

Women in Saper Char, Bangladesh, meet for their weekly planning session. They talk about risks and risk management, for example, when the harvest must be brought in.

Right: People living along the major rivers are used to living with floods. This boy's way to his school near Sinojgonj on the Brahmaputra River leads him through hip-deep water levels that persist for weeks during the monsoon season.



North-South research for development



There is widespread consensus that research is a vital pillar for transformation to worldwide sustainable development. Two examples are the need for a regionally resolved understanding of the impact of climate change, and a better understanding of the socio-economic implications of and a viable transformation to a green economy.

The notion of North-South cooperation has traditionally framed development research. While it has provided a wealth of insights, the present practice leaves considerable room for improvement. The overwhelming part of present research is funded by institutions in the “global North”, i.e. the wealthy industrialised countries, while most of the pressing problems concern people in the “South”. Although sensitivity regarding this pattern has grown among the development research actors, the discourse is still largely determined in and framed by the “developed” part of the world for the “developing” part.

This asymmetry might soon become obsolete for several reasons. First, emerging economies, such as Brazil, India, Indonesia and others, are likely to enrich the landscape for development research in terms of both funding and agenda-setting. Second, the search for global sustainability will need to alter the view on development itself. The themes of the Millennium Development Goals, e.g. eradication of extreme poverty, will continue to be a main issue for many countries of the “South”. On the other hand, the Sustainable Development Goals, emerging from Rio+20, will be of much more concern to the wealthy industrialised countries. While many of the so-called “least developed” countries are facing a poverty trap, it looks as if the rich countries are trapped in a non-sustainability pattern. Future inclusive sustainable development will have to address both these traps on an equal footing and recognise the close links between the two problem areas. Development research has hardly addressed this link thus far.

Nevertheless, there is hope that things will improve. Newly emerging international research initiatives are beginning to address the asymmetry of the North-South cooperation by attempting to build up institutional partnerships between universities in countries at different levels of economic development. Among them is the Twin Initiative of the United Nations University (UNU). A model example of such a twin partnership is the newly established Institute for Integrated Management of Material Fluxes and of Resources (UNU-FLORES) with its two locations in Germany (Dresden) and Mozambique (Maputo), focusing on developing methods for an integrated management of water, soil and waste.

The twin institutes will build up common research and education programmes, and develop regional networks around both hubs. The aim of such a partnership is first to overcome the problems associated with the short-term nature of purely project-based research funding, which does not guarantee continuity beyond the project duration, and therefore often lacks sustainability. Second, the initiative aims at capacity building by developing attractive scientific working places in, and networks around, both twin locations, and therefore to counteract the brain drain often caused by development research projects, where the capacities are built up predominantly at research institutions in the traditional donor countries.

A second example is the new decade programme “Future Earth – Research for Global Sustainability”, initiated by the Science and Technology Alliance for Sustainability. The members of the Alliance are the International Council for Science, the International Social Science Council, the Belmont Forum (the group of the largest national funding organisations), UNEP, UNESCO, UNU and the World Meteorological Organization (WMO) as an observer. Bringing together a group of powerful research funders, international science organisations, service providers and development organisations, the Alliance is looking for a paradigm change in development research by linking the themes laid out by the Millennium Development Goals with the Sustainable Development Goals of Rio+20. I am convinced that this inclusive approach will offer new options for the exploration of truly sustainable future development routes.

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For further information on this issue:
www.ehs.unu.edu
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