

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. 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.

Why equity matters

We face many challenges in today's world – from climate change, 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 have seen important and substantial investments in knowledge systems across the South. But as we look across these rapidly changing 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.

High quality knowledge that addresses pressing problems can only be produced collaboratively: where the people who use it, and the people who produce it, work together. 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 development demands.

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 - weakening the ability for knowledge to count in the struggle against poverty and lack of opportunity.

What's the problem?

Many researchers and students, are locked out of the conversation because opportunities accrue to a smaller number of people providing preferential access to discussion and decision-making spaces at the exclusion of others.

At the individual level: Women don't receive the training and mentoring afforded to men and their voices are neglected in research. 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.

At organisational level: A few institutions are privileged by greater funding and greater access to decision makers. Researchers in rural universities, or those outside capital cities, face additional barriers to securing research funding. In government, there is often insufficient time or resource to use evidence effectively, or it is not prioritised by leadership and organisational cultures.

At systems level: Dominant scientific methods and measurement exclude important local knowledge. Development agendas are largely set and funded in the north and informed by research from northern institutions and researchers who have access to better facilities and resources. At national level, a lack of alignment between research and the needs of government, civil society and the private sector, can result in research does not respond to national development needs.

A vision for equity in knowledge ecosystems.

Imagine a knowledge ecosystem that is better able to respond to national development priorities. One in which decision makers can draw on more relevant, 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 do we need to achieve equity?

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 – focusing 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 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 critical thinking skills; undertake – and effectively communicate - relevant research which addresses the needs of society, policy makers and practitioners

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

At organisational level: enabling environments in which knowledge can thrive

Universities and research institutes need to: ensure research is relevant, high quality, credible, and visible; create an environment in which women have opportunities to advance; support and develop research and teaching talent

Government policy making units need to create environments which facilitate access and use of research and other forms of evidence; 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 coordinated and systemic approaches to capacity development is essential

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

INASP's approach

We are building on 25 years of working with partners, of learning what works 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.

Approaches that work:

Responding to local visions | Identifying needs | Strengthening relationships | Recognizing how a system works

