

Executive Summary: Knowledge Translation in the Global South: Bridging Different Ways of Knowing for Equitable Development

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This Executive Summary summarises findings from the longer Synthesis Report produced as part of the **Knowledge Translation (KT) in the Global South** research project. The project explores the KT strategies, practices and theories researchers and research intermediaries use in the global South, and the challenges they experience, and identifies the types of support required from research funders. You can read the full report here: ***Knowledge Translation in the Global South: Bridging Different Ways of Knowing for Equitable Development***.

Steering Group

Andrea Ordóñez, Southern Voice

The research sheds light on the need for a more inclusive approach to knowledge translation, emphasising the importance of local actors shaping their strategies and adapting them based on their contextual knowledge. For too long, we have relied on concepts that ignore the high levels of adaptation that take place in the day-to-day practice of knowledge translation in the global South. This thought-provoking report offers valuable recommendations for funders, empowering them to support effective structures and strategies to enable the use of research to respond to key policy challenges.



Vanesa Weyrauch, Purpose and Ideas

This study leads to a more inclusive and diverse understanding on how the global South, with its on-the-ground experience and wisdom, can increasingly contribute to the development of the knowledge translation field. The research team and IDRC have opened a door to new opportunities: for reflection, for support and hopefully for action.



Amédé Gogovor, Université Laval

It was an honour to be part of this inquiry that offers an exploration of knowledge translation theory and practices in the global South. Drawing on literature, dialogues and case studies, this report provides valuable insights for researchers, practitioners, policymakers and funders seeking to enhance knowledge translation efforts in diverse contexts.

**Owusu Boampong**, University of Cape Coast

It was such a great opportunity to be part of a multi-actor and multi-level inquiry on knowledge translation in the global South. This study evinces the complexities of knowledge translation and draws attention to organic and grass-roots structures that cannot strictly be explained by received models. For those of us in the global South, bridging different ways of knowing remains central.

**Rhona Mijumbi**, Makerere University and the Malawi-Liverpool-Wellcome Programme

This is a rare example of research that really makes the effort to try and decipher what, from a practical point of view, is knowledge translation and transfer in different contexts. My hope is that folks will read this important study not looking for all the answers, but letting it provoke an anxiety to ask themselves even more challenging questions about what we see as knowledge and knowledge processes in different contexts. This is how fields of research and practice get built.



Executive Summary

The single most common experience of knowledge translation... is around building bridges between different ways of knowing, while grappling with system-level inequities that go far beyond just the production and use of research.

The research

This study explores knowledge translation (KT) in the global South and provides recommendations for funders to support more effective structures and strategies for the use of research for equitable development. The year-long project explored the KT strategies, practices and theories researchers and research intermediaries use in the global South, and the challenges they experience, and identifies the types of support required from research funders.

The research methodology comprised: (1) a Learning Journey, or iterative and inclusive dialogue between the research team, the funder, and a steering group of researchers and practitioners from the global South; (2) a systemised exploratory review of the literature from the global South; and (3) primary research on the lived experience of KT actors, including researchers, knowledge brokers, research users and key opinion formers in this field.

Key learning

KT is narrowly defined and led by the global North

Concepts of KT, knowledge management and knowledge mobilisation appear to have remained oriented towards the priorities and perspectives of large aid donors and actors in the global North that have historically supported this field's application in the global South. Whereas KT in the South may be informal and indistinguishable from broader research processes, donors tend to focus on narrowly defined KT activities. This agenda has resulted in a sense of disempowerment for many researchers in the South. Case studies in the literature, key informant interviews and think pieces recommend that Southern researchers and knowledge intermediaries should shape their own KT approaches and strategies, informed by their own understandings of desirable outcomes and pathways to change. This requires funders to adopt a more nuanced understanding of KT that focuses on function or purpose (i.e. to facilitate use of evidence), rather than on narrowly defined activities or roles.

KT challenges and enablers are not unique to the global South

An underlying current of dissatisfaction or concern about KT is not a unique feature of the global South. Therefore, we need to differentiate the frictions that exist between academic scholarship and applied learning for social or economic impact from contestations that arise around the perceived imposition of KT agendas that are ill-suited to specific socio-political contexts in the South. Many dimensions of KT challenges and opportunities are not uniquely shaped by hemispheres. Opportunities exist to share learning across diverse geographies, while firmly anchoring KT support in particular socio-political environments. 'Othering' Southern KT practitioners or Southern exceptionalism may only deepen inequalities and cognitive bias.

Local and national actors must shape their own KT strategy

Those in the global South sometimes find the language of equitable research partnerships and co-production to be largely rhetorical. Some respondents struggled to see how KT was being integrated into research processes that align with the priorities of communities. Although recent movement towards the application of principles of equity in North–South research partnerships must be welcomed, in the longer term, decentralisation of research commissioning and leadership in parallel to global research collaboration and flows of funding will also be required to transform KT practice.

A holistic approach to supporting KT is required

The challenge for research donors and researchers is that the emphasis on getting evidence into use does not always deal with broader systemic issues that relate to institutional cultures, cognitive justice and epistemic inequalities, and ultimately to social justice. Concepts of knowledge ecosystems that sometimes accompany donor-driven approaches frequently underestimate political and cultural factors, as opposed to technical infrastructure and relationships, which are shaping dominant research and policy dialogues in particular contexts.

Doing KT in the global South is thus as much about bridging different ways of knowing as it is about the tools to mobilise knowledge. Given that the challenge of KT is less one of moving research into action and more broadly relates to the political economy of evidence production and use, this study suggests that funders and international partners who take a more holistic approach will enjoy more success. This means conceptualising KT as part of the broader research agenda and paying greater attention to context than to narrowly defined KT activities.

Valuing structural investment in research and KT

Every effort needs to be made to connect research commissioning and capacity support with networks of actors that are embedded in the politics of knowledge. Not all change requires new research – support for research intermediaries, networks and knowledge infrastructure is of equal importance to addressing global challenges. These approaches do not always require complex system-level interventions. Measures to support knowledge systems can focus beyond formal state infrastructures. In politically unstable or fast-changing environments, an emphasis on epistemic communities, civil society or informal policy networks and social movements may prove far more sustainable. This potentially extends concepts of KT and research uptake to include outcomes focused on building and strengthening networks, and creating bridges between different epistemologies or ways of knowing.

Bridging the gap between scholarship and practice on KT in the global South

Globally, the research fields concerned with the theories and practice of KT are highly fragmented, focused on the global North and disproportionately concerned with health. This literature fails to engage adequately with Southern perspectives on structural power, equity in knowledge systems, and cognitive justice. There is an opportunity to address these issues in low-income contexts, given the current demand for knowledge in this area. Some of the gaps in the literature we have identified could be addressed if the work was shaped and led by researchers embedded in the contexts being analysed. We need to look beyond generating case studies or evaluating specific programmes and consider what learning can be shared between sectors and regions.

Recommendations for funders

Create KT challenge funds and support institutionalisation of KT culture

Funders should empower researchers and their national and international partners to shape research design and determine their own change objectives. This could include challenge funds that allow research teams to shape their own plans for engaging research with policy or practice. They could do this by embedding these processes within Southern research institutions that take responsibility for assessing proposals and allocating resources. They should also diversify the range of actors who participate in designing calls and commissioning research, such as strategic partnerships with national research councils.

Co-develop culturally appropriate systems for KT monitoring and evaluation

Funders should play a key role by developing and valuing culturally and politically responsive indicators for KT monitoring, evaluation and learning. These must be sensitive to the iterative and informal nature of relationship, and trust-building, and what constitutes success in different contexts. Frameworks need to be grounded in broader and more nuanced understandings of KT that pay greater attention to function and purpose than to the delivery and impact of narrowly defined KT activities or roles.

Take a programme-level approach to supporting KT

Funders should take a more structured approach to supporting research systems. They should create more space for the co-production of research and change agendas, and cease to treat KT in isolation from broader issues and processes relating to equitable research partnerships, social movements, advocacy and governance. They should invest in programme-level knowledge mobilisation initiatives designed to facilitate evidence use that combine practical support around research synthesis and uptake with deliberation, led by researchers from the South, on pathways to change and structural barriers to KT in their context.

Strengthen research capacity and facilitate mutual learning

Funders can play a key role in facilitating mutual learning between KT actors. They should incorporate capacity-strengthening costs that cover a range of capabilities, from more traditional research communications, to community engagement and advocacy, to knowledge brokering and policy influencing.

Support multi-actor, multi-level networks for mobilising diverse forms of knowledge

Funders should take a more holistic approach to strengthening the capacity of multi-actor networks that have a common interest in solving a particular problem. Bilateral donors are in a unique position to broker relationships between their country missions or posts and regional offices, local researchers and knowledge intermediaries, governments, communities and global policy actors. Rather than supporting KT in isolation and solely in relation to specific research investments, address the broader issues that relate to evidence production and use.

Position Southern research for global learning and engagement

Funders can support Southern researchers to make their work more accessible on a global scale. Meaningful investment can connect local knowledge and research to global debates. Supporting Southern researchers to publish internationally and participate in global dialogues remains essential for both international science collaboration and more inclusive global policy.

Embrace complexity and risk

Donors should be willing to learn from failures and celebrate them as learning opportunities, creating a more authentic relationship with grantees. KT actors in the global South understand that change is non-linear, that major disruptions occur that derail research to policy and practice initiatives and that some successes are down to serendipity. By sharing a more realistic and contextualised understanding of KT, donors and Southern research communities can build more equitable, productive and impactful initiatives together.

Pioneer new understandings of how to make sense of and mobilise research evidence in diverse settings

Funders can support a research agenda based on the gaps in the literature and discussions in our Learning Journey that relate to questions around gender and social inclusion in the production and use of knowledge, challenging knowledge hierarchies, and conducting political economy analysis. This research looks at KT within a broader context of global and local challenges.



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