

# Brokering *Digest*

A spotlight on knowledge brokering resources

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## Bridging the gap between research and practice

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This article explores why it is so difficult for international development researchers and practitioners to work together effectively and how more satisfying partnerships can be built. The author argues that revealing the barriers to co-operation is important because the opportunity for in-depth knowledge sharing is "too good... for all of us to forego."

In recent years, attempts at knowledge partnerships have flourished in the international field, fed by demands for more effective use of resources and more tangible learning from experiences. These experiments in joint evaluation, program redesign, and in-depth reflection and learning struggle for existence in the face of pragmatic day-to-day concerns.

The author suggests that to grasp the fundamental causes of the failure or success of a research-practice partnership, we first need to understand the cultural differences between the two worlds.

**Institutional differences.** Although both worlds share the goal of sustainable development, they have different institutional imperatives. Research organizations focus on creating formal knowledge, built on the critical analysis of practice, which they direct primarily at other international development researchers. Development agencies focus on funding, networking, lobbying, capacity development, and knowledge sharing with Southern-based non-governmental organizations. These institutional differences manifest in the pace at which the agency moves forward – the development group being faster and more pragmatic, the research group more likely to step back to observe and analyse.

**Communicative differences.** While jargon is shared, the ways messages are articulated and broadcast vary significantly. Incentives in the research world favour publication in peer-reviewed journals and moving on to new knowledge creation. Little pressure exists to re-articulate findings for practitioners. Meanwhile, practitioners want case- and action-based research that offers empirical evidence related to a specific policy approach or strategic assumption. In terms of knowledge distribution, practitioners share information readily while researchers guard the ownership of ideas.

### Key messages

- In recent years, development researchers and development practitioners have worked to expand their vision of their "stakeholders" and to be more responsive to each other's knowledge needs. Even so, knowledge transfer and collaboration between the two groups is limited and too little relevant knowledge reaches Southern stakeholders.
- In the development research and practice worlds three significant cultural differences exist: institutional, communicative, and philosophical.
- By taking the time to get to know each other, develop common goals and objectives, recognize interdependence, and celebrate small successes, research and practice organizations can build mutually beneficial knowledge sharing partnerships.

**Philosophical differences.** Researchers still see objectivity at the heart of their endeavours despite philosophical arguments that their activities are coated with subjective beliefs, particularly in the ideologically suffused development arena. Development practitioners, on the other hand, are openly driven by ideological interests. Still, both groups desire empirical evidence that proves or disproves the premises by which a development approach is justified.

The author proposes 10 building blocks to help create effective knowledge-sharing partnerships:

1. Get to know each other. Start with small experiments at articulating, acknowledging, and understanding each other's differences at the institutional, communicative, and philosophical levels.
2. Be patient. Invest the time at the outset to understand each other's interests.
3. Be respectful. Look beyond your own experience to learn from the other perspective.
4. Embrace diversity. Venture beyond your conventional frame of reference and benefit from the energy, innovation, and new insights this brings.

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5. Recognize that scientific and practical knowledge are strengthened by the existence of the other.
6. Foster a clear, mutual frame of reference. Find focus and direction through the development of a strong common goal and a number of clear mutual objectives.
7. Build the partnership incrementally. Small initiatives increase participation and build broad ownership.
8. Ensure institutional buy-in to guarantee priority status, time, and resources.
9. Strive for equal (financial or in-kind) commitment to the partnership.
10. Allow for mistakes.

Successful joint knowledge partnerships proceed in small steps and pay attention, in particular, to the involvement of the stakeholders, the commitment of individuals outside the core group, and the distribution of results.

**Ferguson, JE. 2005. "Bridging the gap between research and practice." *KM4D Journal*; 1(3): 46-54.**

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