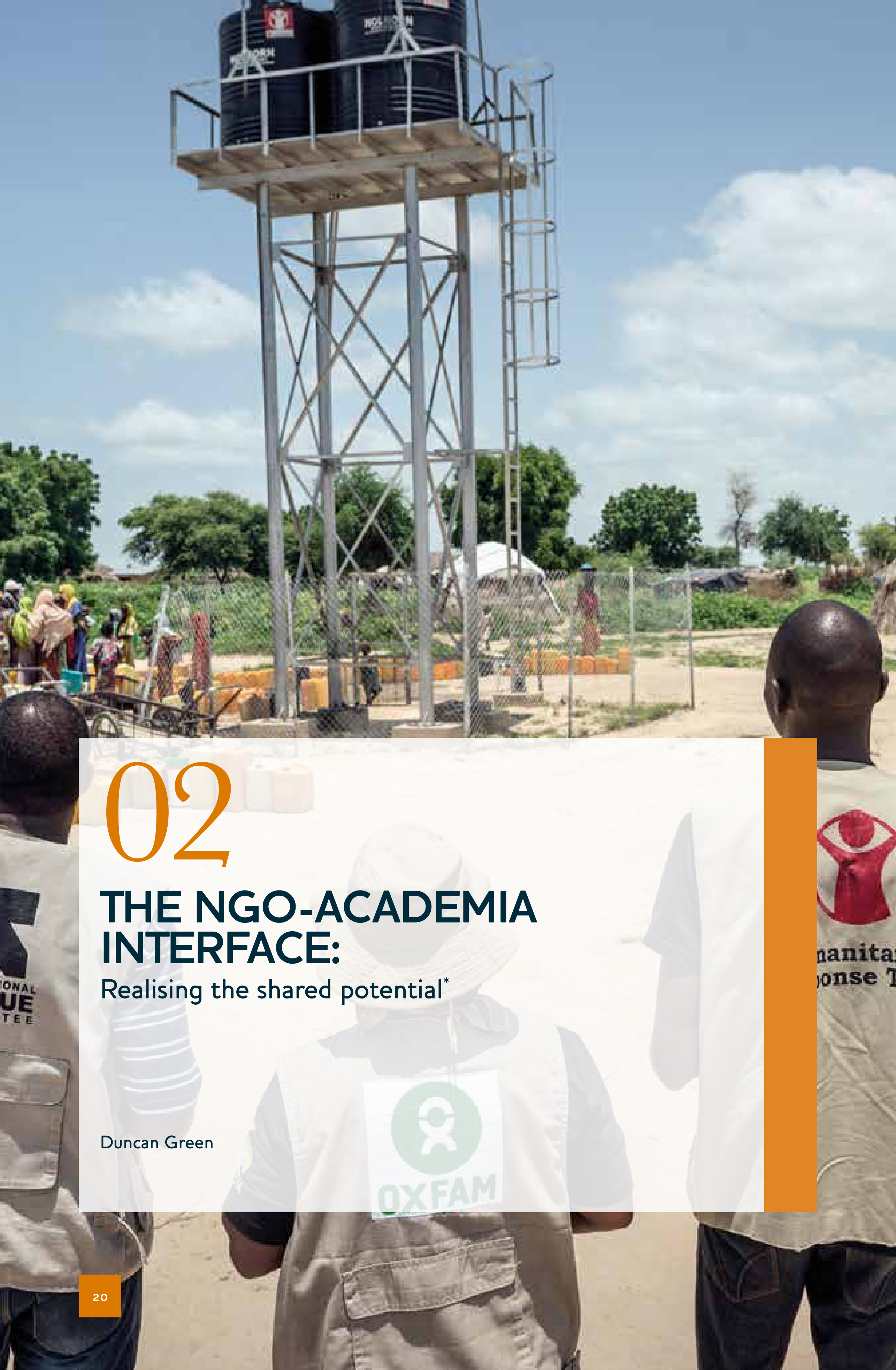

02

THE NGO-ACADEMIA INTERFACE:

Realising the shared potential*

Duncan Green

ABSTRACT

The case for partnership between international non-governmental organisations (INGOs) and academia for advancing development knowledge is strong and well-rehearsed. INGOs bring presence on the ground – through their own operations or long-term local partnerships – and communication and advocacy skills (which are not always academics' strong point). Academia contributes research skills and credibility, and a long-term reflective lens and systemic perspective that the more frenetic forms of operational work and activism often lack. In practice, however, such partnerships have proven remarkably difficult, partly because, if anything, INGOs and academia are *too* complementary – there is so little overlap between their respective worlds that it is often difficult to find ways to work together. This think-piece begins by outlining how each of the two camps thinks about and applies research before discussing some of the obstacles to cooperation. It concludes with suggestions for how to overcome such obstacles, setting out ideas for consideration by NGOs, academics and funders.

KEYWORDS

evidence, partnership, international development, non-governmental-organisation, international charity, INGO, research partnership, policy engagement.

BIOGRAPHY

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1. DIVIDED BY A COMMON LANGUAGE? HOW DO INGOS AND ACADEMICS SEE RESEARCH?

Whether you are an international non-governmental organisation (INGO) or an academic, research is more than simply the design of studies, the gathering of data or the writing up and dissemination of results. It is also about a wide range of associated activities – synthesising knowledge, bridging different audiences, co-creating and renewing ideas, forging new networks and relationships, building convincing stories and meanings, and creating and holding the space for public policy debate.

But there are also considerable differences. Even the word 'research' means different things to NGOs and academics. What NGOs do is often better viewed as evidence-based narrative than as primary research. Two-handed academics ('on the one hand; on the other') get frustrated with one-handed ('finger wagging') activists and vice versa. This easily tips over into mutual disrespect and finger pointing (if the metaphor isn't getting over-stretched).

INGOs are seldom interested in knowledge for its own sake, but as a vehicle to improve the impact of their programmes and advocacy in three broad areas: tactical research (reactive to broader events and policy agendas); formative research (setting new agendas and directions); and evaluative research (monitoring and evaluation, learning lessons).

But INGOs have a mixed record in such research: at its best it is rooted in real life, the experiences of partners and communities. From my own experience, Oxfam's work with IDS on the impact of the global financial crisis (Green, King and Miller-Dawkins 2010) or food prices (Scott-Villiers, Chisholm, Wanjiku Kelbert and Hossain 2016) stands out. INGOs have been pioneers on participatory methods; the research packs a punch both in content and in the ability of INGO media teams to make a media splash that gets it noticed. And they have a global constituency and reach that many academic researchers can only dream of.

However, INGO research is often stronger on qualitative methods than quantitative. While some of the monitoring and evaluation work in some organisations is cutting edge, other areas are sometimes a little slapdash in their methodology. Weak systems of peer review (and some confusion over what constitutes a 'peer') undermine credibility, while research suffers from short INGO attention spans, with few examples of research building up over years.

2. HOW DO ACADEMICS SEE RESEARCH?

Academics are often torn between idealism and pragmatism, juggling what they would like research to be with the daily pressures and incentives of university and research institutional set-up and incentives. Most academic researchers, at least in the social sciences, are interested in development issues and are very concerned that their research should engage with the public and make a difference. Building up a store of usable dynamic knowledge is a vital asset for any society – a genuine public good. However, funding for research is increasingly competitive, pressuring many researchers to adopt consultancy-style approaches to their work and risking a focus on the urgent over the important, and on donor interests and priorities over actual knowledge needs.

Academics tend to be interested in research as something to be done carefully and well, and in line with wider disciplinary debates and traditions. The reality of research is about chipping away at a coal face – it's important, but between breakthroughs it can be mundane, and you often do not know what you are going to find, or when. Few of the discoveries that have transformed development have been planned and intentional.

But academic incentives, increasingly influenced by research funding schemes such as the UK's Research Excellence Framework, require and reward evidence of 'impact' upon the world. Many academics are encouraged by such pressures to improve relevance and engagement, even if they object to overly simplistic ideas of 'impact'. The challenge is to be able to marry such pressures with the approach to furthering knowledge in an open-ended and exploratory way.

These differences in how research is understood are not superficial. They have their origins in the different organisational, professional and cultural systems that underpin the work of INGOs and academics. We can see these differences manifested in incentives, timescales, priorities and capacities (see Box 1).

THE OBSTACLES TO COLLABORATION

Impact versus publication. While funding incentives push academics towards collaboration with INGOs and other actors able to deliver the elusive 'impact', other disciplinary and career pressures appear to push in the opposite direction. The rather closed nature of academia's epistemic communities, buttressed by shared and often exclusive language and common assumptions, deters would-be collaborators, while the pressure to publish in peer-reviewed journals and acquire a reputation within a given discipline shifts incentives away from collaboration with 'outsiders'.

Urgency versus wait and see. INGOs' focus is urgent, immediate and often in response to events. They prefer moving quickly and loudly – reaching as many people as possible, and influencing them – without necessarily having time for slower forms of academic engagement. Academics work to a different rhythm, both in terms of the issues and in the way they respond to them. When Oxfam won some research funding with the Institute of Development Studies to explore food price volatility (Scott-Villiers *et al.* 2016), it was top of our advocacy agenda, but food prices calmed down, the campaigns spotlight moved on, and the resulting research, though interesting, struggled to stay connected to Oxfam's evolving agenda.

For small NGOs, whether national or international, research support is absent when it is most needed – during the design and implementation of projects. Instead, researchers often only show up when the organisation has developed some 'good practice' and then only to document the outcomes.

Status quo versus originality. INGOs do need good research to tell them what is going well or badly, what they need to do more of, less of etc. But also (and increasingly) they need targeted research to help prove to donors that they are value for money. This often means validating the status quo. Researchers on the other hand may be looking to find a new angle, move a debate on and make a name for themselves among their peers. These agendas can occasionally be complementary, but in practice often lead to tension, with INGOs experiencing researchers as unhealthily preoccupied with 'taking down' success stories and attacking aid agencies' performance and legitimacy, often on the flimsiest of evidence (Green 2012).

Thinking versus talking. Research is very underfunded in INGOs and is distributed across organisations. In Oxfam GB, the policy research team behind its high-profile research papers on inequality for Davos (see, for example, Oxfam 2016), and other impressive work, has eight staff. By contrast, the Oxfam Head of Research, Irene Guijt, has calculated that, countries belonging to the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development are now home to 5.5 million full-time academics.[2] There are lots of smart researchers working elsewhere within Oxfam – on programme monitoring, evaluation, learning, or doing research as part of their advocacy roles – but even then, by one calculation, across the whole of Oxfam International research staff come to just 7 per cent of communications staff (a cynic might therefore say we prize talking 14 times more than thinking). Hardly surprising, then, that it is really hard for INGOs to engage with academics, even if it's just to organise meetings to share ideas and explore common interests.

3. HOW DO INGOS AND ACADEMICS INFLUENCE POLICY AND PRACTICE?

The avowed purpose of much research activity by both academics and INGOs is to influence decision-making by policymakers and practitioners. But the evidence for effectiveness of these efforts is remarkably thin, in terms of both the supply of influential research and the demand for it. As INASP has found:

> There is a shortage of evidence on policy makers' actual capacity to use research evidence and there is even less evidence on effective strategies to build policy makers' capacity. Furthermore, many presentations highlighted the insidious effect of corruption on use of evidence in policy making processes. Research-evidence is often used opportunistically to back up pre-existing political decisions/opinions (confirmation bias) (Newman, Capillo, Famurewa, Nath and Siyanbola 2013).

The evidence that does exist is not always encouraging. According to a report by the Carnegie UK Trust:

> Evidence from university research was the most trusted (always or usually trusted by 68% of respondents), but one of the least-used sources of evidence (frequently used by only 35% of respondents). Instead, evidence tended to be gleaned from the internet and the media, even though these sources were much less trusted. Third-sector organisations' research (and especially that of think tanks) was less trusted than university research, but their outputs were more likely to be read than those from academia (Shucksmith 2016).

Public officials value individual contacts and reputations – 'experts' who can advise, rather than documents to plough through in search of useful titbits. As one former civil servant comments:

> we rarely used academic work, mainly because (1) we were not aware of it, (2) turgid writing (that is very off-putting to people who are under severe time pressure), or (3) the failure of the research to take into account real world issues like political constraints, budgets, etc so that any conclusions lacked credibility or usefulness (Robin Ford, comment on blog, Green 2016a).

Some universities are taking steps to close this academic–policymaker divide by involving policymakers in the governance of research institutes and programmes (e.g. in honorary positions, or on advisory boards and reference groups). There is also growing interest among policymakers for using academics as a source of active learning. In the Philippines, for example, two of the main universities have set up executive courses for the new (and often younger) members of parliament (MPs) to learn from experienced scholars. These are MPs that may have had little experience in politics and policymaking, and the courses prepare them for their new role.

When the courses started, the new MPs were reluctant to participate or did not want the media to know, as they feared participating in the courses would be seen as an admission of ignorance. With time, however, these courses have become almost fashionable, with new MPs eagerly publicising their award certificates as a statement of accomplishment.

4. THE IMPLICATIONS OF SYSTEMS THINKING

Some of the problems that arise in the academic–INGO interface stem from overly linear approaches to what is in effect an ideas and knowledge *ecosystem*. In such contexts, systems thinking can help identify bottlenecks and suggest possible ways forward.

4.1 Getting beyond supply and demand to convening and brokering

Supply-driven is the norm in development research – 'experts' churning out policy papers, briefings, books, blogs etc. Being truly demand-driven is hard even to imagine – an NGO or university department submitting themselves to a public poll on what should be researched? But increasingly in areas such as governance or value chains, we try and move beyond both supply and demand to a convening/brokering role, bringing together different 'unusual suspects' – what would that look like in research? Action research, with an agenda that emerges from an interaction between communities and researchers? Natural science seems further ahead on this point: when the Dutch National Research Agenda ran a nationwide citizen survey of research questions they wanted science to look at, 12,000 questions were submitted and clustered into 140 questions, under seven or eight themes. To the organisers' surprise, many citizens asked quite deep questions.[3]

Most studies identify a need for 'knowledge brokers' not only to bridge the gap between the realms of science and policy, but also to synthesise and transform evidence into an effective and usable form for policy and practice, through a process akin to alchemy. An essential feature of knowledge brokers is that they understand the cultures of both worlds. Often, this role is performed by third-sector organisations of various types (from lobbyists to thinktanks to respected research funders). Some academics can transcend this divide. A few universities employ specialist knowledge brokers, but their long-term effectiveness is often constrained by low status, insecure contracts and lack of career pathways. Whoever plays this crucial intermediary role, it appears that it is currently under-resourced within and beyond the university system. In the development sector, the nearest thing to an embedded gateway is the Governance and Social Development Resource Centre (GSDRC),[4] run by Birmingham University and IDS and largely funded by the Department for International Development. It conducts literature and evidence reviews on a range of topics, drawing evidence from both academic literature and non-academic institutions.

4.2 Critical junctures

Anyone involved in advocacy knows that the openness of policymakers to new ideas is episodic, and linked to things such as changes of administration, scandals, crises and failures, known in the political science literature as critical junctures. Currently, thinktanks are reasonably good at responding to the windows of opportunity presented by such moments, updating and repackaging previous research for newly attentive policymakers or providing rapid informed commentary (see, e.g. on Brexit, Collin and Juden 2016; ODI 2016). In contrast, universities are often much more sluggish, trapped by the long cycle of research and dissemination, and with few incentives to drop or adapt existing work to respond to new opportunities. What would need to change in terms of incentives or leadership to make universities as agile as thinktanks?

4.3 Precedents: history and positive deviance

The development community spends little time thinking about what has already worked, either historically or today. Research could really help fill in historical gaps, whether on campaigns (Green 2015a) or redistribution (Green 2015b). It also makes little use of 'positive deviance' approaches, which identify positive outliers: where good things are already happening in the system, for example identifying and studying villages with lower than average rates of maternal mortality and then trying to find out why.[5]

4.4 Feedback, adaptation and course correction

In systems, initial interventions are likely to have to be tweaked or totally overhauled in light of feedback from experience or events. Yet both academics and INGOs still portray their research papers as tablets of stone – the last word on any given topic. Digital technology allows us to make them all 'living documents', subject to periodic revision. At the very least, publishing drafts of all papers for comments both improves quality and builds bridges between researchers, practitioners and policymakers, as the author has discovered on numerous occasions.

4.5 Engage with whole systems not just individuals

Reflecting on Oxfam's Make Trade Fair campaign in the early 2000s, Muthoni Muriu concluded:

> you need to engage different policy makers, on different aspects of the same policy, sometimes in different geographies, to create the sort of critical mass that will drive conversation and hopefully decisions in the desired direction. One or two 'validation' workshops or conference won't do it. Our experience… was that we needed to speak with technocrats in the Ministries of Agriculture, Trade, Planning and Foreign affairs, relevant embassy trade advisers (and ambassadors) in Brussels and Geneva; trusted policy institutions; random academics working for CIDA/SIDA/DFID etc who had connections with said ministries; equally random World Bank/IMF/EU commission folks in-country; friendly journalists etc etc… to get the Minister of Trade to take a position on one policy recommendation! (Comment on blog, Green 2013).

5. WHAT TO DO?

Based on all of the above, a number of ideas emerge for consideration by academics, INGOs and funders of research.

5.1 Suggestions for academics

Comments on the blogposts that formed the basis for this article provided a wealth of practical advice to academics on how to work more productively with INGOs. These include the following:

- Create research ideas and proposals collaboratively. This means talking to each other early on, rather than academics looking for NGOs to help their dissemination, or NGOs commissioning academics to undertake policy-based evidence making.
- Don't just criticise and point to gaps – understand the reasons for them (gaps in both NGO programmes and their research capacity) and propose solutions. Work to recognise practitioners' strengths and knowledge.
- Make research relevant to real people in communities. This means proper discussions and dialogue at design, research and analysis stages, disseminated drafts and discussing findings locally on publication.
- Set up reflection spaces in universities where NGO practitioners can go to take time out for days, weeks or months, and can be supported to reflect on and write up their experiences, network with others and gain new insights on their work.
- Catalyse more exchange of personnel in both directions. Universities could replicate the author's 'Professor in Practice' position at the London School of Economics and Political Science,[6] while INGOs could appoint honorary fellows, who could help guide their thinking in return for access to their work.

5.2 Suggestions for INGOs

In addition to collaborating in the ways discussed above, INGOs could encourage cooperation by:

- Being open about their knowledge base, especially the large amount of data collected while monitoring and evaluating their projects. Oxfam now makes its impact evaluation survey data free to download (Lombardini 2016).
- Finding cost-effective ways of cooperating through long-term but loose networks maintained over time, which can be activated when necessary (e.g. in response to events or new priorities). This is less time intensive than establishing dense and time-consuming networks that often peter out for lack of resources.
- Setting up arm's length collaborative watchdogs on particular institutions or issues with a research function, that maintains a network of academics and activists, as well as maintaining institutional knowledge. Good examples are the Bretton Woods[7] Project or Control Arms.[8]

- Building bridges at all levels of the knowledge 'food chain': INGOs need to go beyond the academic big names and conference attractions to build links with early career researchers. For example, Transparency International has set up a programme called Campus for Transparency that match-makes a Transparency International chapter or staff member who has a specific research need with a university MA programme or student who would then deliver this specific research product as part of their study requirement. PhD students can be involved along similar lines, provided the issues identified are sufficiently core to the INGOs' work that they will not be made redundant by shifting priorities before the thesis is even written!

5.3 Suggestions for funders

By insisting on evidence of impact, and supporting partnerships and consortia involving both researchers and practitioners, governments and aid donor funders already contribute significantly to bridging the academic–INGO divide. But they could do more, including the following:

- Innovative financing – for example, offering 50/50 funding, half for programmes on the ground and half for research. At the moment donors seem to fund one or the other (research with a few links to practitioners, or programmes with a bit of money for monitoring, evaluation and learning), which misses a chance to foster deeper links.
- They could also fund intermediary organisations with a mandate to build bridges between the two worlds. According to the Carnegie UK report:

  Numerous studies reveal that people and small businesses outside universities find them impenetrable institutions. A member of the public or a community or voluntary organisation seeking a relevant point of contact in a university to discuss their research-related query often encounters a huge, incomprehensible organisation whose website is structured according to supply-side logic (faculties, departments, degree programmes) rather than according to demand considerations or user needs.

  (Shucksmith 2016: 33).

6. CONCLUSION

INGOs and academics working on development share many aims and values in pursuing goals of human progress and justice. However, because of a number of differences described here, their interactions often add up to less, not more, than the sum of the parts. Overcoming the obstacles to more productive collaboration requires both a change of mindset and new thinking and approaches to the roles and structures of both academic and practitioner institutions. Research funders and aid donors play an important role in nudging both sides towards more effective engagement, but could do more. The prize on offer is significant – nothing less than a step change in the knowledge and effectiveness of the aid and development sector.

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ENDNOTES

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