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On producing and sharing knowledge across boundaries: Experiences from the interfaces of an international development research network*

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Abstract

The number of large research networks and programmes engaging in knowledge production for development has grown over the past years. One of these programmes devoted to generate knowledge about and for development is the cross-disciplinary, international development research network of the NCCR North-South, funded by the Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation and the Swiss National Science Foundation. Producing relevant knowledge for development is a core goal of the programme and an important motivation for many of the participating researchers. Over the years, the researchers have made use of various spaces for exchange and instruments for co-production of knowledge by academic and non-academic development actors. In this article we explore the characteristics of co-producing and sharing knowledge in interfaces between development research, policy and practice of the NCCR North-South. We draw on empirical material of the NCCR North-South programme and its specific programme element of the Partnership Actions. Our goal is to make use of the concept of the interface to reflect critically about the followed strategies and instruments applied in producing and sharing knowledge for development across boundaries.

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Introduction

The number of large research networks engaging in the cross-disciplinary field of development studies has grown over the last couple of years. They represent a trend from individual researcher-based projects in developing countries towards much larger research programmes involving institutions and researchers from the Global North and the Global South as well as from the academic and non-academic realm. One of these networks is the Swiss National Centre of Competence in Research (NCCR) North-South. It was launched by the Swiss Federal Council in 2001 and has grown into a network of more than 400 members in about 160 institutions worldwide.¹ The NCCR North-South is co-financed by the Swiss National Science Foundation, the Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation and the participating institutions. According to the latest NCCR North-South programme brochure “new knowledge for sustainable development is generated in mutually beneficial learning processes involving various scientific disciplines (*interdisciplinarity*) as well as non-scientific stakeholders (*transdisciplinarity*)” (NCCR North-South 2008, p5, emphases in original). Consequently, the members of the research network do not only conduct basic research in single disciplinary studies but have a strong footing in multi-disciplinary, applied and engaged research, which is often conducted in collaboration with stakeholders from development policy and practice.

In this article, we seek a better understanding of the processes of co-production and sharing of knowledge for development in large inter- and transdisciplinary development research networks. We take a close look at the encounters between actors from development research, policy and practice associated with the NCCR North-South. For conceptual reasons explained in the next section, we use the notion of “interface” thought of as a space for knowledge sharing, production and exchange between research, policy and practice. In the following sections, we structure our account by two questions: i) What kind of interfaces provides the NCCR North-South?; and ii) what are the experiences of co-producing and sharing knowledge in interfaces composed of actors from the academic and non-academic realm? To explore these questions we draw on empirical material of the NCCR North-South programme and its specific programme element of the Partnership Actions. The combination of conceptual ideas about the interface and the experiences in Partnership Actions shall help us to reflect critically about ways to co-produce and share knowledge for development across boundaries.

Knowledge interfaces: Co-producing and sharing “relevant” knowledge

“Relevant” knowledge

Large development research networks conduct both curiosity-driven research *on* development as well as issue-driven research *for* development. Although this can be seen as an artificial distinction, because development research “is research committed to improvement (...) [and] knowledge generation is not an end in itself (...)” (Molteberg and Bergstrøm 2000, p7), we concentrate our account on the activities to produce and share knowledge *for* development. It is knowledge that is found useful to solve a problem or that can be applied and brought to use in a specific context. Often this kind of knowledge is described as “relevant” knowledge. However, what is “relevant” is difficult if not impossible to define. If we accept that, generally, development research has a normative point of departure (Sumner 2006; Sumner and Tribe 2008) this means, that what counts as “relevant” context depends partly on what is

¹ See also <http://www.north-south.unibe.ch/>.

being studied. In the tradition of poststructuralist or Foucauldian approaches the question of relevance in development studies is about context and discursive formation of the “relevant” issues. These approaches encapsulate broad social strategies and respective institutional and administrative manifestations (Wetherell 2001). There is a plurality of valid standpoints and of objectively and subjectively valid descriptions of the world, and there exists no unique explanation of the world that could motivate or justify policy (van den Hove 2007). It is crucial, therefore, to try finding common ground to enable co-production and sharing of knowledge for development. A notion which shall help us analysing and discussing the emergence of such common ground is the interface.

The concept of the interface

In our search for a better understanding of how knowledge for development is co-produced and shared among participating institutions and individuals of large development research networks we use a conceptualisation of a space of exchange and of negotiation of knowledge, which we call the “interface”. Although the interface has a rather technical connotation – it is much used in IT and the technical sciences – it has been brought to meaning by Norman Long and others (Long 1989; Long and Long 1992; Arce and Long 2000; van den Hove 2007) for encounters between different sets of actors who draw on different forms of knowledges.

According to Arce and Long (1992, p214) the concept of the interface entails an awareness of the ways in which different, possibly conflicting, forms of knowledge intersect and interact. It conveys the idea of some kind of face-to-face encounter between individuals with differing interests, resources and power. Encounters in such interfaces are moments of confrontation with others, with outside concepts, ideas, images and normative frameworks. Margins of action are defined and changed and this includes also a fighting for and defining of boundaries (Villarreal 1992). In the tradition of such an actor-oriented approach the focus lies ultimately on the interplay of different social constructions of “reality” developed by the various parties to the interface and traces out their social implications (Arce and Long 1992). However, interfaces between development research, policy and practice can also be defined as expressions which encompass relations between scientists and other actors in the policy process, and which allow for exchanges, co-evolution, and joint construction of knowledge with the aim of enriching decision-making (van den Hove 2007). According to van den Hove (2007, p807) interfaces are implemented to manage the intersection between science and policy. This reflects an understanding of the interface not only as analytical concept to study knowledge production and sharing processes but also as a notion for managing encounters between science, policy and practice. In the latter sense, interfaces are intentionally created and managed as spaces for exchange.

Probably because the term interface still resonates with the technical aspect of connecting different entities – translated here as different social or life worlds, systems knowledge, and sources of power – it tends to compartmentalise the world. Mosse and Lewis (2006, p10) as well as Rossi (2006, p29) argue that the interface is an inadequate metaphor for various types of exchanges, strategic adaptations, or translations contained within development interventions, and that it is necessary to think less in terms of separated worldviews and more in terms of positioned strategies and perspectives. We acknowledge this critique but continue using the concept of the interface as a structural space of exchange on time and as a unique context shared by collaborating actors co-producing and sharing knowledge for development. In line with van den Hove (2007, p821) we use the concept of the interface for an explicit recognition of and transparency about the existing dependencies between the scientific and the social systems. Interfaces are spaces of exchange located at the intersections between

research, policy and practice. In these spaces skills in communication, translation and intermediation are essential.

Using this notion of the interface we will in the following exclusively focus on the knowledge production and knowledge sharing activities of the NCCR North-South, with a special emphasis on the Partnership Actions. Since the research network of the NCCR North-South puts a strong emphasis on creating knowledge *for* sustainable development its thematic and institutional involvement goes way beyond the academic realm. Therefore it is particularly interesting to analyse in more detail the interfaces that appear when research, policy and practice meet in joint efforts to contribute to sustainable development. Our account emerges from our research and professional activities in the international development research network of the NCCR North-South. We draw on selected empirical material collected in about 50 semi-structured and narrative interviews with researchers and non-academic partners participating in the NCCR North-South. Additionally, we draw on programme publications and annual or final reports of the individual projects and Partnership Actions.²

Interfaces of the NCCR North-South

The NCCR North-South

The NCCR North-South is today an international development research network that includes about 400 members working in some 160 institutions in nine regions of the world. When analysing interfaces as intentionally created spaces for exchanging and co-producing knowledge for development it is worth taking a short look back in history of the NCCR North-South and to point out the fundamentals of science policy that spurred its emergence as a large international development network.

At the end of the 1990s, the Federal Council instructed the Swiss National Science Foundation (SNSF) to create a new instrument to promote cutting edge research in Switzerland. This instrument, to be named National Centres of Competence in Research (NCCR), shall strengthen Switzerland's position in research in those areas in which a high expertise exists. NCCRs are operating up to 12 years. They are considered targeted research programmes and adhere to three principles: i) to carry out research of excellent quality, spanning basic research to applications; ii) to create the necessary structures and implement measures required to train young scientists and pay particular attention to the advancement of women in research; and lastly, for the purpose of this article most importantly, iii) to develop links with the potential users of their results, and involve them in project planning from the outset in order to realise the knowledge and technology transfer (SNSF 2009). According to this third principle, NCCRs thus imply a reinforced focus on transdisciplinary research as they explicitly encourage enhanced encounters between academic and non-academic actors.

The NCCR North-South emerged in the course of the first programme call of 1999 and achieved an equal co-financing from the Swiss National Science Foundation (SNSF) and the Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation (SDC). This funding scheme has implications for the research agenda of the NCCR North-South. While the SNSF is driven by the notion of scientific excellence, SDC is interested in the generation of specific

² As members of the NCCR North-South we assume different roles as researchers and coordinators (knowledge sharing, partnership actions) in this international development research network. The co-authorship allows us to analyse jointly our systematically collected sets of data to provide an analysis from within our own research network. Clearly, there is the issue of subjectivity and positionality in our account, which we cannot elaborate on further in the space provided by this article.

development-relevant research findings. Traditionally SDC funds research on the sustainable use of renewable natural resources (Water, Soil, Agricultural Production), social issues (Health, Education, etc.), socioeconomic issues (Employment, Income, Market Access) and political issues (Governance, Human Rights, Democracy) in developing and transition countries (SDC 2007). Through its commitment for the NCCR North-South, SDC is also funding research partnerships between Northern and Southern research institutions and supports capacity-building in the South. SDC's agenda thus involves a combination of Swiss-financed research *on* development and Swiss-financed research *with* researchers and non-academic partners in developing and transition countries.

Institutional interfaces

There are various understandings of development research among the participating actors of the NCCR North-South, spanning from more analytical to more applied versions. However, the programme's long-term vision reveals a clear development orientation by "carrying out research, providing education and promoting societal empowerment in partnership with individuals and institutions in developing and transition countries, and through a Swiss network of excellence in research on sustainable development" (NCCR North-South 2008, p3). Over the years, the participating Swiss institutions and their partners in nine regions of the world have played a vital role in carving out the institutional interfaces between research, policy and practice. These interfaces do not only provide platforms for exchange among researchers but involve to various degrees non-academic partners in governmental ministries and non-governmental institutions of the development sector. Research in Central Asia, for example, is conducted in partnership with the Department of Water Resources in Kyrgyzstan and the Aga Khan Development Network (AKDN) in Tajikistan. In West Africa, another regional focus of NCCR North-South, research on health and sanitation brings together scientists, development experts and health practitioners in Burkina Faso, Cameroon, Chad, Côte d'Ivoire, Ghana, Mali, Mauritania and Senegal. The collaborations between academic and non-academic stakeholders in West Africa has, for example, considerably contributed to an enhanced awareness of the health problems of nomadic people in the Sahel which supported the establishment of an inter-ministerial committee.

Our informants report that at the institutional level a lot is being done to disseminate and spread the research findings broadly. The university institutes organise meetings and seminars and invite high ranking government officials as well as local authorities, private entrepreneurs, and civil society organisations. They collaborate with public agencies to revise laws or to give trainings. Selected researchers represent their institutions in national or international commissions drafting policies. Overall, all these activities help enlarging the network beyond the scientific sphere and to contribute to processes ongoing in the development policy arena as well as in national, mostly public contexts.

However, the existence of these institutional interfaces is not a guarantee for co-production and sharing of knowledge for development by collaborating partners from research, policy and practice. Whether these institutional interfaces are actually used for co-producing and sharing knowledge depends mostly on the initiative of individuals and their motivation to share and integrate various forms of knowledge for development. The NCCR North-South has created a specific instrument for such encounters, namely the Partnership Actions. Before looking in more detail at this instrument we highlight some of the motivations for and implications of co-producing and sharing knowledge across boundaries.

Interfaces between individual collaborators

Whether the institutional interfaces actually create opportunities for fruitful exchange depends not only on the structural conditions and the management of these interfaces but also whether the opportunities are taken up by individual researchers and their collaborators. In an international development research network like the NCCR North-South meets a great number of people with different disciplinary, professional, and cultural backgrounds. Despite their heterogeneity many of the members of the NCCR North-South are driven by the intrinsic motivation to contribute something that is of relevance to humanity as a whole or something that is useful on the way towards sustainability and social justice. Many of our informants report that their research should respond to identified needs and the research results should not just be put in a book on the shelf. They consider it highly meaningful to work together with local partners and the local population. Hence, this understanding of development research consequently passes the boundary of the academic.

However, the individual actor needs to actively decide to create, enter and use the interface for co-producing and sharing knowledge. Although the intrinsic motivation is there, this decision is far from trivial because it involves getting exposed to other cultures of knowledge and getting questioned (cp. Brown 2008). Thus the boundary that provided a protection in the respective field is opened in order to get involved in exchanging knowledge beyond disciplinary and professional, cultural, gender and age boundaries. This decision often depends on whether this kind of exposure and exchange is considered beneficial for the topic addressed and/or the person involved. In these encounters the members of the NCCR North-South experience the challenges of finding common ground and trying to understand each others' discourses and contexts. Most of them have moved away from the idea of knowledge transfer and policy advice towards the notion of dialogue and co-production of knowledge. They see an added value of co-produced knowledge emerging from encounters between unequal and diverse partners and collaborators. In many cases, the exchange of knowledge has its effect on both sides as it can modify the "practitioners'/decision-makers'" as well as the "researchers'" views of what is relevant. They experience that knowledge sharing takes place in a contested social arena and involves a whole series of different stakeholders (Messerli et al. 2007).

The institutional set-up of the NCCR North-South as well as the experiences of the participating researchers in interacting with non-academic actors show that interfaces need to be actively created, used and managed by a research programme as well as by individual researchers. These activities can be supported by specific instruments. The NCCR North-South offers incentives with the Partnership Actions. This programme element provides opportunities and separate funding for combining academic and action-oriented knowledge production processes. Thanks to the Partnership Actions the NCCR North-South has a unique character in the international development research arena. In the next section we now look at individual encounters in interfaces intentionally created during Partnership Actions.

Encounters at the interface: transdisciplinary partnership actions

Transdisciplinary partnership actions

Based on the understanding that development research should not only produce analysis and synthesis but also "relevant" and applicable results, the NCCR North-South from its onset planned to set up a programme component for the implementation of development-oriented action. This idea materialised in the Partnership Actions for Mitigating Syndromes (PAMS), consisting of small projects which are jointly designed and implemented by local

organisations and researchers of the NCCR North-South in geographic and thematic areas where research is being conducted. Interested researchers and their non-academic partners can submit their proposals to bi-annual calls for Partnership Actions. The NCCR North-South provides a maximal budget of 50,000 Swiss Francs. The non-academic partners usually supplement this budget by own investments. From the part of the NCCR North-South, Partnership Actions are meant to allow testing the applicability of research results in specific development contexts and to provide a platform for transdisciplinary research; hence they are designed to bring together researchers from the North and South, local development practitioners, communities and political actors. For the local organisations, the Partnership Actions offer opportunities to backup their actions with fresh empirical evidence and research findings, and to benefit from the reputation and the scientific reference of the research network. The Partnership Action concept is based on the assumption that transdisciplinary research can play an important role in finding solutions to problems of non-sustainable development, if it triggers social learning processes which can ultimately lead to societal change (NCCR North-South, Management Centre 2008).

While initially the focus of Partnership Actions was on achieving a concrete effect with respect to managing or mitigating an identified problem of global change, an internal evaluation showed that the great potential of these Partnership Actions rather lies in their nature of providing platforms or meeting points for diverse stakeholders (Messerli et al. 2007). The financial means as well as the institutional affiliation of the Partnership Actions with the development research network of the NCCR North-South attract both academic and non-academic partners to create new teams across functional boundaries. The innovation potential of Partnership Actions lies in one year of intense interaction between researchers and local stakeholders in order to exchange knowledge and experience, to negotiate problems and to jointly find ways for tackling them. Such collaborations can trigger learning processes that in many cases continue after completion of the project and influence perceptions, behaviour and practices of stakeholders, and even the course of some policy processes. The effects of encounters through Partnership Actions are twofold: On the one hand, the institutional frame of Partnership Actions supports the collaboration of diverse stakeholders who usually do not work closely together. Since researchers are often considered neutral, they are in a good position to mediate between groups with differing or conflicting agendas. On the other hand, the collaboration of researchers and non-academic stakeholders allows generating integrative knowledge that includes scientific as well as other forms of knowledge for innovative solutions to the problems at hand. Of course, the success of Partnership Actions is not given by the mere creation of spaces for encounters between academic and non-academic stakeholders. The individual character of every single Partnership Action and the effectiveness for sharing knowledge depends on various conditions. The following example is one of the more successful cases according to which we try to spell out the supportive factors for co-producing and sharing knowledge in intentionally created interfaces by way of Partnership Actions.

Experiences of a partnership action: Support to local risk management in Bolivia

The Partnership Action entitled “Support to local risk management in Bolivia” was designed for and implemented in two departments, including La Paz, and six municipalities across the country in 2007. Against the background of political reform towards decentralisation, it aimed at creating spaces for participative governance between political and social actors, involving civil society groups in the development of measures and tools for improving local risk management. This involved, for example, the elaboration of municipal and departmental development plans on the prevention and mitigation of natural disaster. The project was jointly funded by the NCCR North-South and Oxfam GB and closely connected to research

activities on vulnerability and resilience conducted by a research unit and several projects of the NCCR North-South. It was implemented by two Civil Society Organisations (CSO) based in La Paz, bringing together political actors such as the Vice-ministry of Civil Defence, prefectures of departments and municipal governments, social actors such as local assemblies, women's organisations, communal associations and farmers' unions. The academic side was represented by researchers of the NCCR North-South, particularly one PhD candidate working on risk management policies in Bolivia and their articulation in the municipal space.

The Partnership Action engaged with the problem of weak local and regional risk management strategies in areas frequently hit by natural hazards, such as land slides and flooding. The CSOs and the researchers contacted and approached local communities and municipalities where everybody is threatened by repeated flooding. They presented the Partnership Action project in the community and municipality meetings. Six communities agreed to participate in the Partnership Action. The local inhabitants expressed their views, feelings, and ideas about natural hazards, risks and the management strategies in various exercises and working groups, which were facilitated by the CSOs and the NCCR North-South researchers. Both partners stated that the direct involvement with the local communities was more successful than any state intervention, which usually provokes a lot of resistance. Their trainings were designed especially for the local inhabitants, avoiding any top-down mode of teaching and knowledge transfer. On the contrary, risk perceptions, problem definitions and potential solutions were formulated in newly created spaces of exchange. Together they crafted instruments and tools for mainstreaming risk management (e.g. in the Municipal Development Plan). It was also possible to systematise data on natural disaster and knowledge on risk management for constructing maps showing threats, vulnerabilities and risks. The CSOs and the researchers assisted in training and technical matters and provided support for the community members in the formulation of Emergency Operation Centres and Contingency Plans as well as in the formation of volunteer groups and the construction of water and basic sanitation projects. This helped empowering the local community groups in negotiating their stakes vis-à-vis the local authorities. The CSOs and the researchers acted as facilitators, intermediaries and translators in the various processes of knowledge co-production and exchange. Overall, the Partnership Action supported the strengthening of governance processes through capacity building of and collaboration between political and social actors. In one community, however, the processes did not develop as intended and not all the objectives could be met. This was mainly due to a dispute among two local political leaders, from which the implementing CSOs concluded that "it is useless to attempt change without the consent of the politicians, as they do not appropriate or respect the change" (Fundación para el Desarrollo Participativo Comunitario (FUNDEPCO) and Fundación La Paz 2008, p9).

The collaboration between the various stakeholder groups participating in the Partnership Action generated a multidirectional co-production and exchange of knowledge and experience. The work at the interface between the academic and non-academic realm was experienced and assessed as follows:

- The academic partners appreciated the opportunity to expand the research to more sites, to achieve greater approximation with the communities, consolidation and validation of tools and results, and to enhance the interaction with various actors at national, departmental, local and community level. Considered important were the possibilities to support the empowerment of the communities through enhanced skills in organisation and training for risk management. The principal researcher acted as a technical expert for the communities, supporting them throughout their negotiation process with the municipal government. The implementation of the developed tool box permitted technical

knowledge development, dialogue between stakeholders, the elaboration of a conceptual framework of the meaning of risk management, and the construction of maps.

- The non-academic partners stated that the instrument of Partnership Actions can fulfil the expectations of the three involved actor groups, i.e. the researchers, the development agencies, and the communities where the project activities took place. With respect to sharing knowledge and mutual learning the representatives of the implementing CSOs highlighted the constant learning process to transform theory into reality and to re-conceptualise all findings. They appreciated the opportunity to redesign their work proposals and they emphasised that the interaction with different actors permitted the issues to be approached in a realistic and specific manner, based on various thoughts and feelings. They concluded that “it is necessary to promote initiatives like these which articulate the social, political and academic actors, so academia can project true community-based extension”. At the same time they noted that it is necessary to “respect the political movements experienced by each of these municipalities”(Fundación para el Desarrollo Participativo Comunitario (FUNDEPCO) and Fundación La Paz 2008, p9, 13).

The Partnership Action was also successful beyond the immediate process of co-production and sharing of knowledge among the participating actors. It was rewarded within the international programme “Prevención de desastres de la comunidad andina” and it helped creating a larger public awareness in urban and rural risk management, considering people’s various perceptions of risk. Overall, it has considerably influenced public policy and practice in this field. A concrete outcome of the intensified interaction between the participating actors is the officially recognised national atlas on risks, vulnerability and natural hazards in Bolivia (Torrico Canaviri et al. 2008). Thus this Partnership Action, which followed previous research projects on risk management in the city of La Paz, was especially effective in building bridges between researchers, policy makers and local stakeholders in Bolivia. The success of this Partnership Action was supported by the fact that the collaborating partners had known each other for quite some time beforehand and that they benefited from existing and extending networks and trust relationships. Equally important was the political framework allowing for decentralised political action, as well as the political transformation towards a new Bolivian constitution, which provided a background conducive for the activities of the project. The finding that political transformation can be a crucial factor for achieving changes on a political level is supported by other Partnership Actions from Bolivia and Nepal.³

Conclusions

With this article we set out to explore the spaces for co-producing and sharing knowledge for development. We specifically discussed encounters between actors from development research, policy and practice associated with the international development research network of the National Centre of Competence in Research (NCCR) North-South. Conceptually, we made use of the idea of interfaces as intentionally created spaces for exchange, co-production and sharing of knowledge for development. We find that the NCCR North-South, thanks to its long-term programme set-up as well as mixed funding scheme of SNSF and SDC, provides institutional interfaces between the academic and non-academic realms. However, the provision of institutional interfaces alone is not enough. Even if two institutional partners sign a memorandum of understanding it is not guaranteed that the effectively involved stakeholders find a basis for collaboration, co-production and exchange. Ultimately, whether

³ For further information on the concept of Partnership Actions and individual projects see also <http://www.north-south.unibe.ch/content.php/page/id/228/>.

interfaces are created, used and productively managed depend on the activities of individual actors and their motivations and interests in co-producing, sharing and negotiating “relevant” knowledge for development.

Overall, our account points out that there are various conditions influencing the success of co-producing and sharing knowledge across boundaries. At the institutional level, specifically allocated time and financial budgets, such as provided for the Partnership Actions, are supportive elements for encounters between academic and non-academic actors. At the individual level we identify as crucial the motivation and openness to the “risk” of getting exposed by encounters between different forms of knowledges and their respective rationales. In our attempt to draw out supporting factors for co-production and sharing of knowledge, we have come up with a rather positive account of encounters at the interfaces provided in and created by the NCCR North-South, such as supported by the instrument of the Partnership Actions. In our selected case from Bolivia, scientific findings were brought to use in a non-academic environment and mutual learning about risk perception and action took place between all participating actors. As success we consider the fact that the involved sources of knowledge transcended various contexts and that research was followed by and supported concrete development-oriented action. Clearly, there are cases where it is just impossible to cross boundaries and to bring stakeholders from research, policy and practice together for co-producing and sharing knowledge for development. In this regard, some of our academic informants provided accounts of complete disinterest or strong prejudices towards scientific, development-oriented results where it was not possible to engage in a constructive dialogue with actors from practice and policy. Incompatibilities could also be reported from the other side, especially when researchers communicate in the top-down mode of experts not able to “translate” and to reveal. Sometimes knowledge sharing is also hindered by strategic interests, and lop-sided financial conditions can negatively affect the close collaboration and sharing of ideas and knowledge.

Finally, when trying to understand activities of producing and sharing knowledge for development it becomes clear that scientific knowledge is certainly not the sole basis for informed decision-making. The concept of the interface draws attention to the requirements and opportunities of combining different forms and sources of knowledge. The interface is not a closed hermeneutic entity but an expression of availability as well as strategic positioning. Although it suggests that encounters can be actively managed, the interfaces create also spaces for sometimes unintended consequences and sequences of knowledge production. From the point of view of a large development research network, the concept of interface suggests a continuous requirement for interested allies and the supportive forms of collaboration to bring certain development-oriented messages across the boundaries of academia. As promising and innovative this can be for tackling persistent development problems it is certainly not trivial to open up and to allow translation and modification of scientific results to be brought to use in daily development practice and policy. Nonetheless, we hope that our account has provided some ideas of how interfaces can be intentionally created and made use of by various stakeholders in the development sector interested in drawing on different sources of “relevant” knowledge for development.

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