OPINIONS

Bridges across boundaries:
linking research and policy
in international development

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Think-tanks need to work together across national boundaries if they are to influence policy-making internationally. ODI is helping to pioneer a new way of doing this, using a model known as 'policy code-sharing'. It is especially difficult to bridge the gap between research and policy when any change to policy needs decision-makers in many different countries to agree. This is the case with many policies related to international development: anything to do with trade or international finance, issues governing the structures of overseas aid, measures to improve the effectiveness of international institutions – an endless list.

Researchers wanting to influence these kinds of policies have three choices.

First, they can disseminate their own research findings and recommendations as widely as possible, hoping that they will be picked up by decision-makers, and advocating that they should be. This is the Microsoft solution.

Second, they might work through research institutes and think-tanks in other countries, capitalising on their local knowledge, but disseminating the same core message through all the different outlets. This is the franchise option – the McDonald's solution.

Third, they might work more in partnership with other institutions, sharing ideas, modifying messages, and collaborating to achieve change. There is a high degree of trust involved and a cross-guarantee of quality across the network of partners. An appropriate model is the airline alliance, One World, say, or the Star Alliance.

There are good reasons for researchers to prefer the third model. It recognises the benefits of plural voices, including in developing countries. It builds local capacity to work on policy questions. And it maximises the opportunity for further development of the research base to inform

policy. Airlines talk about 'code-sharing'. A good way to think about this model is 'policy code-sharing'.

But can policy code-sharing work in practice? A current experiment to test the model is underway on the future of European development cooperation, being led by the European Association of Development Institutes. EADI has more than 150 institutional members in 29 countries. In many of those countries, European issues loom large for all who work in international development. The proposed Constitution has much to say about development; there are decisions being made about future financing; and there are links to many other topics, like the reform of the Common Agricultural Policy. It is important for decisions on these matters to be based on good research and sound evidence – and that the public debate is influenced and informed by research voices.

The EADI project called 'European Development Cooperation to 2010' makes that possible. Its key features are:

- A scenario-building exercise and overview paper, prepared jointly by us at ODI and the European Centre for Development Policy Management in Maastricht;

- Briefing papers on the main issues covered by the overview paper, providing further detail and options for the future;

- The establishment of a shared website, to which participating institutes and think-tanks can post resources, announcements, briefing papers and position papers;

- Public meetings on topics connected to the project, held in countries all over Europe, with conclusions posted on the shared website;

- Workshops and conferences, organised by EADI institutes and their partners in the NGO and policy-making communities;

- Opinion pieces to stimulate debate.

There is an explicit attempt in the project to build bridges across national boundaries. For example, the original overview has been translated into French and Italian. Similarly, speakers from one country have been invited to attend meetings in other countries. Points made in one series of meetings (for example, those held in London in 2003) have been carried over to others (for example, a meeting held in Ireland in April 2004, or a series held in Germany in the summer of 2004). Major conferences draw the themes together, for example the Conference in the Netherlands in September 2004, sponsored jointly with the Society of International Development, and the biennial conference of EADI itself, in Bonn in September 2005.

It is too soon to evaluate the exercise or to claim policy impact. At a minimum, however, the project has raised the profile of European issues in the academic and think-tank communities around Europe. Some lessons have also been learned: about the time it takes to build momentum in a project such as this, the necessity of core funding for the business of managing the network, and the need for intellectual leadership. Developing country voices also need to be brought more visibly into the exercise.

Without doubt, however, policy code-sharing is a model that will be used in future, whenever policy issues transcend national borders.

- **www.eadi.org/edc2010**
- **www.odi.org.uk/edc**
- **www.odi.org.uk/speeches/edc_2010/ meeting_report_9july.html**
- **www.odi.org.uk/publications/opinions**