don't think or work in silos. Seek to collaborate, both within your organisation and beyond.

Looking forward

Going back to where we started, how would you answer the question about *whether there is a moral imperative for development researchers to act as advocates?*