



Equity in research and knowledge systems: Learning from dialogue events in Ethiopia and Uganda

Dr Femi Nzegwu
February 2019

2-3 Cambridge Terrace
Oxford
United Kingdom
OX1 1RR
Company registration number 04919576
Registered charity number 1106349

t +44 (0)1865 249909
info@inasp.info
www.inasp.info

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Executive summary

In October and November 2018, INASP, in conjunction with local partners*, facilitated dialogue events in Uganda and Ethiopia to consider issues of equity in research and knowledge systems within the two countries and in the broader regional and global contexts.

The meetings, which included stakeholders from academia, government bodies and civil society, amongst others, revealed some common themes:

- A collective vision from the events gave four common and inter-related themes that are needed for equitable research and knowledge systems: coordination, collaboration, inclusion and self-sustaining.
- The need for a national institution with the mandate to create a unified research system able to lead the governance, development, management, and funding of a national/country-focussed research and knowledge system emerged as a priority across the two dialogues.
- The discussion on research funding highlighted the many influences that “externally supported development” has on a country’s capacity to autonomously shape its future. This includes funding from the North and the influence this often has on shaping a country-defined agenda. Pursuing alternative and diverse sources of funding as a strategic government/sector goal was common to both dialogues.
- The two dialogue events emphasized that both women and men must benefit from any solutions advanced to promote gender equity. Both events recognized the great contributions both women and men have made to their societies – historically and currently – in every sphere of the lives of the country.
- The importance of technology to the realization of the research system visions was clearly demonstrated at the dialogue events. Most striking was the fact that a number of researchers sometimes did not actually know about the existence of the national research and education networks (NRENs) and almost always did not know about their foundational roles in enabling the operation of a coherent research system nationally.
- A consensus across both dialogues was a desire and commitment to see the quality of publications improved, through: the availability of local publications; the need for the academy to revisit its criteria for promoting academics; and the improvement of research designs and studies. There was also an agreed need to improve the quality of these publications whatever the content, source and the publication outlets, and to routinely and consistently apply internationally accepted standards to their work.

The two dialogue events sought to focus, in a practical way, on how to realize the vision of research systems in their country. Both forums agreed that the focus should be on the people/the researchers/ human capital as the agents of transformation.

The events were strategically opportune in that they created a space for much needed conversation, reflection and learning to feed into a wider national debate on the future of their national research systems.

** Uganda Council for Science and Technology in Uganda and Ethiopian Academy of Sciences in Ethiopia.
Work funded by Sida.*

Background

INASP's vision of our ongoing work in research and knowledge systems with our partners is about enabling greater levels of equity and cohesiveness across research systems – in the access to, use of and contribution to these systems. The link between greater levels of equity (as described) and an active and impactful research and knowledge system is evident.

In response to this vision, towards the end of 2018, in conjunction with local partners, INASP ran a series of national dialogue events to bring high-level stakeholders in the research system within each country together. In both the conceptualization and delivery of these dialogue events, equity served as the overarching theme, although there was variation across the countries about which equity components would constitute the focus of their dialogue.

This learning paper captures and explores the emerging themes of the dialogue across Ethiopia and Uganda.

Main themes

1. Vision definition

Prior to the dialogue events and as part of our own internal reflections on our work with partners, INASP defined its own vision of “strong and equitable research and knowledge systems” (SERKS). This vision represented what we would like to see as an outcome of our work in line with many years of feedback from engagement and discussion with our partners. There were four components to this vision:

- **Sustainability** – demonstrate with our partners that sustainability is possible and achievable
- **Commitment, local ownership and sustainability** – partners make the necessary (tangible) investments and adopt approaches in their projects that ensure project continuity beyond INASP
- **Relationship building** – grow existing ones and create new ones (outgrowths of partners' and our work) to build strong local teams clear about what work they choose to deliver and why
- **Equity** – demonstrate equity within the projects in a locally defined and locally applied context

During the dialogue events, the two participating countries also defined their own visions of what a strong and equitable research system would look like.

The Ugandan dialogue defined a vision for creating an equitable research system as one which:

- Works together in a coordinated and collaborative way to deliver research that enables transformation, is resilient and achieves solutions to society's problems
- Is based on partnership, gender parity, connectivity and focused on achieving a cohesive goal
- Is comprised of open and diverse networks that include and nurture all kinds of voices and knowledge systems

- Is not risk averse or confined to the ways things have been done, but looks to the future – acknowledging how things could be done to achieve growth, change and progress

In Ethiopia, the vision of equity in the research and knowledge system was one that:

- Values, aligns and responds to Ethiopian needs, informs national policy, delivers impactful research in support of national priorities and operates within an independent space
- Recognizes and builds on the wealth and variety of knowledge within Ethiopia, while also looking to shape the future of research globally
- Is collaborative, participatory, and trans/multi-disciplinary in approach, recognizing that all types of research have a role to contribute to achieving national development needs
- Supports and sustains diversity and inclusion by creating a conducive environment that values and encourages all research voices – regardless of gender, institution or region etc.

Our collective vision has four common and inter-related themes:

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- **Coordination** – of the many components that should clearly identify and respond to citizen and national needs so that the national response is holistic, visionary/innovative, targeted, efficient (in the use of resources) and effective in the realization of outcomes
 - **Collaboration** – working together across the many varied components that deliver research: institutions of research, universities, researchers, users of and those impacted by the research, citizens, government, policymakers, publication platforms – editors, reviewers
 - **Inclusion** – of the many voices (active in the sector – regardless of whether they are currently recognized) and knowledge systems that comprise knowledge/research in the country. This implies strong relationship building – trust, respect, true and equal partnership
 - **Self-sustaining** – such that these research and knowledge systems are able to continue to function well even without external assistance.
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2. An autonomously defined country-focussed research agenda

The need for a national institution with the mandate to create a unified research system able to lead the governance, development, management, and funding of a national/country-focussed research and knowledge system emerged as a priority across the two dialogues. In both events, common themes of discussion included: “the fragmentation of research institutions and the work they produce”, “need for harmonized national research systems that bring individual research units under one umbrella and a unified focus, albeit with diverse components”, and “need for a national research agenda with clear objectives”.

Such an institution “should have a government-given mandate to create a unified research system able to work across the sector to define, prioritise, harmonize a research agenda that speaks to national priorities”. It also has to be an institution respected by peers, one that is transparent and is seen as transparent and which is also politically astute.

This institution would shape and drive a national agenda that could be supported by a variety of actors, internal and external to the country. However, the framework for operation would be “locally owned, autonomously defined” in line with the needs of its people.

3. Research funding

The discussion on research funding highlighted the many influences that “externally supported development” has on a country’s capacity to autonomously shape its future. This includes funding from the North and the influence this often has on shaping a country-defined agenda.

Pursuing alternative and diverse sources of funding as a strategic government/sector goal was common to both dialogues. Key – and, to date, minimally engaged - sectors of interest are private sector businesses and individuals of private means. These were seen as particularly useful on three fronts – direct funding of research institutions at departmental/thematic level, funding of PhD students, and the commercialization of research outputs as appropriate.

On the part of government, an expansion of the national GDP allocation to research collectively was also seen as an important route for injecting funding into the sector.

Via the institutions, greater inter-institutional collaboration within a more collaborative research culture could see the re-distribution of research funds to those subject areas and institutions with less access. Enlarging research governance discussion forums to include government, policy makers as well as research/HE institutions would also ensure greater understanding of the issues at stake.

The dialogue believed that these were attainable goals that now needed the energy, commitment and vision to drive them forward.

4. Promotion of gender equity and other aspects of inclusion

The dialogue in Uganda defined gender parity as “same chances for women and men to realize their own capabilities without discrimination – and extra chances for those starting from a disadvantaged position.”

The two dialogue events emphasized that both women and men must benefit from any solutions advanced to promote gender equity. Both events recognized the great contributions both women and men have made to their societies –historically and currently – in every sphere of the lives of the country.

There was a focus on four dimensions:

- Overall, it is essential to identify, recognize, respect and build on the knowledge, value systems, structures and many contributions found in these societies in order to anchor any efforts to advance issues of gender parity. The challenge is to promote the types of transformative critical thinking that are needed to reconstruct society’s understanding of the historical and continuing contribution of women and men equally to society’s advancement; and then build on this within our current education and research system to make it truly inclusive and supportive of all. This will begin to correct the impacts of many of the gender distortions that we currently witness and hopefully lay the groundwork for a different experience for a younger population moving forward.

- Internal to the higher education institution (HEI)/research institute – expanding avenues and opportunities for women and early career researchers in their access to funds, training and all other resources; critical thinking approaches to course design & student learning; Implementation of a monitoring scheme for academic leadership positions with a 50/50 divide between men and women; needs-based or specific capability/capacity building; training of teachers; curriculum review; conducting empowerment/ “assets-based” research that demonstrate the positive and critical roles that both women and men play and have played historically in the survival and development of society, building on the value, diversity and complementary roles of both men and women; awareness raising of management and the creation of a conducive teaching and learning environment; investigative research into institutional barriers/ understanding the blockages to policy implementation; adoption of more gender-responsive HR and working policies/ review of HR policies, procedures, senate legislation, etc. relating to childcare, family/work life balance solution, 50-50 targets on recruitment schemes (with the active involvement of women on all these groups).
- External to the HEI/research university within its catchment area and beyond – work across departments in the university to have outreach projects that build greater awareness and understanding of gender inclusion as a desirable outcome for society focussing on young people in primary and secondary schools in the HEI’s catchment area; contribute to revisions of school curricula both through formal linkages to the responsible bodies and direct support to interested schools in the HEI’s catchment area.
- Government – the dialogue also saw itself as having a role in influencing government regarding fundamental societal inequities such as its related education policies, land inheritance rights, etc.

5. The enabling role of technology

The importance of technology to the realization of the research system visions was clearly demonstrated at the dialogue events. Most striking was the fact that a number of researchers sometimes did not actually know about the existence of the national research and education networks (NRENs) and almost always did not know about their foundational roles in enabling the operation of a coherent research system nationally.

The events highlighted the NREN role in:

- Improving digital literacy
- Enhancing library services
- Increasing collaboration between HEI/research institution, between HEI/research institutes and industry (Private Public Partnerships), between Ethiopia/Uganda and the global network
- The development and sharing of local content
- Enabling better linkages for knowledge sharing internally and across the globe

One NREN is self-funding, demonstrating that it is possible to run such a vital service for the research sector nationally in an economically viable and self-sustaining manner.

The key to strengthening these NRENs, in the first instance, is to institutionalize their role and mandate within an appropriate legal and policy framework, generate an awareness of their presence and role, and enable HEI/research/policy related/private institutions to engage with them in support of their work.

6. Publications and quality

A consensus right across both dialogues was a desire and commitment to see the quality of publications improved. There were three aspects to this reflection:

First, the availability of local publications – locally generated content and its visibility internally in the first instance, before wanting to promote it internationally

Linked to this was the need for the academy to revisit its criteria for promoting academics – with “local/ locally-facing research” and “teaching differently” – e.g. critical thinking skills, assuming as important a role as publications in peer-reviewed journals.

Second, was the improvement of research designs and studies making them more “ambitious” – e.g. in the natural sciences, more cause and effect interventions; in the social sciences and humanities, more original inward looking innovative research; and generally in the approach to research, more inter-disciplinary, multi-disciplinary, trans-disciplinary studies that cross boundaries of knowledge and approach for innovation and insight into the topics under study.

Key issues to address include:

- Who research is for and for whom is the impact?
- Criteria for quality publication should be redefined to include local relevance, local impact and community engagement as well as standard “technical criteria” such a credible editorial board, peer review, etc.

A third aspect was to do with the quality of these publications whatever the content, source and the publication outlets. The dialogues agreed the need to routinely and consistently apply internationally accepted standards to their work, regardless of the sites or platforms of publication.

How is this improved?

- High calibre/visionary researchers mentoring others in both skills (critically thinking about and formulating research) and vision
- Training made available for early-career researchers – both writing and digital skills
- Training on what is acceptable as a quality journal – for reviewers, editors, researchers and what needs to be in place to produce one. Making these skill part of the researchers’ professional experience and a core part of their training.

7. Actualizing the vision

Both dialogue events sought to focus, in a practical way, on how to realize the vision of research systems in their country. Both forums agreed that the focus should be on the people/the researchers/ human capital as the agents of transformation.

“We need forums for continually growing our researchers’ capacities – mentoring programmes that support core competencies, research skills, critical thinking skills, analytical skills, generating research ideas, more learning opportunities outside the classroom.”

While several organizations involved in the dialogues recognized that they, through their human capital, have a major role to contribute to this vision, without a clear government mandate or overarching framework the full impact of their work will not be realized.

8. Helping to create local ownership

From the analysis of the two dialogues, local ownership refers to an autonomously defined research and knowledge system (see #2 above).

It is clear that INASP (or the event itself) does not “create” local ownership. The system is locally owned. The autonomy to chart a path for this system and how best to do it were the objects of the meeting. “Local ownership”/an autonomously defined vision was enabled by the dialogue events to the extent that the dialogue:

- Created the space to do so
- Generated the ideas and the debate
- Enabled the connections/networking among peers and institutions
- Created an opportunity to think about how to begin to chart a different direction for their institution and the sector as a whole based on the dialogue

Two comments from the event capture the opportunity created by these events:

“Very useful meeting in generating stakeholder consensus or a shared vision for research.”

“Researchers across institutions never really meet to discuss about the sector as a whole across disciplines and with other important stakeholders. This has been very useful in bringing many diverse voices together to do just that.”

The dialogue events were strategically opportune in that they created a space for much needed conversation, reflection and learning to feed into a wider national debate on the future of their national research systems. The work continues...

Thank you to Professor Masresha Fetene, Executive Director of Ethiopian Academy of Sciences; Ismail Barugahara, Assistant Executive Secretary of Uganda National Council for Science and Technology; and Sida for funding for this work.
