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Barriers to uptake of research
findings on governance and
public services in low-income
Africa

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Working Paper

April 2011

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Published on behalf of the Africa Power and Politics Programme (APPP) by the Overseas Development Institute, 111 Westminster Bridge Road, London SE1 7JD, UK (www.odi.org.uk).

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The Africa Power and Politics Programme is a consortium research programme funded by the UK Department for International Development (DFID) and Irish Aid for the benefit of developing countries. The views expressed in this publication are those of the author and not necessarily those of DFID, Irish Aid or the Programme as a whole.



Working with the grain and swimming against the tide:

Barriers to uptake of research findings on governance and public services in low-income Africa

David Booth*

Research into the governance of public goods provision in sub-Saharan Africa confirms that bottom-up pressures from voters and service users are a weak factor at best in improving performance. It suggests placing emphasis on how different types of political regime approach the provision of public goods, and on the enduring importance of working with service providers as well as clients. However, getting 'uptake' of these findings into development policy and practice is difficult, and this paper asks why. Obstacles exist at two levels. At an intermediate level, the dissemination of WDR 2004 and related studies through teaching, guidelines, blogs and books has systematically over-sold certain simple messages about information and community monitoring. More fundamentally, incentives, ideologies and vested interests stand between research and the adoption of its findings by the development business. This aspect of the problem of research 'uptake' needs to be taken more seriously by all concerned.

1 Introduction

Under-provision of essential public goods is a key source of the malaise of development in sub-Saharan Africa. It is widely accepted that this is a governance problem. Yet current approaches to improving the governance of development in Africa are seriously flawed. Inspired by supposedly universal 'best practices', they are typically ill-adapted to the contexts in which they are expected to work. This is one of the interim conclusions from research in the Africa Power and Politics Programme (APPP).¹

This paper draws on findings from the APPP research stream which is investigating institutional sources of variation in public goods provision at the sub-national level. This research has a particular focus on key bottlenecks to improvement in maternal mortality, water and sanitation, facilitation of markets and enterprise, and public order and security. Its early results point to three clusters of issues which seem to account for much of the variation in intermediate outcomes (Booth, 2011b). Fieldwork is ongoing but it is already clear that the findings have strong counter-conventional policy implications.

The paper is concerned with one particular group of findings, and with the challenges this poses for policy 'uptake'. Reasons for being concerned not just about the evidence and its theoretical implications, but also with the likely response from policy communities, are set out in Section 2. Section 3 then summarises the particular findings whose uptake is the focus of

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¹ For overviews, see Crook and Booth (2011) and Booth (2011a).

concern, making reference to the APPP work and other relevant evidence from research and programme evaluations. Section 4 explores one set of reasons why getting uptake of these findings is unlikely to be plain sailing, focusing particularly on the role of various intermediaries between the research and policy communities. Section 5 probes the problem of uptake a little further, considering how it continues to be affected by the incentives, ideologies and interests prevailing in the aid business as a whole. Section 5 concludes.

2 Development research and the challenge of 'uptake'

Once upon a time, research funded from the public purse was expected to be well disseminated. Official funders in the UK required large research programmes to have good external communication strategies, to get findings not only into the public domain but to the attention of policy-makers and relevant groups of public-policy practitioners. These days have gone. Increasingly research programmes are expected to have strategies for securing *uptake* of findings into policy or practice, and their ability to attain this objective is being monitored.

This paper is not opposed to the trend. I work by choice in a policy think-tank, the Overseas Development Institute, whose mission includes building bridges between the world of research and the world of policy. A relatively outgoing type of research communication makes good sense from the perspective of ODI. The APPP, too, has engagement with policy-makers as a principal objective. But the shift from good public communication to monitorable strategies for securing uptake has implications which I think are not widely appreciated among either those promoting the idea or researchers and research programme directors. I want to illustrate this with a discussion of some of the challenges facing the APPP's Local Governance research stream.

In my view, one of the implications of the uptake imperative is that the dissemination of policy-relevant research has to include discussion of, and perhaps even research into, the opportunities that may exist for the adoption of findings by the relevant policy communities. In all fields of public policy, uptake of research is about organisational incentives, general and professional ideologies, and power and vested interests, and not only about intellectual receptiveness as such (Jones et al., 2009; Young and Mendizabal, 2009). For this reason, discussing uptake issues in a frank and evidence-based way runs some risk of offending some of the target groups and in this way making actual uptake harder to secure.

A good example of the new style of research dissemination in the field that concerns me, governance and public policy, is the booklet produced at the end of the second five-year phase of the Centre for the Future State (2010). Co-authored by Mick Moore and Sue Unsworth, the booklet contains a compact summary of the findings of the programme's research *and* a short discussion of why, in the authors' opinion, the implications of these findings are likely to be difficult to take into the policies and practices of the programme's main funder, DFID. This is what is necessary, in my view. The uptake of research is not a simple technical matter, and it invites controversy, but it needs to be addressed head on.

In the same vein, in ODI's Politics and Governance Programme recently convened a two-day dialogue session for development agency staff, consultants and governance researchers, which tackled many of the general issues affecting the transmission of research- and other evidence-based findings into development practice (Wild and Foresti, 2011). Among the topics covered was the increasing use of applied political-economy analysis in programming, including its potential as a transmission-belt for research and evaluation evidence. There was also a good discussion of the incentive structures prevailing within donor agencies and in the

wider politics of aid, although uptake of research as such attracted relatively little interest among the donor participants and was the least productive element in the proceedings.

Partly in response to this experience, I have been convinced that discussion of uptake issues needs to become more narrowly targeted. The Moore/Unsworth treatment of the gap between the Future State approach to governance for development and the technocratic 'mindset' that prevails in aid organisations is a step forward, but rather generic. It relates to the uptake of an overarching idea – turning approaches to governance 'upside down' – rather than the response to the more particular findings which inspired the overarching idea. The ODI initiative was also generic, which was both a strength and a weakness. In this paper, I discuss the challenges regarding uptake of a particular set of APPP findings in the area of local governance and public goods provision.

3 Working with the grain: some findings from research

The research findings which are the focus of this discussion arise from the preliminary phase of ongoing research in the Local Governance stream of APPP. In due course, a much larger body of fieldwork evidence will be available for analysis, and some of our conclusions may be different from what they are now. However, it seems unlikely that on the two particular points selected for discussion here the central policy implications will change. Furthermore, we are not the first group of researchers to reach conclusions of this type. It could even be said that virtually all the direct research evidence and much of the relevant theory supports our point of view. So it makes perfect sense to have this discussion now.

The findings concern one particular aspect of the problem of inadequate public goods provision in low-income Africa: the incentives facing the organisations, especially state organisations, charged with delivering services and providing other key public goods.

3.1 Public goods and the supply and demand sides of improving governance

In recent decades, policy discussion about the role of the public sector in service provision in Africa has become more realistic about incentives. There is a general openness to the idea that poor performance and what appear on the surface as 'capacity' limitations have to do with incentive structures. It is widely recognised that the prevailing type of political system in poor African countries, the hybrid type that political scientists call neopatrimonialism, conveys signals to the public service as a whole which encourage clientelism and corruption, and discourage rigorous performance management (van de Walle, 2001; Chabal, 2009). In this context, service improvement is seen as a 'governance' challenge. It is part and parcel of the challenge of promoting the adoption of good or at least better governance.

Improving the governance of public services is generally seen as having two aspects. On the one hand, improvements in the management of services may be expected as political systems become less patrimonial and comply more closely with modern administrative practices. On the other hand, politicians and provider professions will be influenced by bottom-up pressures for better performance as governance becomes more democratic and both voters and service users gain more voice or are empowered. These are sometimes referred to as the 'supply side' and the 'demand side' respectively of governance improvement.

An implicit feature of most thinking on this subject is that not very much can be expected on the supply side short of a general reform of the public sector. In the face of evidence of the resilience of neopatrimonial politics and of the difficulty of reforming public service management, this becomes a relatively pessimistic perspective. Partly for that reason, there has been an explosion of interest in the 'demand side' – on the mobilisation of voters and service users and their proxies in 'civil society' to generate bottom-up performance pressures, directly or indirectly, on providers. The *2004 World Development Report* (World Bank, 2003) reflected the trend and gave it further impetus.

Our research – and much other research, we think – sheds doubt on this trend in policy thinking. It suggests that it is doubly unrealistic. First, while the resilience of neopatrimonialism is real enough, it is not the case that all neopatrimonial regimes convey the same incentives to their civil servants and service-providing organisations. Nor is it the case that improvements in specific services require a general transformation of the public service. Second, in low-income Africa, for some general reasons and some particular reasons, both voter pressure and client pressure are weak factors for improving performance unless there is some kind of shift in incentives from the top down.

Our research (Booth and Golooba-Mutebi, 2011; Cammack and Kelsall, 2011; Kelsall, 2011) is leading us to emphasise the relevance of differences between more developmental and less developmental forms of neopatrimonial regime. We think this can be explained theoretically and is well grounded in historical experience in both Asia and Africa. Our fieldwork is suggesting that regimes sharing broadly neopatrimonial qualities and untransformed civil services can have significantly different effects on local public goods delivery. The key difference on the explanatory side is whether the political leadership has both the will and the capability to centralise the management of economic 'rents' in the service of a long-term vision. Where this happens, the top down pressures for performance in public services can be strong and effective.

At the same time, we are finding a great deal of evidence that, in the absence of such pressures from the top down, bottom-up pressures should not be relied upon as a significant factor (Booth, 2011b). Particularly when taken down to the local-government level, young democracy strengthens clientelist pressures, not performance pressures. In respect of public goods which involve regulation and enforcements more than service delivery, the evidence is that local democracy or democratic decentralisation creates perverse incentives which may not have existed previously. As for direct user or client pressure, this suffers from severe generic limitations on account of what are theorised in the principal-agent literature as information asymmetry problems. In the African context, it is necessary to add particular additional limitations on account of the distribution of social status, power and social skills between provider and user groups. Finally, the 'civil society' that is expected to provide the links and make social accountability a reality has to work within these limits, and additional limits set by its own origins in donor funding.

3.2 APPP and other research

There is insufficient space here to go into the detail of the evidence from our fieldwork in Malawi, Niger, Rwanda and Uganda. However, the proposition that democracies that are 'young' in various senses are likely to promote the targeted distribution of private goods and not the provision of public goods is increasingly mainstream in political science and institutional theory (Bueno de Mesquita et al., 2003; Keefer, 2007; North et al., 2009). The 2004 WDR (World Bank, 2003), which is generally seen as the flagship of the client

empowerment approach, itself contains all the references and some best arguments supporting the realistic perspective we are advancing (for more, see Leonard, 2000).

APPP's theory about developmental patrimonialism is more innovative and the evidence in support of it less mainstream. However, the idea that development interventions need to be 'working with the grain', in the sense of recognising and adapting to the actual institutional arrangements in developing countries, is gaining traction at high levels (Andrews, 2010; Levy, 2010; Pritchett et al., 2010). Our argument for recognising the virtues of more developmental (even if in many ways imperfect) forms of neopatrimonialism is an application of that idea.

Also, the notion that it is premature to give up on 'supply side' improvements is shared with two important evidence-based trends of thinking. One is the body of work on 'pockets of effectiveness' within otherwise weak institutional environments (Leonard, 2008; Crook, 2010; Leonard, 2010), to which our fieldwork is adding some new dimensions. The other is the discovery that, with proper prioritisation and focus, it is possible to sidestep comprehensive reform to enable national leaders to 'get things done' and win elections increasingly on that basis (Blair, 2010).

On social accountability, understood as processes involving voters and users plus the coordination and amplification roles supplied by civil-society organisations and social movements, there has been some very good previous research. And the burden of this research is consistent with our main proposition that what works sometimes to improve performance is the combination of strong top-down and otherwise weak bottom-up pressures – in other words an efficient combination of supply and demand.

This refers particularly to a long stream of work on social accountability at the Institute of Development Studies, especially two phases of research within the Centre for the Future State (Goetz et al., 2001; Future State, 2005: Ch 3; Joshi, 2007; Houtzager et al., 2008; Future State, 2010: Ch 4). Initially inspired by the well-known Brazilian case study by Judith Tandler (1997), the IDS research went on to document for various parts of the world examples of success which combine all or most the following elements: emergence of a political leadership with an enhanced interest in winning elections on a public-goods basis; interest within the professional organisations of providers in improving their public reputation; linkage of social movements to political parties; and client and voter interest in improved performance. This is the combination that sometimes works.

While not all of the elements may be necessary, some sort of change in incentives on the provider side seems essential if user or voter pressure is to have any effects, and the whole process needs to be political. In this sense 'social' accountability is a misnomer – this is politics!²

3.3 The uptake challenge

Research findings are, of course, not in a direct way specifications for government policies or for donor programming. However, if direct influence is not realistic, what are the more likely mechanisms or channel of indirect influence?

The answer revolves around the concept that public policy interventions involve with a greater or lesser degree of explicitness a 'theory of change' or well conceived 'intervention logic'. That is what good programme evaluations are evaluating: not only is the intervention working, but

² On the most touted Latin American examples, see Goldfrank (2007) and Bräutigam (2004) among many others.

what can we learn more broadly from the ways in which it is working or not working (Pawson and Tilley, 1997; Weiss, 1998; Chen, 2005)? Good evaluations begin by trying to identify the operational theory at work, even when, and indeed especially when, it is not well articulated in the programme documentation. The hope is that this results in better designs, informed by a more robust theory the next time round. It also seems reasonable to suppose that research, conveyed through agency guidelines and policy-oriented digests of evidence as well as by evaluation reports, influences practice by helping to shape programme theories.

Has this happened in the recent past and may we reasonably expect it in the immediate future? In the Section 4, I argue that it has not and we cannot. Section 5 considers why.

4 Swimming against the tide: obstacles to uptake

A useful starting point is the evaluation of the past programmes of several donors. Two comprehensive evaluation or review studies have been undertaken in recent years, one by an ODI team focused on ‘voice and accountability’ programmes (Rocha Menocal and Sharma, 2008), the other by an IDS team with a focus of ‘empowerment’ (McGee and Gaventa, 2010). Despite their slightly different terms of reference, these exercises converge on three points. First, most donor programmes have an implicit and somewhat fuzzy theory of change at best – that is, it is not very clear how the interventions are supposed to work. Second, the programme designs seem to imply that there are regular and always benign linkages among the variables, democracy, empowerment, voice, accountability and service performance – ‘all good things go together’. Third, the results suggest a much more complicated picture, and the need to act upon both the ‘demand’ and the ‘supply’ sides in a context-sensitive way.

Why are programme theories weak despite the existence of relevant research? The question invites several layers of explanation. In this section, I restrict myself to the more immediate factors, relating to direct intellectual influences on programming.

4.1 How programming is informed

Those designing donor programmes are quite rightly expected to pay attention to their agencies’ policy papers, ‘How To Notes’ and other digests of evidence and experience. Together with the flagship publications of the Bretton Woods institutions and UN agencies, such documents are indispensable transmission belts from research or evaluation evidence to programme design. Agencies like DFID not only fund a great deal of relevant research, but also support a Governance and Social Development Resource Centre and produce a large body of guidance material which serves to interpret the government’s White Papers on International Development for practitioners.

The UK government’s White Papers have, unfortunately, not been particularly helpful in steering the rest of the DFID guidance material towards a realistic approach to governance programming. The Labour government’s third White Paper (DFID, 2006), for example, is usually considered a breakthrough for the evidence-based view that politics and governance are critical areas of development. However, the argument about *how* governance matters was heavily influenced by the notion of all good things going together. Good governance was said to require three things: state capability; the accountability of governments to citizens, civil society and the private sector; and responsiveness to citizens’ needs and rights (2006: 20). This so-called ‘CAR framework’ was used subsequently to guide DFID’s country governance assessments.

As with many donor policy guidelines at this level, the 2006 White Paper had a tendency to mix up evidence-based claims and definitional matters when treating good governance. The subsequent DFID Policy Paper *Governance, Development and Democratic Politics* (2007) added some useful clarifications, including a commitment to pragmatism when it comes to the expected sequence between democratisation and development. However, the causal flow diagram presented in the section 'What makes governance good?' contained an unambiguous message: there is strong mutual reinforcement between 'the ability of citizens to hold leaders ... to account', 'the ability and authority of leaders ... to get things done' and 'how leaders ... actually behave in responding to the needs and rights of citizens' (DFID, 2007: 14). Outputs from the public-sector management team at the World Bank in this period contained equivalent diagrams with similar implications (e.g., Levy, 2007).

On service delivery more specifically, the key guidance that programmers looked to in that period was the 2004 WDR. As I have conceded, this WDR is scrupulously grounded in relevant thinking, including academic theory and empirical work. However, it also displays another common feature, which is a growing mismatch between the argument and the evidence as the discussion moves from background discussion to policy prescription. In the text, this is I believe mainly a function of the desire to be upbeat about possibilities for contributing to development with concessional loans and grants. It is not possible for a Bank report to say that it has found insuperable obstacles or situations which cast doubt on the relevance of Bank lending. Therefore, there are strong reasons to put the accent on the positive, even if it has to be admitted that there is only a possibility of this succeeding.

Generally, the WDR itself can be defended against charges of severe inconsistency. However, one of the things that typically happens is that documents like the WDR are consumed directly only by a small number of outstandingly committed readers. Its influence is achieved primarily by re-summaries in oral presentations by Bank staff and others; books and teaching in development studies; brainstorming discussions in development organisations, and in a variety of working documents. These days, blogs are an increasingly important dissemination vehicle of the same kind. And in all of these media, the caveats and the close reasoning tend to disappear. What is left is the upbeat discourse around the 'good things to do'.

4.2 The over-selling of information power

Selective dissemination of WDR 2004 is part of a wider problem of selective reading of studies and reports for the sake of sustaining some simple, upbeat message about the potential for 'bottom-up' initiatives. There are several well-worn examples. One is the Bangalore citizens' score-cards experiment which has been widely copied across the world, including in Africa. Others concern the claimed impact of publishing budget information on school funding in Uganda, and later work in Uganda in the same vein.

The IDS evaluation points out that the approach pioneered by the Public Affairs Centre in Bangalore, India, may not have had such a large impact on service quality and public satisfaction as originally claimed. More important, whatever improvements were achieved were the result of the participation of both users *and* providers in designing and applying the score-cards (McGee and Gaventa, 2010: 12). As evidence of the power of client pressure on its own, the experience has been over-sold.

Paul Hubbard (2007) has usefully re-told the much-repeated³ story of the reduction in leakages from district education budgets in Uganda in the late 1990s. The case was originally documented in World Bank research by Reinikka and Svensson. Hubbard shows that between the first tracking survey which revealed the high level of leakages and the later one showing a reduction, there were a number of changes to the form and content of funding to districts and major shifts in the amount of political interest, Ministry of Finance monitoring and donor conditionalities focused on the use of funds. The evidence that the Ministry's decision to publish the financial allocations was major contributor to the outcome, through the mechanism of parent pressure, is not very strong. And, in particular, the suggestion that it would have such effects in the absence of the other, more top-down influences, if applied elsewhere, is quite misleading.

A subsequent piece of work involving some of the same researchers (Björkman and Svensson, 2007) is increasingly being cited in the blogosphere in support of the idea that citizen pressure stimulated by release of information is a likely road to service improvement. There are questions in both cases about the degree to which the researchers themselves can be held responsible for this misinterpretation of their findings. Hubbard (2007: 6) says that Reinikka and Svensson 'never claimed that information was the only factor in explaining [the] apparent decrease in leakage'. However, they did give at least one of their papers the title 'The Power of Information'. Björkman and Svensson called theirs 'Power to the People'. The intention to convey a simple, upbeat and 'democratic' policy message is explicit.

Björkman and Svensson report a citizen report card experiment in relation to local health service delivery, which they present as a test of the WDR claims about user voice and participation as means of disciplining service providers. The study, using best-practice randomisation techniques for control, concludes with robust statistical findings supporting the belief that 'improved quality and quantity of health care provision resulted from increased efforts by the health unit staff to serve the community in light of better community monitoring' (2007: 25). However, this is already a simplification of what happened, on the authors' own account.

First, the project inputs included a major investment in community capacity, including a series of facilitated meetings on the retention and use of information and to overcome hesitation based on social inferiority and avoid elite capture ('Extensive piloting concluded that simply reporting the facts would be likely to have little impact'). Second, the project also held extensive meetings and discussions with the health unit staff, and this fairly clearly had effects on provider motivation independently of any 'community monitoring'. The authors give little or no attention to the possibility of 'Hawthorne effects' – that is, workers improving their performance because of the effects on group morale of being the subject of an experiment. However, they do recognise the possibility of complementarities and virtuous circles in worker effort (Björkman and Svensson, 2007: 10, 13).

The authors of this second Ugandan study do warn against assuming that the observed effects of the citizen report card project are permanent. They also recognise that scaling up of this limited success would be challenging (although not on cost grounds alone). Together with my points about the nature of the experiment, this indicates the need for any generalisation to be careful and qualified. Nevertheless, the study is now routinely cited as a 'rigorous' exercise revealing the potential of community monitoring and the power information (e.g., Barder, 2010; 2011). The rigour in question refers, of course, to the statistical design and testing techniques, not to the care taken in extracting policy-relevant messages from the evidence. I

³ Including notably by Paul Collier (2007).

would argue that, rather typically, the lack of rigour in the interpretation which begins in this case with the authors has been compounded by secondary commentary on their work.

A common feature of all these uptake and evidence-utilisation examples is that they draw mono-causal conclusions from what are clearly multi-causal situations. Or, in economists' language, they take a partial equilibrium approach to a general equilibrium reality. The dangers of doing this in the field of macro-political institutions and public-policy quality in Latin America have been compellingly revealed in work for the Inter-American Development Bank (Stein and Tommasi, 2008). The same warnings should be applied in the field that concerns us here.

4.3 Results-based aid: new wine in old bottles

Much of this abuse of evidence occurred in the second half of the last decade. Is the pattern going to continue? At least as far as donor policies are concerned (and this will be my focus in the rest of the paper), the signs are that it will. Bilateral development agencies have commissioned a very large number of social accountability schemes and 'deepening democracy' programmes in the last few years, in which the principal direct beneficiaries are NGOs. DFID is actively commissioning new ones, and there are strong signs that this will be one large channel for the increased programme spend to which it is committed.

Such projects are becoming more sophisticated in a number of respects. First, they now tend to take the form of basket funds, rather than single-donor initiatives, which addresses the objection that they replicate the patron-client patterns of the politics they are trying to transform. Second, substantial monitoring and learning components are now usually attached to the apparatus for disbursement of funds. Thirdly and most recently, a capacity for 'political economy analysis' has been built into the design of programmes. These additional elements are useful, but they do not appear to result in different, or clearer, theories of change.

One reason is that the general climate of discussion in the community of practice around aid has not become much more evidence-based in the last few years. There are new items on the donor agenda, notably Cash-on-Delivery Aid (Birdsall and Savedoff, 2010) and other proposals for making aid more accountable and results oriented by linking disbursements to monitored outcomes (Barder and Birdsall, 2006; Barder, 2009). In the UK, these ideas influenced the coalition government which took over from Labour in 2010, and there is a commitment to apply them on at least an experimental basis. However, these initiatives are underlain by a remarkable continuity of approach when it comes to the assumed political economy of improving service delivery.

Results-based disbursement is partly about finding ways for ministers to justify aid spending when budgets are being cut. For some, this is a sufficient rationale. However, the most prominent advocates of the approach cannot deny themselves the claim that publicly linking aid to outcome targets will be good for country ownership of development efforts and for domestic accountability. Governments will be able to decide for themselves how to achieve results and whether the aid is worth having, it is argued. If citizens know what aid is supposed to be paying for, and that it does not come when the agreed results are not produced, they will 'hold their government to account' (Birdsall and Savedoff, 2010: 21-24).

This seems to reaffirm in passing what the research says is a wholly unrealistic portrayal of the realities of voter and client power. However, the need to back such claims with evidence seems to be no more recognised today than it was ten years ago.

5 The political economy of uptake

Three kinds of factors seem important in helping to explain the problems discussed in Section 4. The same factors also, independently, pose challenges to the uptake of research findings about the drivers of performance in local public service delivery. They are incentives, ideologies and vested interests.⁴ These are the conditions which researchers are going to need to address if better uptake of research-based evidence is to be secured in the coming years. They are highly interactive. Sometimes, it is hard to see where to place a particular factor. Nevertheless, it seems important to insist that all three types exist, meaning that extremely wide-ranging changes need to be contemplated if the picture is to change.

5.1 Incentives

In between research and donor operations – I have argued – there is an intermediate field of thinking and activity in which there are powerful incentives to simplify and be upbeat. The audiences typically being addressed do not want unnecessary complexity, nor do they want to be told what well-intentioned people cannot do or cannot achieve. They want easily grasped explanations about initiatives that might be worth supporting, even if success cannot be guaranteed. So speakers, teachers, think-piece writers and bloggers have an incentive to simplify and to put the accent on the positive. This is one of the things underpinning the use of simple, partial-equilibrium propositions (e.g., ‘information empowers’) when reality has general-equilibrium properties, or where causality is multiple and complex.⁵

In the aid business proper, there are incentives which reinforce the tendency to partial-equilibrium thinking. Professionals who are designing programmes are specialists charged with spending in particular institutional spheres – health services, public financial management, civil service reform, social accountability, etc. At least until recently, in many donor organisations ‘governance’ itself was treated as a ‘sector’ of activity. This creates difficulties for dealing with multi-causal realities. Not only do professional advisers find it time-effective to work in disciplinary ‘silos’, so that not much discussion takes place with members of other advisory groups, but performance assessment and career advancement may be assisted less by project designs which involve collaboration with other disciplines than by single-focus designs.

As this assumes, donor staffs also have incentives to disburse funds. In the case of DFID, the pressure is increasing and is accompanied by requirements to spend more in politically fragile environments and with fewer advisory staff inputs. There are also increasing requirements for programmes to be monitorable. While in principle this exigency is compatible with a sophisticated theory-of-change approach to programming, and with learning-process designs, in practice the simplicity of a single-factor design with fixed and easily measurable outputs is irresistible in the incentive climate that now exists in most large agencies.

⁴ Once again, I limit myself to discussing the donor-side obstacles, even though many of the issues addressed here are equally relevant to governments and other domestic actors within African countries and the obstacles are hardly less significant.

⁵ E.g., ‘information can help to empower when combined with certain, not very common, social and political factors, but can have the opposite result under different conditions’.

5.2 Ideologies

Underlying and certainly reinforcing the incentives mentioned are at least two kinds of ideologies. We have already encountered both of them in beginning to articulate the APPP research findings.

General ideologies relevant to this field of research include the belief that political democracy is not just desirable but the solution to most governance problems in all types of country. This idea is officially enshrined in the foreign policy of several European countries and the US where development assistance is treated as an arm of foreign policy. In the UK, foreign policy is committed to democracy promotion. Development assistance under DFID has been somewhat more pragmatic in principle and practice, but research-based ideas suggesting that development results may *not* be reliably delivered by a 'democracy deepening' programme encounters heavy resistance, some of which is ideological.

Ideas may be considered ideological because they involve an unthinking, or at least not evidence-based, extrapolation from own experience ('it works here, so it will work there'). The default position at the World Bank, where North Atlantic institutions are considered as best-practices of relevance to the South unless proven otherwise is no less ideological from being clothed in technocratic language. Ideas can be ideological, too, in the sense that ethics are allowed to override evidence. The best Northern development workers are not uncommonly driven by guilt about their own relative wealth. This can result in an exaggerated universalism, an insistence that citizens of developing countries have 'the same rights' and therefore are entitled to the same institutions as 'we enjoy' in the North (the question of whether they are the institutions they need or want being pushed into the background).

There are also *professional ideologies* in the mix of factors blocking uptake of governance research findings. I will mention just two. One is the ideology prevalent among certain kinds of economist which validates bold posturing on topics about which they should consider themselves rank amateurs. I should make it clear that I do not object to the so-called imperialism of economics within the social sciences – that is, the movement that has brought rational-choice and game-theoretic perspectives into the substantive fields of political science and sociology. On the contrary, that has been genuinely enriching, and indeed provides part of the evidence base on which APPP research is drawing. My target is instead the toleration often shown to the dissemination by economists of ideas about governance and social relations which have a 'common sense' basis, and are offered in complete ignorance of the relevant literature. The prestige which economics enjoys as a discipline, not least in World Bank circles, admits amateurism about some of the topics discussed in this paper which would never be tolerated in reverse.

It would not be fair to put economists on the carpet in this way without some reference to my own parent discipline, social development. Along with the combined forces of the international 'third sector', social-development specialists have been the architects of an ideology in which citizen empowerment and social movements are regarded as effective ways of unlocking development problems almost on principle. The World Bank itself has been heavily influenced by this thinking since the early days of structural adjustment, with the result that it is almost never capable of resisting calls for greater civil society involvement or for 'participation' to be taken more seriously. Outside the Bank, the default position to which social development advisers tend to return when discussing governance problems is enhancing citizen voice and empowerment.

5.3 Interests

It may seem excessive to invoke vested interests in explaining why getting uptake of some propositions from research is difficult, given that incentives and ideologies point in similar directions. I am also increasing the risk of offending many friends and colleagues in taking this further step. However, even those who work in these sectors sometimes recognise a material element in their motivation and I would concede the same regarding the organisations and teams with which I have been associated myself. So it would be perverse not to recognise that there is a citizen-empowerment and social accountability *business* in which contractors and Northern and Southern NGOs of various types share an interest.

I am not completely convinced by Owen Barder's (2009) portrayal of the relationship between funders and implementers of development-assistance programmes, which forms part of his argument for greater use of results-based contracting of development services. However, it is certainly true that there is no necessary congruence between the interests of aid implementers and those of the users of public services in developing countries, or indeed of their well-wishers and sometime supporters in the North. On some issues, such as democratic decentralisation, there is something like a global pressure-group which brings together all those with interests in this sector, including local government practitioners and their associations, consultants specialising in this field and agencies, especially UN agencies, which have staked out decentralisation work as their territory (see e.g. Global Forum on Local Development, 2010). Last but not least, bilateral and multilateral development agencies have interests, as well as incentives and ideologies, favouring the disbursement of funds in ways that are familiar, established and uncomplicated.

The sum total of all of this helps to make uptake of certain types of findings from governance research quite problematic.

6 Conclusions

It is important that research findings are taken up by policy-makers and practitioners. This applies to the field of public service provision in developing countries as much as to other fields in which there is a respectable body of policy-relevant empirical evidence and applied theory. Therefore, the pressure on research programmes to have 'uptake strategies' and be proactive about engaging with policy and practice is to be welcomed. However, this has implications that may not have been fully anticipated.

Some of the initial findings of the Africa Power and Politics Programme about the implications of 'working with the grain' in African governance are challenging from an uptake perspective. This is so despite the fact that these findings agree with a good deal of other previous and current research evidence. It is not just the APP that is swimming against the tide in this respect. Against this background, I have argued that promoting uptake implies questioning the standards of rigour that are observed in some of the professional fields that act as transmission belts or intermediary channels between research and practice. It also involves tackling in more fundamental ways the incentives, ideologies and vested interests that get in the way of intelligent, evidence-based programme design in the aid business proper.

At these two levels, there is a political economy of uptake which is bound up with the political economy and politics of aid itself. This is dangerous territory for researchers, but if we want our work to have an effect, we need to make it our own.

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