

Unleashing the talent: Building equitable knowledge ecosystems

To tackle global challenges and address the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) we need to bring the latest evidence to bear on the most pressing and intractable problems. This depends on our ability to harness high quality and relevant research and knowledge, and to support decision makers and practitioners to use it. But, important knowledge and important voices are missing. We need strong and equitable national knowledge ecosystems, where diverse voices are recognized and those who commission, produce, communicate and use research and knowledge can work effectively together.

Research, knowledge and social change

We face many challenges in today's world – from climate change and its many impacts, to the lack of decent work, health and education for many people.

We can't tackle these challenges without new knowledge – and without making better use of the knowledge we already have. We also need to connect knowledge and ideas across disciplines and across sectors, to bring diverse talents and expertise to bear.

We have seen important and substantial investments in research systems across the South. The gains are visible across university campuses and research institutes.

But as we look across rapidly changing research and knowledge systems, we see serious inequities. There are inequities in who can create and produce new knowledge, in whose knowledge “counts”, how knowledge shared, and who can access and make use of the results of research.

A few institutions are privileged by greater funding and greater access to decision makers. Our partners express a range of frustrations.¹ Researchers in rural universities, or those outside capital cities, face additional barriers to securing research funding. Women don't receive the training and mentoring afforded to men and their voices are neglected in research. Dominant scientific methods and measurement exclude important local knowledge.² Policy makers face major technical and political challenges to finding and using diverse and relevant evidence.

Why does equity matter?

High quality knowledge that is relevant and addresses pressing problems can only be produced collaboratively: where the people who need it and can use it, and the people who produce it, work together.³ We need to spread capacity and opportunity outwards from existing centres, if we are to harness the diverse and critical talents, ideas and energies that it demands.⁴

Signs of stronger systems...

In Uganda, Makerere University has steadily increased its research activity, enrolling more postgraduates and publishing more papers.

An alliance of universities in 9 African countries have launched a series of new collaborative research centres. The World Bank has funded 40 centres across the continent to train masters and PhD scientists in priority fields.

The African Academy of Science, alongside stronger national research councils, are enabling greater funding to be managed by African grant making bodies, and are become stronger, more effective voices for scientific development on the continent.

In South Asia, the Sri Lankan national science foundation has led efforts to strengthen the country's academic publishing system, with 79 journals now published on the Sri Lankan Journals Online platform.

In Kenya, the African Centre for Technology Studies have convened scientists to influence the development of climate change legislation.

In Ghana the head of the civil service has sought to strengthen the role of evidence in the nation's governance.

¹ <http://blog.inasp.info/create-effective-equitable-systems-research-higher-education/> and <http://blog.inasp.info/recognizing-inequity-research-knowledge-levels/>

² <https://www.nature.com/articles/d41586-018-05581-4>

³ <https://www.nature.com/articles/d41586-018-06855-7>

⁴ <http://www.universityworldnews.com/article.php?story=20180927104004479>

If we don't address inequities in research and knowledge, we will create islands of capacity and excellence, but we won't transform systems as a whole. This will fundamentally weaken the ability of countries and institutions to harness knowledge in the struggle against poverty and lack of opportunity.

What would an equitable knowledge ecosystem look like?

Imagine a knowledge ecosystem that is better able to respond to national development priorities. One in which decision makers can draw on more relevant, better quality evidence as they frame policy questions and devise practical responses.

Imagine a diverse community of researchers who are producing, and refining, the knowledge base – collaborating closely with the communities who stand to benefit most. Imagine institutions that enable individuals to work and learn and advance their careers, regardless of gender or background. Where a diverse range of institutions are valued and able to advance their missions.

What's the problem?

There are challenges to equity in knowledge ecosystems at many levels:

1. At the individual level: among researchers, policymakers and intermediaries

Many researchers and students, are locked out of the conversation because opportunities accrue to a smaller number of people – more often men. Fewer women enrol in university, and fewer are enabled to progress. There can be huge disparities between male and female researchers – with women prevented from advancing their education and careers, from accessing support and training, from taking leadership roles and influencing policy. Civil servants and policymakers are unable to influence decisions or deliver the best results for citizens because they lack the evidence they need, or the skills to access and appraise it.

2. At organisational level: in research, policy and intermediary organisations

Funding and prestige is often concentrated within a small number of institutions – a flagship university, a few leading think tanks or research institutes. The work of particular institutions is amplified by international partnerships, by elite journals, or by preferential access to discussion and decision-making spaces. While it can lead to strong research-focused institutions, it can also concentrate opportunity and funding to the exclusion of others. This consolidates inequities and means that particular research questions, institutions and people are less able to access funding and opportunities than others. In government, there is often insufficient time or resource to use evidence effectively, or it is not prioritised by leadership and organisational cultures. A strong system requires a mix of different institutions, who are all able to contribute to research and knowledge.

3. At systemic level: in society, between national institutions and between the 'north' and 'south'

Development agendas are largely set and funded in the north and are informed by research that is published and produced by northern institutions and researchers who have access to better facilities and resources. The structure of international partnerships can often amplify these inequities – with the power to define questions and determine the direction of research invested in northern institutions. At national level, a lack of alignment between research and the needs of government, civil society and the private sector, can result in research that is not relevant or does not respond to specific development needs.

What do we need to do achieve this?

Strong knowledge ecosystems depend on coordination and connections across many different organisations – from universities, to think tanks, to funding councils, to policy and regulatory bodies, to national IT and information providers. Strengthening a research system requires that we recognize the importance of how a system works, as well as the component parts within it. This means working beyond single organisations and going beyond technical interventions and training – to focus as much on the connections between organisations and people, as on their individual strengths.

At individual level: the skills, knowledge and confidence to produce, communicate and use research and knowledge, irrespective of their gender or social background

Students need to: develop skills to think critically and use knowledge

Academics and researchers need to: Create learning environments which enable students to develop their critical thinking skills; undertake research which addresses the needs of society, and is relevant to policy makers and practitioners; communicate to academic peers, policy makers, practitioners and the public; progress their teaching and research careers

Policy makers and practitioners need to: have the knowledge and skills to be able to engage in the research process, to ensure knowledge is relevant to their needs; understand how to access, appraise and synthesise evidence in their day to day work

At organisational level: an environment which enables individuals to work, learn and advance their careers, and facilitate engagement in wider institutions to raise their visibility and advance their missions

Universities and research institutes need to: Ensure the research they produce is relevant, high quality, credible, and visible; create an environment which ensures women as well as men have opportunities to advance; provide in-house training and mentoring programmes to support their staff.

Government policy making units need to: create an environment which incentivises the use of research-based and other forms of evidence; systems to facilitate access to different forms of knowledge; clear points in the policy process where knowledge is sought and systematically integrated.

At the system level: a diverse ecosystem of institutions, playing distinct and complementary roles

National systems need to: Ensure that capacity, expertise and opportunity can be developed more evenly across the country; allow knowledge and expertise to be shared across the system and to link research to policy and practice; provide platforms to make research and knowledge produced within a country more visible; meet collective needs across institutions, such as digital infrastructure and access to the latest information

International systems need to: Recognise that knowledge is key to development, that equitable knowledge ecosystems are essential for knowledge use, and long-term funding for, and coordinated and systemic approaches to capacity development for all stakeholders is essential.

What is a research and knowledge system?

A research and knowledge system is made up of multiple inter-linked parts and actors that influence each other. It includes the organisations and individuals who commission, fund, produce, communicate and use research, the formal and informal relationships between them and the institutional norms, practices and policies which shape their interactions. The system is therefore composed of multiple parts, which interact with each other, and which depend on each other in order to function successfully.

How we will do this: INASP’s approach

We are building on 25 years of working with partners, of learning what works⁵ and what does not. Our commitment to learning and our sustained efforts to increase the impact of our work have enabled us to define approaches to capacity development that achieve lasting change. But our work has also shown us that we need to go beyond our existing tools, to support partners to connect, convene and influence to drive change at system level.

Our aim is to develop a wider programme, through which we can work with a diverse group of partners and funders to collectively address equity in research and knowledge systems, at multiple levels.

- **Responding to local visions:** Change must be locally led; visions must be locally defined; capacity must be strengthened through local leadership. We are convening a series of dialogue events – to understand visions and priorities and chart an agenda for action.
- **Identifying needs:** We will recognise existing capacity – and make that the foundation. Working with partners we will identify targeted support in areas where we excel, and forge partnerships where others have the expertise and experience.
- **Strengthening relationships:** Problems are solved when people come together and collaborate across boundaries. We will ensure that sufficient time and energy is dedicated to facilitating connections and conversations between organisations and individuals to unlock the potential for change.
- **Recognizing how a system works:** Progress and change can only be achieved when different parts of the system work together, but systems are constantly shifting. Change in one part of the system will inevitably affect – positively or negatively – the conditions for another. We need to understand and track these changes to work effectively.

Our 25 years of work has shown us that:

Carefully designed training and mentoring can achieve important results.

Our AuthorAID platform has developed vital skills and increased confidence to improve the visibility of Southern research.

Our work with libraries has ensured greater access to critical information.

Our gender mainstreaming work with women in universities has shown how we can support institutional change.

Our evidence for policy skills training has supported civil servants, senior bureaucrats, and members of parliament to access, understand, and communicate evidence throughout the policymaking process.

Our Context Matters Framework enables policy-making organizations to identify factors that affect the organizational capacities, systems and processes that shape evidence use.

These tools and platforms have been refined over recent years and provide a foundation for achieving greater transformation, if we are able to put them in the hands of wider group of institutions by working at systems level.

⁵ <https://www.inasp.info/SRKSfinalreport>