A Consultation Paper for the DFID Funded 'Implementing Quality Education in Low Income Countries' Research Programme Consortium (RPC)

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Capacity Strengthening and Evaluation Within International Research Collaboration
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Introduction

This consultation paper is designed to contribute to the development of the RPC capacity strengthening strategy as an accessible guide to selected key issues and to the related literature. Particular focus is given to the research and evaluation capacity dimension of the RPC in the light of the comparative and international literature and the author's own work in this area. The text is not meant to provide a definitive or comprehensive review – though for more in-depth material readers are referred to chapters 2, 3 and 6 in the recent volume published by Symposium Books in Oxford: *Research and Evaluation for Educational Development. Learning from the PRISM Experience in Kenya* (Crossley, et al, 2005).

Conceptual Considerations

Conceptualising Capacity Strengthening

The concept of capacity strengthening (or capacity development) is not new to those familiar with the international development literature. Priority has been given to such concepts by international development organisations, researchers and national ministries and agencies (in all sectors) from the outset of the post World War II decolonisation process. Success in practice, however, has been elusive and many analysts continue to report 'a lack of capacity' as a major obstacle to development. In the field of education, Samoff (1999) thus challenges orthodox conceptions and perspectives by asking why this remains so after decades of effort and investment. Problematising the contemporary discourse further, Webster (1997) (writing from a Papua New Guinean perspective) identifies a 'myth of incapacity' in the literature. He goes on to suggest that many international agencies use the concept of capacity strengthening to maintain control by perpetuating a misleading view that low-income countries are unable to analyse and address their own problems.

These concepts are therefore often highly contested, they have varied interpretations and they deserve careful and critical attention from the outset. Some see capacity strengthening as one of a suit of strategies for promoting good governance (Grindle 1997, p 6; Cohen 1993, p 26), capacity strengthening efforts should be 'narrow, operational and problem-solving oriented' directed primarily at civil servants. Fredricksen (2005), a former adviser to the World Bank argues that:

> To ensure long-term impact, technical support must be provided in a way that *helps develop national capacity.* There is no panacea for achieving this. However, the *focus* must be on providing continued, punctual technical support that helps mobilise, motivate, utilise and retain *existing* national capacity, rather than on providing long-term external technical assistance that often results in substituting for, rather than strengthening, existing capacity.

For others the term capacity strengthening is broadly defined and synonymous with the concept of development itself. The term therefore has a powerful role in legitimising external influence and involvement, precisely because the concept appears so constructive. The purposes for which capacity is being developed are rarely interrogated and important assumptions about the nature and implications of capacity-building are rarely problematised.

Civil society organisations such as trade unions, non-governmental organisations, churches and community groups have also provided much impetus for good governance and capacity building. Indeed, partly in response to the deterioration of education, health and welfare services resulting from structural adjustment policies throughout sub-Saharan Africa, many people at the grass-roots level have demanded more participation in decision-making and greater attention to the strengthening of democracy and human rights. In contrast to Cohen's (1993: 26) narrow definition, the term capacity building is thus also used to mean efforts to involve civil society more firmly in development processes, with the intention of promoting advocacy and democratic participation in decision-making. Oxfam's motivation for capacity building, for instance, is to enable women and men to "strengthen their ability to overcome the causes of their exclusion and suffering" (Eade 1997, p 24). See also NETF (2005). A comparison of these various perspectives certainly demonstrates that the term

capacity building can have different meanings, each resulting in different activities and serving different purposes.

Understanding the implications of the above issues is important in developing the aims, objectives and rationale for the capacity strengthening dimension of the RPC. However, a sound foundation already exists in initial RPC documents that identify different types and levels of capacity. To cite the project proposal document:

> A key programme objective is that African consortium members become regional centres of excellence in one or more areas of education quality. The consortium will develop the skills base of African partner institutions in research methods, administrative support for research and project leadership and management. The consortium will focus on strengthening the capacity of women particularly to lead and manage project activities (University of Bristol 2005, p 9).

The levels and types of capacity strengthening that are identified in the proposal including administrative; project management; research; government and NGO agencies; and schools and communities, are well targeted. Further work, in the light of the present contribution, is, nevertheless, needed to draw attention to additional issues; to the complexities of translating interventions into successful practice; to the importance of greater acknowledgement of different 'ways of knowing' in cross-cultural research; and to the potential dilemmas of the international transfer of research theories and methodologies – in addition to policies and practices. In exploring these and other issues further it is now appropriate to focus more directly upon research and evaluation capacity strengthening.

Research and Evaluation Capacity

The term research capacity also has multiple meanings and these result in different strategies and priorities being proposed by those engaged in research and evaluation initiatives. In much development discourse, we can see how the concept of research capacity has become closely connected to ideas about knowledge for development (World Bank 1998). Alternatively, King (1991) has described research capacity building as a "new aid strategy". One mainstream definition represents research capacity as:

> a subset of human resource capacity particularly concerned with the sustained ability of individuals, organisations, and nations to identify important basic and applied problems and to collect, process, analyse, and disseminate information that addresses them ... Having research capacity means being able to sustain over time these processes of identification, implementation and linkage (Trostle et al 1997: 71).

The concept of research capacity can thus be situated within the broader development agendas of capacity building and good governance. In many ways it is possible to see how straightforward and unproblematic this concept appears to the uncritical eye. Yet, significantly for this RPC initiative, most definitions focus on a rather traditional and positivistic notion of research as an orderly sequence of collecting, processing, analysing, and disseminating information. Such conceptualisations do not, however, problematise how the focus for investigation is assessed, who plans such studies, or who is able to engage in research and from what perspectives. There can, indeed, be different types of research and evaluation capacity to develop!

A central argument that emerges from this review is, therefore, that the meaning of research capacity is highly contested, because of assumptions about what constitutes research and knowledge, and who has the power to define this. Indeed, studies of the concept of research capacity are useful because they draw attention to the need to define what is or is not knowledge for development (see Holmes and Crossley 2004). This is clearly a highly contested term that means different things to different people and one that is constantly being shaped by political and economic interests. Studies of the meaning and potential of educational research capacity are thereby important and highly pertinent for all involved in international development activities.

It can also be argued that dominant 'ways of knowing' prioritise certain western conceptions of research to the extent that 'local' expertise, knowledge, and modes of meaning making are marginalised. Furthermore this is seen by some analysts to have hampered the formation of new theoretical perspectives within the South (Buchert 1998; Buchert and King 1995, 1996).

Educational research in the South has, therefore, long experienced tensions between those who see it as the key to progress and modernization, and those who see it as an inherently neo-colonial process,

dominated by international policy agendas and external knowledge systems and ways of knowing. Related debates about the role of science and technology in development can thus be seen to underpin much contemporary thinking in the arenas of educational and social research in developing world contexts. Indeed, they are integral to much writing about alternative development and post-development visions and strategies (Nederveen-Pierterse 1996; Odora Hoppers 2001).

One important and increasingly influential theoretical perspective to emerge from Southern scholars (albeit often from those working in the North) is postcolonial theory (Tikly 1999). This can help deconstruct deeply held assumptions, and it can offer new ways of thinking about research capacity, along with alternative ways of conceptualising the research process and development itself (see, for example, Crossley and Tikly 2004). There is, for example, growing interest in the potential of non-Western forms of knowledge. The articulation between Western science and traditional knowledge systems as a means of understanding power relations is also integral to the postcolonial project (Dirlik 1997). Scholars working within other research paradigms have reached similar conclusions. The information scientist, Fanie de Beer, of the University of South Africa, for example, has noted that attempts to impose Western models of research on nations in the South have often resulted in deadlock. From this perspective, special formulas are needed, based on "a productive integration of different forms of knowledge including 'non-Western and non-scientific forms'" (cited in (Braun, Glanzel and Schubert 1999). Other natural scientists are beginning to recognise that "informal research and traditional wisdom should also be considered as a valuable part of the knowledge system" (Cetto, Francisco and Gebremedhin 1996, p 27). These knowledges might include, for example, traditional medicine, agricultural practices, customs and folk culture expressed in narratives, fables, songs and dance. The large, multilateral development agencies have thus begun to give more attention to the value of indigenous knowledge in recent years. However, most agency reports and publications regard indigenous knowledge as a useful product, and rarely explore its implications for the research process itself. Louisy applies such questions directly to ways in which the quality of education is defined in low income countries (2004). This should be directly helpful for the RPC.

For one postcolonial scholar, Tuhiwai-Smith (1999, p 1), the term research is "inextricably linked to European imperialism and colonialism". For her, the history of Western research, and the development of the academic disciplines can be traced back to the colonial era and in this sense it is not as culturally, economically or politically neutral as many social and natural scientists would claim. For example, the research process itself may be considered as inherently exploitative, extracting knowledge and time from indigenous peoples and offering little in return.

In framing the work of the RPC the significance of such arguments deserves concerted attention if the research carried out is to be more effectively grounded in the needs and priorities identified by African communities and stakeholders.

Key Issues

While many attempts are currently underway to strengthen educational research and evaluation capacity within the South, RPC initiatives must also remember that the nature and purpose of Western social and educational research is also being critiqued and redefined in various ways. Care must thus be taken to ensure that efforts to strengthen research and evaluation capacity in low income countries take account of, and are responsive to, these debates, and especially to those challenges that are sensitive to cultural and contextual differences.

In their book, *Informed Dialogue: using research to shape education policy around the world,* Reimers and McGinn (1997: 25), for example, suggest that since research-based knowledge is constructed within specific value frameworks, policy decisions cannot be based solely on research-based evidence. Instead they advocate "informed dialogue", across cultural boundaries. "Research can bring fresh air and new perspectives, but it has to be incorporated into a process of communication so that it informs the meanings of this collective construction of education problems and options" (1997: 26). The consideration of alternative policy options, they argue, "should take place not within the simplified environment of the analyst but in the real world where concrete persons and groups express these multiple interests" (1997: 27). This resonates to some extent with the findings of Gibbons et al (1994), that knowledge production is increasingly characterised by the collaboration of different stakeholders and by a flow back and forth between the theoretical and the practical. The RPC has been designed with some understanding of these issues but their ongoing importance is highlighted here – and deserves foregrounding in further documentation.

A core challenge for any research and development initiative is, therefore, for it to achieve both a local and global analysis of educational issues, drawing upon local and global resources, knowledge and expertise. Thus, while such efforts are underway to reconceptualise approaches to international and comparative research in education (Crossley 1999; Crossley and Watson 2003), and there is currently a high level of introspection in the social research community, it is especially important to "rethink the place of knowledge and research in the increasingly complex processes of global development" (Mundy 1997: 343).

There is also currently much written about the knowledge revolution, knowledge management, knowledge societies and knowledge stock in the educational development discourse. These are all concepts that have wide ranging implications for research capacity building, and indeed for the future of social and educational research worldwide. Interest in knowledge for development has certainly been gaining ground over recent years (World Bank 1998) and since the World Bank declared itself a Knowledge Bank it has also proudly created a Global Knowledge Network. Knowledge is thus increasingly regarded as a commodity, legitimised by its value in world markets, as much as for its public worth. Our RPC is designed to strengthen local knowledge production within this globalising world.

The United Kingdom's DFID also increasingly prioritises knowledge sharing and holds the following rationale for research capacity building.

> Research is an important weapon in the fight against poverty. Without research, many development interventions would fail or be much less successful; and research has significant multiplier effects - solutions to the causes of poverty in one part of the developing world may well be replicable in another. The principle of shared knowledge is an important component of the partnerships that are essential to development (DFID 1997 p 48).

Perhaps in recognition of the increasing commodification of knowledge, the current British Government's Second White Paper on International Development, recognises that:

> Most research and development capacity is in developed countries and is oriented to their needs. Research that benefits the poor is an example of a global public good which is underfunded. Not enough of the world's knowledge is relevant for the needs of the poor (DFID 2000, p 43).

Having said this, the question of what constitutes pro-poor knowledge and research is contentious. Yet, this is important precisely because research traditions and universities in the former colonies were, as we have noted earlier, generally modelled on the administrative structures and academic traditions of institutions in the metropolitan countries with all the problems that this entails (Ashby 1966). It is therefore pertinent to ask to what extent these models and institutions have been able to contribute to the capacity of developing countries to critically engage with international policy agendas and to chart their own development paths (Bourne and Davenport 2000). In 'sharing' western research and policy experience with RPC partners these issues need to be kept closely in mind.

The role of research and evaluation in the development process has therefore been increasingly acknowledged in recent years – but the need for more context sensitive strategies, that can contribute more effectively to the relevance and sustainability of educational innovations, still demands concerted attention. This generates possibilities for new kinds of enquiry, including more participatory and collaborative methodologies in social and educational research and evaluation. Such proposals often challenge the conventional relationship between the researcher and the researched. As development increasingly becomes understood as a complex socio-cultural process, rather than as the technical application of planned inputs for predictable outputs, new epistemological questions are also raised about how development processes can best be researched and evaluated. Linking their practical experience of agricultural, forestry and fisheries programmes, with advanced contemporary social theory, Mosse, Farrington and Rew (1998), for example, consider the changing information needs faced by development agencies as they shift beyond technology-led project approaches. In focusing on the unintended outcomes, the unmanageable element, the local variability of effects, and the importance of social and human relationships, such authors challenge simplistic managerial models and suggest research, evaluation and development strategies that acknowledge, explore, and positively engage with cultural differences, the unexpected and diversity in the development process.

A growing awareness of such issues has, for some time, stimulated efforts by some international agencies to emphasise the strengthening of national research and evaluation capacity within the South,

and to promote more genuine and collaborative partnerships (NORAD 1995; Buchert and King 1996). There are indeed many examples of successful initiatives, and a now burgeoning literature on partnerships for development. Yet, as Bray (2000) observes, "some statements about partnerships are rather idealistic, and they are not always grounded in empirical reality" (2000: 5). Bray identifies several important rationales for engaging in partnerships, such as sharing experience and expertise, providing mutual support, a division of labour, sharing resources, an increased sense of ownership and extended reach. Partnerships can also increase the sum of knowledge and bring multiple perspectives to bear on a situation, thus potentially increasing the effectiveness of development initiatives. Most pertinently for the present study, working in partnership can offer a way to access a wider range of feedback, which can contribute the knowledge needed to improve the relevance and sustainability of development projects and programmes. In other words, improved partnerships between stakeholders at all levels can help to strengthen research monitoring and evaluation capacity in ways consistent with the principles of sustainable development.

Like participatory approaches, research partnerships emphasise the process of collective knowledge generation. International partnerships have the extra advantage of bringing comparative and cross-cultural perspectives to bear on local situations. Although well established in the natural sciences, collaborative research partnerships have only recently become more acceptable in social and educational research. As Hareide (1998) points out, the processes of globalisation are making the "education and research sectors increasingly open to international cooperation and to participation in international development programs". With the growth of electronic mail, the internet and an internationally mobile population, the advancement of North-South research partnerships is also both more organisationally realistic and politically desirable.

Collaborative research can also significantly strengthen the validity of cross-cultural studies and, by incorporating the agendas, priorities and interpretations of insiders, research findings have the potential to be more meaningful and helpful for policy-makers (see various articles written from the perspective of different low income countries in Crossley and Vulliamy 1997). Unlike some participatory approaches, where the emphasis is on assisting the poor within a donor-recipient aid paradigm, research partnerships, as understood here, set out to be mutually beneficial to all partners. Ideally the interests of all are openly acknowledged, and, together with an assessment of the relative attributes of each partner, this can strengthen ongoing collaboration.

Conclusions

In focussing upon the Terms of Reference for the present consultation, conclusions are presented here in accessible bullet points relating to 'common mistakes' and successful experience. These are drawn from the various bodies of literature identified above, and from experience derived from a series of DFID funded collaborative research initiatives involving the writer and the University of Bristol between 1993 and 2005. In many ways the process (research and evaluation capacity) goals for the current RPC build upon the GSoE's long and distinguished tradition of work in international development, and upon these longitudinal and collaborative research capacity strengthening experiences in Kenya with SPRED I (Kenyatta University 1995); Belize for the Primary Education Development Project (Crossley and Bennett 1997); Tanzania and Rwanda on Globalisation and Skills for Development (Tikly, Lowe, Crossley, Dachi, Garrett and Mukabaranga 2003); and Kenya for PRISM (Crossley, Herriot, Waudo, Mwirotsi, Holmes and Juma 2005). This cumulative experience with international research partnerships should help greatly in positioning the RPC intellectually and organisationally.

Some Common Mistakes and Insights from Successful Experience

For the sake of clarity a limited number of summary points are listed here – but readers are referred to the text above and to the following references for more detail.

- While much about capacity strengthening can be learned from the international literature this must be done without falling prey to the dangers of the uncritical international transfer that the field of comparative and international research in education has long emphasised (see Crossley and Watson 2003). The international literature is replete with examples of the simplistic and unsuccessful international transfer of educational policy and practice.

- In a related way the uncritical transfer of research theories and methodologies from one cultural context to another is equally problematic – and this deserves especially careful consideration for the RPC in the light of the above. Vulliamy (2004), for example, highlights the dangers

embedded in the global transfer of contemporary western preferences for systematic reviews and randomised controlled trials.

- The dangers of the dominance of western knowledge in cross-cultural/international research and development can be seen in the above points. However, the pace of change generated by the 'western clock' is a further issue that is now beginning to be identified as problematic in such contexts. If human capacity development is to be sustainable, successful experience suggests that genuine (often long term) partnerships are essential – and these need more time to develop than most development initiatives acknowledge. Research is indeed a human and 'social-process'.

- While attention to process goals (strengthening of research capacity) may be supported – this often has implications for product goals, the achievement of deadlines and the quality of outputs. Tensions between product and process goals can therefore emerge as major issues in this approach to research. This will need careful and ongoing attention.

- Specific guidelines for good practice in terms of international partnerships and capacity-building in international research and development can be found in KFPE (1998) and Crossley and Holmes (2001).

- In international development work research capacity strengthening is too often seen as a one way, and one size fits all, process. Context sensitive international research, however, requires capacity strengthening in all partners – in the North as well as the South. This is where contributions for specialist comparativists have much to offer – and where much learning from southern partners and about their concerns, perspectives and contexts is essential. The implications of this experience are vital for the RPC.

- Theoretical perspectives that marginalize indigenous knowledge, local ways of knowing and the politics of international development often fail to understand or deal with perceived 'barriers' to successful implementation. And successful experience in both research and development requires especially close attention to the processes of implementation.

- Dialogue as Reimers and McGinn (1997) and Samoff (1999) argue is too often limited in scope and depth. Research on its own does not shape educational policy – 'informed dialogue' across cultural and professional boundaries reflects a more complex relationship – and one that should be central to RPC processes. But, on this, I cannot conclude better than to cite Samoff (1998, p 24) who emphasises that "what is required is genuine dialogue among partners who not only talk but also listen and hear".

- Participatory and collaborative research strategies that involve practitioners have proved responsive to local needs, though such qualitative traditions often remain difficult to legitimise in policy arenas in low income countries. But it is through such initiatives that direct linkages and partnerships between researchers, policy-makers and practitioners can be made. This is well demonstrated by the PRISM research and evaluation strategy (Crossley et al) and it holds much potential for the RPC.

This consultation paper must conclude here given time limitations and the need to send this material to the RPC team. The following references should however provide further help in this respect. My own recent work with Kenyan colleagues, however, concludes by emphasising the potential to be gained by seeing development more as a process (rather than a product) in which all participants are engaged together. This I believe is also appropriate as we strive to articulate and position the RPC itself.

> As research strategies are reviewed and redeveloped on a larger scale in the arena of international development co-operation, we … emphasise the need for increased attention and support to the strengthening and advancement of culture and context-sensitive research processes, recognising that there is much to be gained, in our rapidly globalising world, from a stronger process orientation to development itself (Crossley et al 2005, p 110).

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