ENGAGED EXCELLENCE

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Introduction: Interrogating Engaged Excellence in Research

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Abstract Approaches to engaged research, which do not just produce academic knowledge, but link with people and groups in society, have long intellectual roots. In recent years, however, for epistemological, practical and ethical reasons, interest in such approaches has gained ground. At the Institute of Development Studies (IDS) we seek to adopt an 'engaged excellence' approach to research. We have identified four pillars that support engaged excellence: high-quality research; co-construction of knowledge, mobilising impact-orientated evidence; and building enduring partnerships. This introduction interrogates this approach, deepening our understanding of what it means, whilst also acknowledging the challenges which it poses. It raises questions about who defines what good quality research is; how, why and who we co-construct knowledge with; what counts as impact; and how we build enduring partnerships. It also touches on some of the implications for both researchers themselves and the institutions through which we work.

Keywords: engagement, quality, co-construction, impact, partnership, knowledge.

1 Introduction
Across the world, researchers, policymakers and practitioners alike have long struggled with how to create knowledge that is both rigorous in its own right, and relevant and useful to those whose lives and futures are potentially affected by new evidence, insights and concepts. At the Institute of Development Studies (IDS), we seek to combine high-quality, conceptually and empirically innovative research, with extensive engagement with particular countries, localities and people through our practices, partners and students (IDS 2015: 5). We have called this approach 'engaged excellence', by which we mean that the high quality of our work (excellence) is dependent upon it linking to and involving those who are at the heart of the change we wish to see (engaged).

Figure 1 The four pillars of engaged excellence

Quality
• Rigorous
• Pluralistic
• Robust
• Relevant

Co-construction
• In problem identification, data gathering, analysis, dissemination

Engaged Excellence

Impact
• Policy influence
• Improved practice
• New ways of understanding

Partnerships
• Trust and transparency
• Mutual learning
• Added reach and perspective

Source John Gaventa, presentation at the Transdisciplinary Methods for Developing Nexus Capabilities workshop, University of Sussex, 29–30 June 2015.

We have identified four pillars of engaged excellence (*ibid.*):

• Delivering high-quality research;

• Co-constructing knowledge;

• Mobilising impact-orientated evidence; and

• Building enduring partnerships, emphasising their mutual interdependence.

The articles in this *IDS Bulletin* all challenge us to interrogate this approach, to deepen our understanding of what it means, whilst also acknowledging the challenges which it poses. They raise important questions about *who* defines what good quality research is; *how, why* and *who* we co-construct knowledge with; what counts as *impact*; and *how* we build enduring partnerships.

In recent years, several debates have emerged about how to make academic research more 'engaged'. The motivation for these debates has varied from a recognition that engagement can contribute to improving the impact of research; to normative arguments that research needs to

engage with those it seeks to influence, and to democratise knowledge; to epistemological arguments that the multiple nature of truth necessitates the engagement of multiple perspectives (Oswald 2016). This introduction, together with the articles in this *IDS Bulletin*, contribute to these debates and attempt to articulate IDS' approach to engaged excellence and the unique contribution such an approach can make.

Many of the arguments laid out in this *IDS Bulletin* are not new. Indeed, we at IDS, as well as others, have been making similar arguments for several decades. This is demonstrated by the inclusion in this issue of four archive articles from previous *IDS Bulletin*s, covering a period between 1979 and 2007. In 1979, Howes and Chambers argued for the inclusion of indigenous technical knowledge in development framings, essentially calling on IDS, and development more broadly, to bring together both scientific and indigenous knowledge in order to generate greater relevance and a richer picture where multiple truths prevail. In 1994, Davies stated that knowledge is power, and called on IDS, and other institutions in the global North, to examine our role in the production of knowledge and the framing of global problems. In 2002, Leach and Fairhead explored how science and policy processes are embedded in broader power relations, calling on researchers to engage with and critically analyse the politics of knowledge in policy processes. Finally, in 2007, Standing and Taylor asked us whose knowledge counts within development studies, challenging Northern institutions like IDS to pay attention to how we create partnerships in order to reduce inequalities in knowledge production.

Today, IDS researchers and partners are exploring and applying engaged excellence around diverse topics and issues. Those addressed in the articles in this *IDS Bulletin* range from natural resource management (Apgar *et al.*) and transformations to sustainability (Ely and Marin) to food security and nutrition (Pittore *et al.*), sexual violence (Dolan *et al.*), young people's sexualities (Oosterhoff and Shephard) and the role of universities in democratising knowledge (Tandon *et al.*). They cover a range of geographies, from Finland to Uganda. In so doing, they also raise important questions and challenge us to reflect more deeply on what engaged excellence means and needs to mean in different contexts.

This introduction is structured around the four pillars of engaged excellence: delivering high-quality research; co-constructing knowledge; mobilising impact-orientated evidence; and building enduring partnerships, emphasising their mutual interdependence. Each section draws on the contributions to this *IDS Bulletin* to explore the epistemological, methodological, ethical and practical implications of this approach.

2 Delivering high-quality research

The four pillars of engaged excellence are mutually dependent – therefore, high-quality research will need to be based on the co-construction of knowledge, it will need to mobilise impact-orientated evidence, and be based on enduring partnerships – in other words it

will need to be engaged with society, not detached from it. Exactly what 'engaged' means is discussed by all the articles in this *IDS Bulletin*, but two articles in particular, Dolan *et al.* (this issue) and Tandon *et al.* (this issue), turn the phrase 'engaged excellence' around and outline what they believe to be examples of excellent engagement.

The concept of engaged excellence moves us away from an understanding of quality research being that which tells us the 'truth', as if that were a neutral 'thing' to reveal. Jasanoff makes the argument well:

> Science… is understood as neither a simple reflection of the truth about nature nor an epiphenomenon of social and political interests… Co-production… [is] a critique of the realist ideology that persistently separates the domains of nature, facts, objectivity, reason and policy from those of culture, values, subjectivity, emotion and politics (2004: 3).

A similar point is made by Funtowiczi and Ravetzi who state that:

> invoking 'truth' as the goal of science is a distraction, or even a diversion from real tasks. A more relevant and robust guiding principle is quality, understood as a contextual property of scientific information… by bringing 'facts' and 'values' into a unified conception of problem solving in these areas, and by replacing 'truth' by [*sic*] 'quality' as its core evaluative concept. Its *principle of the plurality of legitimate perspectives on any problem* leads to a focus on dialogue, and on mutual respect and learning, wherever possible (2003: 1–3) [italics added].

An interesting discussion that arises in some of the articles in this *IDS Bulletin* is who defines what good quality research is. Pittore *et al.* (this issue) argue that in order for their research to have credibility with the policymakers they are trying to influence, their research, and the methodology it uses, must be seen to be legitimate. In other words, their research methods need to be trusted and seen as robust. There has been a long and vibrant debate within academia about how to define rigorous and robust research. Different research paradigms have different understandings depending on their epistemological viewpoints. An engaged excellence approach, that encourages researchers to engage with each other (interdisciplinary) and actors outside academia (transdisciplinary), helps us to understand that good quality research will be rigorous in whatever epistemological and methodological approach it uses (i.e. be able to explain why a particular methodological approach has been used, based on a particular epistemological viewpoint), and robust in the application of the chosen method(s) and approach. A further criterion that an engaged excellence approach raises is relevance, i.e. that we need quality research that is relevant to the problems we are seeking to address.

Dolan *et al.* (this *IDS Bulletin*) also discuss the value of legitimacy, arguing that one reason for Southern organisations to partner with a Northern research institute like IDS is to benefit from their credibility

amongst donors and other institutions, but they note that these benefits may or may not outweigh the costs of 'reinforcing the notion that excellence only exists in – or is, at any rate, judged in – the North'.

3 Co-constructing knowledge
3.1 Why should we co-construct knowledge?

The co-construction of knowledge is a process of bringing together multiple kinds of knowledge and multiple perspectives to construct an understanding of research phenomena based on a plurality of situated knowledges (Oswald 2016). This includes the knowledge and perspectives of those outside the research establishment; of people and groups in society, be they members of communities, businesses, governments, activist organisations or development agencies.

The implications of this are that:

> [t]he research process can no longer be characterized as an 'objective' investigation of the natural (or social) world, or as a cool and reductionist interrogation of arbitrarily defined 'others'. Instead, it has become a dialogic process, an intense (and perhaps endless) 'conversation' between research actors and research subjects… (Nowotny, Scott and Gibbons 2003: 187).

This position has long been recognised in constructivist epistemology which argues that knowledge is situated and always represents the standpoint of the knower (Pietrykowski 2015: 244; Haraway 1988).

However, one can argue for the co-construction of knowledge, not just from an epistemological perspective, but also from a normative perspective. The dominant Western paradigm of scientific–rational knowledge has been criticised for inflicting an injustice on subaltern forms of knowledge by failing to recognise alternative ways of knowing and dominating what is understood as 'truth' (Visvanathan 2005; Santos, Nunes and Meneses 2008). Universities themselves have perpetuated this injustice. Gaventa and Bivens argue that:

> universities [need] to think not only about justice in the larger world, but also about their own distinctive role in shaping cognitive justice and knowledge democracy. Without cognitive justice – which focuses on whose knowledge counts – the larger struggles for social justice will not be realized (2014: 149).

From the perspective of cognitive justice and the pursuit of democratising knowledge, the co-construction of knowledge is a moral necessity, but should also ensure that more holistic and pluralistic knowledge is produced, which will mean research is better able to address complex problems (Oswald 2016).

Tandon *et al.* (this *IDS Bulletin*) pick up on and extend this argument by calling for an acknowledgement of ecologies of knowledge that recognise that knowledge is not just cognitive, but that we also know through acting

upon the world and feeling about the world. They state that knowledge can exist in multiple forms: text, images, stories, music, drama, poetry, ceremony, etc. This is demonstrated by Dolan *et al.* (this *IDS Bulletin*) who document the powerful role that participatory video and theatre played in their collaborative research project, arguing that these methods allowed deeply personal stories to be articulated using 'non-verbal expression of emotional truths that are difficult to communicate in words'. In turn, this provided the research with a deeper understanding of participants' experience, and challenged commonly held assumptions (*ibid.*).

Oosterhoff and Shephard (this *IDS Bulletin*) draw on the concept of affective engagement, to argue that emotions and affection play a role in understanding our preferences and choices, and therefore, research that creates an affective link with people may be more likely to have impact on them. Their article directly links the acknowledgement of different types of knowledge being legitimate (feeling as knowledge) with the call to mobilise impact-orientated evidence, by arguing for the creation of evidence that resonates with people at an emotional level. The research Oosterhoff and Shephard (this *IDS Bulletin*) document specifically used creative methods such as music, as a form of knowledge, to document the experiences of young Kenyans and to share them with others. They argue that knowledge shared in this form resonates with young people and is therefore more likely to have an impact.

Accepting non-cognitive knowledges as legitimate ways of knowing is important both for building knowledge democracy and for de-colonialising the academic curricula. Tandon *et al.* (this *IDS Bulletin*) draw on Grosfoguel's 'four Genocides/Epistemicides of the Long 16th Century' to argue that there has been a large-scale epistemological, as well as military, conquest, in which indigenous knowledges have been destroyed and European 'enlightenment' came to have the monopoly of knowledge. Universities themselves are gatekeepers of what is 'good' and 'valid' knowledge; therefore, cognitive justice calls on universities to co-construct what counts as valid knowledge with communities and citizens in order to rebalance this monopoly of knowledge, and make subaltern knowledges more visible.

Dolan *et al.* (this *IDS Bulletin*) challenge universities in the global North, including institutions such as IDS, to reflect on their positions of privilege in the creation of knowledge. They problematise the term 'engaged excellence' by questioning who defines what counts as 'engaged' and 'excellence' in research, and call for the approach to be true to the values of collaboration and respect for multiple subjectivities. They argue that determining what 'engaged excellence' means is a 'politically and epistemologically positional judgement' and this discussion should be the central focus of partnerships, which profess a commitment to this approach.

Apgar *et al.* (this *IDS Bulletin*) also make a normative argument for co-construction, arguing that research into resource management should

make '… space for all knowledge, including IK [indigenous knowledge], to be recognised as embedded in social and cultural institutions and practices that enable more sustainable resource management'. They argue that sustainable resource management systems, and research into them, need to acknowledge and recognise socially embedded indigenous knowledge as being just as legitimate to local communities responsible for those systems, as scientific knowledge. However, they warn against the way in which this is being implemented in several locations. In Canada, for example, formal recognition of IK in shared governance processes has 'led to their knowledge becoming subjected to a bureaucratic process based on government set measures' (*ibid.*), leading to co-option and assimilation of IK into external mechanisms. This is often due to inherent inequalities between researchers and communities, and an instrumental understanding of IK that fails 'to appreciate the broader political and social processes within which knowledge is created and contested' (*ibid.*).

This example highlights the fact that it is not just institutions in the global North that are privileged in the production of knowledge compared with institutions in the global South. Institutions in the North can marginalise the knowledge of indigenous peoples in their own countries. The same can occur when universities and institutions in the South, whose models of knowledge production often mirror those of the North, also marginalise the IK of local peoples.

3.2 Co-construction of knowledge in practice

All the articles in this *IDS Bulletin* document some form of co-construction of knowledge. Dolan *et al.* (this issue) draw on Haraway to argue that 'the knowledge we claim is conditioned by the locations we occupy'. They propose that an engaged excellence approach that brings together academic and popular knowledges can deconstruct accepted framings and create an expanded understanding of the world, and that this is meaningful co-construction of knowledge. In their exploration of an ongoing ten-year partnership between researchers at IDS and the Refugee Law Project (RLP) and latterly the Men of Hope Refugee Association Uganda (MOHRAU), Dolan *et al.* (this *IDS Bulletin*) provide a powerful example of a research collaboration based on an understanding that 'we are all "subjects" of our own lives and narratives, not "objects" in the stories of others', which is a challenge to traditional extractive forms of research. They explain how a ten-year learning process, involving masculinity theorists, feminist movements, activists for sexual and gender diversity, and human rights organisations, has enabled a dialogue across contrasting perspectives and challenged dominant discourses in development that frame women as victims and men as perpetrators of violence, making invisible the experiences and rights of male survivors. They argue that engaged excellence is not just about co-constructing knowledge with those at the centre of the change we collectively wish to see, but about finding spaces 'to challenge and shift accepted ways of knowing and acting'. Apgar *et al.* (this *IDS Bulletin*) also show how the co-construction of knowledge can challenge dominant narratives, explaining that the research undertaken

in partnership between the non-governmental organisation (NGO) Snowchange and the Sámi people in Finland countered the idea that their land was 'pristine'.

The co-construction of knowledge also allows us to contextualise knowledge in the practical realities of those interested in or affected by change, thus hopefully making it more useful and relevant. Pittore *et al.* (this *IDS Bulletin*) argue that by partnering with local organisations, who can interpret the value and significance of evidence on nutrition within a specific context, they can co-construct how that evidence is framed and used, and increase the likelihood of achieving policy impact.

Ely and Marin (this *IDS Bulletin*) argue that it is precisely by bringing together diverse perspectives on complex problems that alliances can form around transformative systemic change. They document the formation of two Transformative Knowledge Network hubs in the UK and Argentina that have been created to identify and investigate specific challenges in relation to sustainability. In particular, they argue that such co-construction has the potential to unlock impasses caused by seemingly irreconcilable difference in perspectives held by different actors.

A key challenge when co-constructing knowledge is negotiating ownership and authorship of that knowledge when it comes to be published (Oswald 2016). Castleden, Sloan Morgan and Neimanis (2010) discuss the different ways in which authorship can be understood when working with diverse community members. They argue that '… sharing authorship [can] require no writing at all; rather, if a community member had in some way contributed intellectually to the project, co-authorship was warranted' (*op. cit.*: 27). Dolan *et al.* (this *IDS Bulletin*) reflect on this challenge, with one of the partners reflecting on their lack of presence when research findings are published and presented, and arguing that Northern governments' highly restrictive visa practices often prevent Southern-based researchers from representing their work internationally.

4 Mobilising impact-orientated evidence

Defining what we mean by 'mobilising impact-orientated evidence' is inherently challenging. What does it mean to mobilise – are we directly responsible for ensuring our research has impact, or are we just responsible for making our research *capable* of impact? What constitutes impact and who decides if our research has had impact? What counts as evidence, and who decides this? The last of these questions links directly to another – what counts as valid knowledge and from whose perspective? All these questions challenge us to think about knowledge as power, and who has the power to decide on the definitions of impact and evidence?

The four pillars of engaged excellence are meant to be mutually dependent. Therefore, we can't think about what we mean by impact, without thinking about how that relates to quality, the co-construction of knowledge and working in enduring partnerships.

We have already argued that the high quality of our research is dependent upon it linking to and involving those who are at the heart of the change we wish to see. So this implies that engaged research will involve multiple actors, particularly those who would be the users of the knowledge produced, so the research is more likely to be relevant and useful to those actors *as part of the process*. This is a particular strength of participatory action research (PAR), highlighted by Dolan *et al.* (this *IDS Bulletin*) that adopts an iterative process which includes *learning throughout the research*, not just at the end. Similarly, linking research directly to advocacy in order to have a direct impact on policymakers *through the research process* is one of the reasons Pittore *et al.* (this *IDS Bulletin*) argue that separating research and advocacy is a false dichotomy. They state that when research is developed for the purposes of informing advocacy, the evidence can be critically examined by researchers together with policy advocates, and its policy relevance can be improved. An example of this was the presenting of their findings to a caucus in parliament on nutrition in Tanzania, and the subsequent production of a booklet including nutrition recommendations to inform political manifestos in the run-up to the 2015 Tanzanian elections.

Understanding how our research might have impact, depends upon our theory of '[h]ow… knowledge [is] taken up in societies' (Jasanoff 2004: 42). We need to be alert to how the way in which research is initiated, framed, represented and shared will affect who regards it as relevant to them. Cash *et al.* argue that the effectiveness of mobilising knowledge for action decreases '… when stakeholders… [see] themselves as excluded from relevant dialogues' (2003: 8088).

Therefore, when research is a process of co-constructing knowledge with multiple actors, our understanding of impact needs to shift from a linear view, in which impact is something that happens at the end of the research process, to a view of impact as integrated throughout, precisely because of the multiple actors involved.

An engaged excellence approach implies that we need to involve multiple actors in deciding what constitutes impact and evidence, because we need to recognise that there will be multiple perspectives on what counts as impact. Dolan *et al.* (this *IDS Bulletin*) identify several ways in which research participants can be positively impacted by the research process, 'through making visible a social issue, the therapeutic effect of being able to reflect upon and re-evaluate their experience as part of the process, the experience of solidarity in knowing others are also sharing their story, and the subversive or politicised outcome that these consequences may generate'. Apgar *et al.* (this *IDS Bulletin*) argue that when research is engaged, an important outcome for those involved in the research is the recognition of their knowledge being valued in its own right. Therefore, one form of impact can be understood as the recognition and legitimation of different forms of knowledge and subaltern perspectives previously ignored in mainstream research and policy arenas. This in turn can be important to people's rights,

autonomy and self-determination in social and political matters, as Apgar *et al.* (this *IDS Bulletin*) show.

Mobilising knowledge for impact is a political process, involving both the politics of knowledge as well as the politics of policymaking. This has been acknowledged by a body of work looking at the politics of policy processes, which challenges the divide between research and policy. Wehrens, writing about public health, states that:

> scholars have begun to criticize the analytical a priori separation of research, policy and practice domains that is characteristic for the two communities conceptualization… Rather, what counts as a 'scientific' issue and what counts as a 'policy-affair' is often the subject of active negotiations… the boundaries between domains are never as clear-cut as they may appear, as they are negotiated in practice (2014: 546).

Policy processes are inherently political processes, and therefore will always involve a politics of knowledge that is subject to negotiation and debate (Keeley and Scoones 2003). This is precisely the argument of Pittore *et al.* (this *IDS Bulletin*) when they state that there is rarely a direct linear relationship between research and policy change, and policy impact usually takes place over time and requires significant advocacy efforts, by which they mean 'negotiating and mediating a dialogue through which… ultimately decision makers take ownership of your ideas' (quoting Young and Quinn 2012: 26). Ely and Marin (this *IDS Bulletin*) make a similar argument when they discuss who was invited to participate in the Knowledge Network on seeds in Argentina, arguing that despite inviting actors with divergent and, in some cases, conflicting perspectives on the issue, their hope is that this process will ensure commitment and engagement from these actors in the future, and open up policy discussions that were previously not happening.

Finally, working in enduring partnerships also has implications for what we understand as impact, particularly when those partnerships are transdisciplinary. The way in which we 'mobilise knowledge' needs to change. Williams argues that researchers within development studies need to:

> re-evaluat[e] the role of the researcher. It is no longer sufficient to produce 'world-leading' academic articles in isolation: effective scholars, as imagined within impact evaluation practices, are also skilled in communicating their research to multiple audiences, and recognising, realising and evidencing the opportunities for their research to effect change in the wider world (2013: 232).

Researchers need to blur the lines between research and action in order to make their research useful and relevant (Benequista 2011). This is precisely the arguments made by all the contributions to this *IDS Bulletin*: Pittore *et al.* argue for working directly with policy advocates and makers; Dolan *et al.* argue for working in long-term

partnership with activists and civil society organisations; Ely and Marin argue for creating knowledge networks with diverse actors; Oosterhoff and Shephard argue for working with artists and media organisations; and Tandon *et al.* argue for universities to partner with community-based organisations. In all cases, it is because of the mutual impact these partnerships will have on all those involved, but also the potential impact such transdisciplinary partnerships have on the way knowledge is taken up by societal actors.

5 Building enduring partnerships

The term 'partnership' is used to cover a multitude of different arrangements, from those indicated previously – working together with policymakers and activists – to subcontracting a research partner, to agreeing a memorandum of understanding (MoU) with another institution, to receiving a grant from a funding institution. The term partnership often has implicit implications of equality, but this may hide significant inequalities and power relations in the partnerships we forge (Oswald 2016). However, the articles in this *IDS Bulletin* make it clear that in order to co-construct knowledge and mobilise for impact-orientated evidence, we need to work in partnerships.

As implied by the term 'enduring', we should be aiming to build durable, long-term and stable partnerships (Oswald 2016). Hoffman argues that this requires mutual respect, stating that when building partnerships, particularly with individuals and institutions outside academia, researchers:

> must recognize the extent to which discourse is inherently a dialogue rather than a monologue, a conversation requiring mutual respect and appreciation for the expertise of all sides. In order to succeed, academics need to accept that they do not have a monopoly on knowledge and expertise, and that engagement is a two-way learning process (2016: 86).

The term mutual interdependence implies that we want our partnerships to be reciprocal (Oswald 2016). This does not necessarily mean equal, because it is important to acknowledge that very few of our partnerships will be truly equal, and unequal power relationships will always create challenges for forging enduring partnerships (Strier 2011: 83). However, it does mean that partnerships must be seen as a two-way relationship in which both parties have an active role in shaping that partnership, and see benefit from being in that partnership (Oswald 2016).

Mutual interdependence also implies mutual accountability (*ibid.*). Kajner, Fletcher and Makokis remind us that this means we need to:

> think carefully about that for which they are accountable and those to whom they are accountable. These considerations are important when thinking about scholarly work with communities as well as when working with students and colleagues within the institution. When scholars enter into a shared ethical space and understand

the concept of relational accountability, they respect and embrace multiple worldviews and increase both the quality and quantity of relationships (2011: 267–8).

These principles, of mutual respect, reciprocity and accountability, are actually very challenging to uphold in research partnerships. This is highlighted by several of the contributions to this *IDS Bulletin*, which acknowledge the constraints to upholding these principles.

Dolan *et al.* (this *IDS Bulletin*) state that the three partners in their research were committed to developing the research framing and questions together, and moving away from the traditional roles that would have seen MOHRAU conceived as 'research subjects', RLP as the 'local logisticians', and IDS as the 'researchers'. This was to ensure that people had the right to have a say in the decisions that affected them (in this case research decisions). They argue that this kind of partnership requires an openness by all involved 'to learn from – and be impacted by – others within this collaboration', and that this was only possible because the partnership was 'not established within already preconceived parameters'. This is very rarely the case, as often research partnerships are established based on research proposals already designed and funded, or responding to calls for research agendas set elsewhere. In particular, Dolan *et al.* (this *IDS Bulletin*) argue that the kind of long-term engagement that such partnerships entail is extremely difficult to sustain given the funding environment which tends to focus on shorter-term project-based funding. However, they also reflect on how they managed to use smaller streams of funding to sustain their relationship, and they highlight the importance of funding arrangements to allow for space for collaborations to emerge.

Apgar *et al.* (this *IDS Bulletin*) also discuss how they tried to uphold principles of mutual respect, reciprocity and accountability. They document a partnership between the NGO Snowchange and the Skolt Sámi people in Finland that aimed to restore ecologically damaged parts of the Näätämö basin. This partnership was based on the Sámi as agents and co-researchers in the Arctic climate-change assessments, with Snowchange being a 'bridge' between the worlds of science and IK. They reflect that the Skolt Sámi gained a sense of power from seeing their language and culture valued in the research process, and the process actually had the effect of revitalising Sámi knowledge through the establishment of an archive. The institutional context for this research mattered, however, and Apgar *et al.* acknowledge that the historically undefined role of IK in Finland and the non-interference of state agencies created a safe space for the Sámi to lead this process.

Ely and Marin (this *IDS Bulletin*) emphasise the fact that the Transformative Knowledge Networks project, of which their two case studies were part, was built on pre-existing relationships between partners, where mutual trust had been established over a long period extending back many years. Dolan *et al.* (this *IDS Bulletin*) also discuss

the importance that the long-term and pre-existing relationship between partners played in their ability to work together in an enduring partnership, based on mutual trust.

Oosterhoff and Shephard (this *IDS Bulletin*) reflect on the challenges of a partnership between academics and creative artists, coming from different sectors with different ways of working. They argue that the fact that several members of the team had worked together previously and were prepared to be flexible contributed to its success. They note that these kinds of partnerships are time-consuming and iterative, and do not fit into neat project frameworks.

Tandon *et al.* (this *IDS Bulletin*) discuss a particular type of partnership as a way of supporting the co-construction of knowledge: community–university partnerships. The literature on community–university engagement is vast and diverse, and what counts as engagement varies considerably (Tandon, Hall and Tremblay 2015). It can cover outreach, community service, service-learning, community engagement, civic engagement, community-based research, and community–university partnerships (*ibid*: 8). Tandon *et al.* (2015) argue that it is only the latter two that address 'the role of academics and the knowledge production capacities of universities as a means to creating social change and structural change' (*ibid.*: 8). Tandon *et al.* (this *IDS Bulletin*) argue that the co-construction of knowledge in these partnerships is not easy, and they argue for five pedagogical principles to support community-based research within these partnerships: (1) an orientation towards ethics and values; (2) a deep understanding of power and partnerships; (3) multiple methods of enquiry; (4) participatory learning and balancing theory and practice; and (5) thinking about the role of the research as a facilitator.

Glover and Silka (2013) have argued that who initiates a partnership matters. Due to their knowing the funding environment, it is often universities and research institutions themselves that initiate partnerships with community organisations, NGOs, policymakers, etc based on accessing certain funds (Oswald 2016). The universities become gatekeepers to the funding, and this means that they get to set the agenda in terms of research topic and outcomes, and as a consequence the '… limitations, bias and subtle power differentials in such partnerships, never surface' (Glover and Silka 2013: 46).

A further reason for working through enduring partnerships is to ensure that our research has an impact. As already argued, through involving multiple actors in the research process (engagement), impact can start to be understood as something that happens throughout the research process. Therefore, who we partner with, and why, is integral to who our research impacts on. Pittore *et al.* (this *IDS Bulletin*) explain that they chose to work with regional networks who they believed would be influential in nutrition policy, and argue that by working through existing framings already being used in those networks, their research would be more likely to be used by policymakers. Ely and Marin (this *IDS Bulletin*) document

a knowledge network in the UK on sustainable agri-food systems that specifically partnered with producers and growers themselves in order to involve them directly in undertaking the research, thus hoping to impact directly on their growing practices, whilst also creating evidence of alternative business models to share with policymakers.

6 What does an 'engaged excellent' researcher look like?

As should be clear by now, research that adopts an engaged excellence approach is not business as usual. This approach has some very real implications for the way in which we as researchers work and correspondingly, the skills we need to have. Referring to a related set of arguments about integrated, co-produced science and policy in relation to the environment, Cornell *et al.* (2013: 68) argue that a researcher would need the following capabilities:

- Humility to recognise the limitations of one's own knowledge and perspectives in dealing with complex systems;

- Active inquiry and openness towards other systems of thought, disciplines and world views and other sources of knowledge and learning, both formal and informal;

- The ability to listen to others, being able to communicate in real, multi-way dialogues;

- A willingness to acknowledge that the partial knowledge that a researcher brings to the dialogue table will be transformed in the process, giving latitude to other contributors;

- Procedural, facilitation and management skills;

- The enthusiasm and ability to share knowledge and learn, rather than impose knowledge.

Engaged research necessarily requires negotiation with those who we partner and engage with, not just in the early stages of formation, but throughout. That negotiation needs to be undertaken in a reflexive way that respects and recognises the position, experience, knowledge and skills each party brings to the partnership (Oswald 2016). Therefore, we would add that researchers also need to be critically reflexive about their own position and power. Dolan *et al.* (this *IDS Bulletin*) make a similar argument, calling for a 'pedagogy of the undressed' (quoting Edström), in that research 'needs to challenge us to reflect on how we are a part of the structures we are aiming to change' (2015: 82). They call on us to have 'transformative dialogues' about what engaged excellence means with all our partners, and be alert to the politics of knowledge that we are enmeshed in.

Apgar *et al.* (this *IDS Bulletin*) reflect on the role that researchers can play as 'bridges' between science and IK, recognising that 'knowledge production is a social process embedded in power dynamics'. This means

that researchers need to be able to 'meaningfully navigate the interactions between fluid, embedded and intimate knowledges' (*ibid.*). They recognise that this role is not always a comfortable one for researchers to play, and they reflect on their own position in research processes as simultaneously guardians of knowledge, gatekeepers, and brokers, that required them to be cognisant of power relations – especially their own power.

This has particularly significant implications for the ethics of our research processes. Traditional ethical considerations in research tend to frame research in terms of researchers and 'subjects', focusing on the possible risks to those 'subjects'. The pillars of co-constructing knowledge and forging enduring partnerships challenge that framing, and call on us to think about the ethics of how we co-construct and partner with others in the creation of knowledge, and how we ensure that we are upholding the principles of cognitive justice. This requires new ways in which to think about our ethical commitments and accountability (Kajner *et al.* 2011).

All this has very real implications, not just for individual researchers and those they relate with in their work, but for the institutional structures in which research is embedded. The articles in this *IDS Bulletin* only begin to allude to these broader challenges, which include conventional structures of funding; of disciplinary and departmental divisions; of the different incentives often in place for academic researchers and practitioners; ethical frameworks that assume we have research 'subjects'; and norms and models that treat research and policy as separate. The articles in this *IDS Bulletin*, in exemplifying the norms and practices of engaged excellence, show that these challenges can be overcome – but this should not detract from ongoing work to address these more structural and institutional features of the research enterprise – something we are constantly seeking to reflect on and address ourselves with respect to our institutional practices at IDS.

7 Conclusion

Debates around what constitutes good quality research, how we co-construct knowledge, how our research has impact, and how we develop and maintain enduring partnerships – the four pillars of an engaged excellence approach – have been around a long time. There has been a tendency in the research field to discuss them separately. This introduction, and the articles in this *IDS Bulletin*, bring them together to show that they are interrelated and mutually dependent, as demonstrated in Figure 1.

The complexity and interrelationships become most real when we apply these pillars in practice. The value of this *IDS Bulletin* is that it helps us to see the challenges, trade-offs and difficulties of using such an approach, while at the same time, the exciting possibilities for contributing to a more cognitively just world in which our research engages with those at the centre of the change we collectively wish to see.

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