

Happily Uninformed? The Demand for Research among Development Practitioners in Germany¹

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The impact of development research is largest when it provides new and useful information for development practitioners, which they incorporate into their work. This is conditional on two aspects. First, researchers concentrate on questions that are relevant for praxis and policy and come up with practical suggestions and solutions. Second, development practitioners are willing and able to incorporate new insights into their daily work and to revise existing methods. These new insights will often come from experience and internal communication but also from external sources such as research institutes and universities. Although research based decision making is a stated mission goal of most donors, it remains an empirical question if and how research results find their way into development cooperation². Low demand for research might be due to complicated access to research and an overly technical language of research results. However, it might also stem from incompatible communication and time preferences of researchers and practitioners or a mismatch of needs and expectations on both sides. In this article we explore the demand for academic research by development practitioners, its difficulties and how information flows and cooperation between development practitioners and researchers can be improved.

We developed a questionnaire to find out to what extent practitioners in development cooperation in Germany seek to apply research outcomes in their daily work and what the main obstacles to successful cooperation are. The web-based questionnaire contained 27 questions on work experience, past own research and cooperation with researchers, access to academic publications and barriers to using research results and cooperating with researchers. It was published on the PEGNet³ website and sent to 268 individual and institutional members of PEGNet, 139 German-speaking NGOs working on development issues as well as the German technical and financial development cooperation. Within five weeks 105 practitioners answered the questionnaire. Although the results reported are not representative of the German development sector they provide some interesting insights into existing problems and allow a constructive discussion of possible solutions.

The idea for the survey is based on a similar endeavor undertaken internally at the research departments of the British Department for International Development (DFID) (Jones and Mendizabal 2010) and the World Bank (Ravallion 2011). As research is provided in-house in both these institutions one would assume a high integration of research and practice. And indeed, Ravallion (2011) finds that the majority of senior staff values World Bank research highly. However Jones and Mendizabal (2010) find that learning from research and evaluation works best when results are directly applicable. In Germany, generally the formal integration of research and practice, as well as

¹ We would like to thank all respondents of the questionnaire for their time and particularly Lennart Kaplan for his support during the data collection and analysis process. The questionnaire and an anonymized version of the survey results will be made publicly available on the PEGNet website.

² See for instance:

http://www.bmz.de/de/was_wir_machen/wege/bilaterale_ez/zwischenstaatliche_ez/forschung/.

³ Poverty Reduction, Equity and Growth Network at the Kiel Institute for the World Economy.

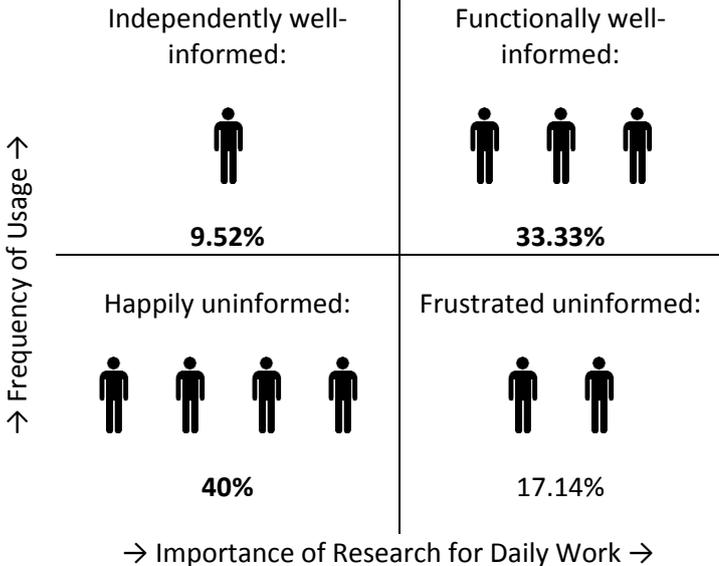
staff exchange between researchers and practitioners, is much lower. Apart from this apparent difference, most development agencies face similar organizational problems that inhibit the application of new knowledge and adjustment of existing practices. Among them are high staff turnover and the resulting difficulties of knowledge management, high daily routine workload and insufficient internal communication.

Survey Results

Our typical respondent works for an NGO (44.8%) or a Public Development Agency (37.1%). Her work concentrates primarily on agriculture and rural development (46.7%), social development and protection (30.5%) or education (28.6%)⁴ in Sub-Saharan Africa (60.9%) or Latin America and the Caribbean (19.0%). She holds a Diploma in social sciences or economics and has around 10 years of experience in development cooperation.

The survey revealed that the principal motivation to read research is of practical nature. Respondents indicated that they were primarily interested in country and context specific information (31.4%) as well as new methods and approaches (23.8%) and technical innovation (16.2%). To learn about recent trends and new results in research practitioners rely mainly on informal discussions with researchers and colleagues (84.8%) but also newsletters (64.8%) and specialized magazines (62.9%). They also attend conferences to stay updated about new research (69.5%). The two lowest ranking sources that are used to learn about new research are social media and blogs.

Figure 1: Demand Matrix



While researchers generally think of scientific journal articles and university working papers as the most obvious source of new research, practitioners in our sample seem to find reports by international organizations and NGOs more useful, which often summarize several journal articles and provide information on case studies. The publications most frequently read are prepared by international organizations (87%) and NGOs (61%). To our surprise (ungated) university working papers (46%) are mentioned even less often than (gated) articles in peer reviewed academic journals (52%) as preferred publications⁵.

About one third of our respondents have been both actively engaged in research and still cooperate with universities and research institutes in their current position. Many respondents cooperate with universities “around the corner” such as Göttingen and Hohenheim, but also with national research institutes such as the GDI/DIE, the GIGA, the SLE and the IfW (where PEGNet is based). With respect

⁴ Multiple answers were possible such that the share will not add up to unity.
⁵ Again, several answers were possible.

to international cooperation universities in Sub-Sahara Africa (South Africa, Zambia, Sierra Leone, Uganda, and Mozambique) were mentioned most frequently. Also well-known institutions such as ODI and UNU-WIDER were named as current research partners by the survey respondents.

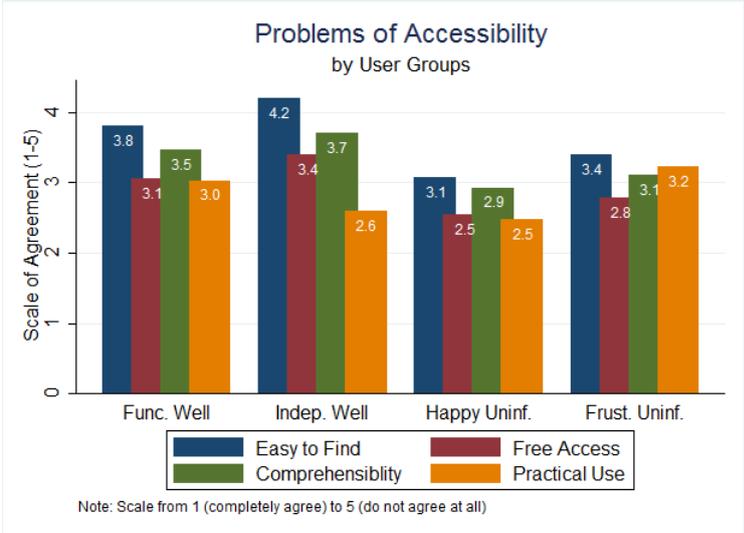
Demand for Research

The importance of research for daily work was rated on average at 6.3 on a scale from 1 to 10. Only 14 respondents evaluated the importance of research to be less or equal than 3 and no one saw the importance to be as low as 1. Respondents who judged research to be very important i.e. higher than 6, do not differ significantly from other respondents in terms of gender and age. However those respondents who have completed a doctoral degree tend to see research as slightly more important for their daily work. When asked about the importance of academic research in their daily work in the near future, six out of ten practitioners stated that they expect the importance to increase.

Consistent with this ranking, around 40 % of the respondents stated that they read academic articles at least once a week to inform their daily work. Although these results indicate a rather intensive use of research results by development practitioners, the remaining 60% are either not interested or abstain from using research due to the prohibitively high access costs. Assuming that research provides valuable information for practical work, this would mean that research fulfills at maximum 40% of its potential.

Based on these two variables we followed Ravallion’s (2011) approach and categorize respondents by their stated intensity of research usage and their judgment as to how important research is for their daily work at the median of each variable. The resulting matrix includes “happily uninformed”, “frustrated uninformed”, “independently well-informed” and “functionally well-informed” respondents (Figure 1).

Figure 2: Problems of Accessibility



The matrix shows that only three out of ten respondents are functionally well informed, i.e. value research highly and use it intensively. Another 10% of the respondents frequently use research but do not consider it important for their work. The two groups that require more attention are the uninformed. Unfortunately the biggest group in the matrix consists of ‘happily uninformed’ respondents (40%) who neither access research nor value research for their daily work. Given that the stated goal of many organizations is

knowledge-based decision-making it is unsatisfactory that so many practitioners neither use nor value research. A reduction of this group would hence be desirable. However, the main target group for possible interventions should be those that seek input from academia but have a low frequency

of usage, i.e. the frustrated uninformed. This group constitutes almost 1/5 of all practitioners who answered our survey. Moreover this figure could underestimate the true proportion of the frustrated uninformed in the development sector since there is probably a considerable self-selection at work, which works towards an overly positive result for the cooperation between research and practice: many of the respondents are PEGNet members and are likely to be more interested in research than the average development practitioner.

Based on these results the ensuing questions must be: Why is the usage of so many practitioners so low? What are the constraints? And how can we remove them? Through the questionnaire we received many substantive suggestions and explanations. In the following we will attempt to cast them into three central categories: usability and access, contact and alignment.

Main Problems and Possible Solutions

Usability and Access: In terms of accessibility respondents rated the ease of finding research results on average higher than all other aspects (see Figure 2). Hence the navigation of research publications does not seem to be a major obstacle. However, usability of research results for practical purposes was rated lowest in all groups except for the frustrated uninformed. This suggests that either hiring more knowledge brokers with research experience in development organizations or installing intermediaries with the explicit role of facilitating knowledge exchange by finding and “translating” research findings into practical language could increase the usability of research for practitioners. These intermediaries should be responsible for filtering and shortening relevant information, producing precise and comprehensive summaries, and fostering the contact with academic research.

Practitioners rated the ease of access of academic research on average with 5.16 on a scale from 1-10, where 10 would be very easy access. Also, one third of all respondents identify financial constraints as a major problem. Peer-reviewed articles in major academic journals are quite costly; a current article in *World Development* sells for USD 19.95 and in the *Journal of Development Economics* for USD 39.95. While many researchers publish their work also as un-gated working papers to make their results available to the public at no charge, it is not a general rule. Hence, one solution would be an open access policy for all research results financed by public funds. For example DFID requires research they have funded to be published in an open access format within a short period after the completion of the project.

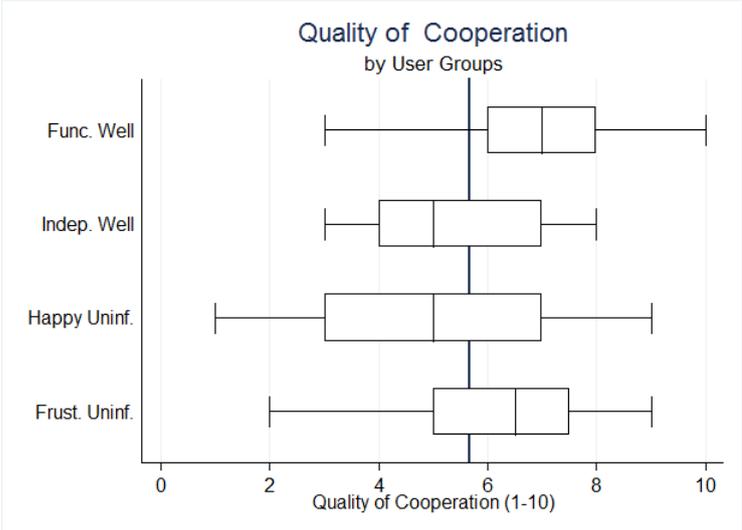
Contact: Although respondents evaluated the quality of existing cooperation slightly above “medium” at 5.7 on a scale from 1 to 10, one third also called the insufficient degree of cooperation and communication between research and practice a major obstacle for the usefulness of research. There were no statistically significant differences between our 4 demand groups although there is a slight tendency for practitioners who value research higher to also judge the quality of cooperation more highly (see Figure 3). Practitioners perceive diverting incentives and interest of praxis and research as a central problem. For 52.4% of practitioners research is not useful and attractive. Another central problem is the mismatch of timing between praxis and research which 37.9% of the respondents identified as problematic. Researchers may take a long time to take up questions that practitioners seek to answer within a very short time interval.

It is clear that more proactivity on both sides is needed. This proactivity must not always be cost intensive. For example research could notify local development agencies of their presence during field research, such that practitioners know about the available local expertise. Synergies also exist

when researchers and practitioners plan surveys for designing or evaluating projects and programs in a similar field. While this could lead to fruitful cooperations, it is quite clear that creating long-term partnerships is a serious challenge due to the high staff turn-over and time constraints at both research institutes and development agencies.

An additional approach would be to better inform the public and the research community at an early stage about (even small) research projects started within the NGOs or development agencies. The informal distribution of small research assignments remains quite in-transparent. While it is apparent that existing bureaucratic hurdles and time constraints seem to inhibit the flexible and transparent inclusion of researchers a non-bureaucratic and less time consuming tender procedure for small projects and better public information about planned research activities could help alleviate this challenge. As with research results, intermediaries could help translating and channelling information from the practical into the research domain.

Figure 3: Quality of Cooperation



Alignment: In our survey two out of three respondents identified ‘time constraints’ as the most important aspect that is limiting the use of academic research by practitioners. The high workload of practitioners stands in direct conflict with the overwhelming amount of new information and the risk of missing new and important findings. While advocating for generally giving people more time to educate themselves about new research, we also believe that the knowledge brokers we suggested with respect to mitigating access problems could help to alleviate this challenge. Another approach to this problem is reducing the size and enhancing the comprehensibility of research results by producing one page policy notes for published papers of practical relevance. These ‘one-pagers’ should be characterized by a non-technical language as well as concrete policy recommendations. They would not only facilitate the dissemination of information but also allow for adequate feedback mechanisms.

Literature

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