Putting Research into Use (RIU): Technology Development for the Poor Farmer in Low Income countries


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The Research Into Use (RIU) programme aims to help agricultural research projects put its existing stock of knowledge into practical use rather than investing in new scientific research. In doing this, it hopes to increase the reach of the scientific projects in low-income countries and set up productive, sustainable and high impact technologic development projects.

A continuous (and long running) issue in public policy debate is that of how to fund science. Whereas what private companies do is their own business (usually concerned with normal profit maximising behaviour) most industrialised countries now have enormous budgets designed to fund bodies to search for, validate and diffuse information which may (or may not) have benefit for social welfare. The argument put simply is that if the state does not do this then society as a whole will suffer. The argument is sometimes put in cultural terms but deep down the belief is ultimately connected with the potential use of new knowledge in achieving social and economic welfare goals. Hence the enormous sums of money routinely spent on higher education, national research councils, government ministries and related organisations. Every so often, however, the sheer costs involved arouse public concern. Attempts are then made to rationalise expenditure like the UK Rothschild Commission on in-house government R&D funding (1971) or the creation of “Technology Foresight” activity run by the UK Office of Science and Technology (OST).

Running through much of this discussion is reluctance on the part of scientific communities to lose decision-making autonomy. Since they, and they alone, fully understand their work’s complexity, interference by penny-pinching bureaucrats will compromise scientific quality and endanger the “seed corn” that arises from new knowledge. Moreover how this knowledge is subsequently used is not the responsibility of science. The scene is thereby set for a classic argument that goes back a long way, certainly to C P Snow’s “two cultures” debate which hit the headlines in the 1960s'. Recently the issue has taken on a new dimension due to the credit crunch and the need for greater public saving. British research councils now emphasise likely “impact” as an important criterion for funding public research.

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with many other resources and suitable “agronomy” to produce its fruit; so it hard to say how instrumental the original “seed” has really been).

Research into Use Programme (RIU)
This short article provides an illustrative example of this general issue, an example that has tried to move it on in policy terms. It concerns poverty-related economic development aid in very poor rural regions of the world, in this case Africa. In the early 2000s The UK Department for International Development (DFID) had become increasingly concerned about its research expenditure in the natural resources sector. Under its Renewable Natural Resources Research Strategy (RNRRS) it had funded, through its Central Research Department (CRD), some 1600 projects costing £220 million between 1995 and 2005, largely in UK research organisations; but it seemed impossible to demonstrate how and to what extent the resultant “knowledge” had resulted in practical low income country (LIC) development, particularly for impoverished rural communities heavily dependent on subsistence agriculture. In response the CRD decided that research targeted at development was necessary but not sufficient – what was required was additional effort aimed at putting the knowledge into use. Accordingly it launched a call for consortia whose remit was precisely to fill this gap. This took the form of a £37.5m for a programme designed to validate and promote the best innovations from previous RNRRS research.

The RIU programme was launched in July 2006. Its approach was to shift the focus of attention away from the tasks involved in the generation of new knowledge to the ways in which an existing stock of knowledge can be put to productive use. What has distinguished it from most technology development activities is the inclusion of three characteristics. The first is its use of the idea of an innovation system to guide its operations5. What this has meant in practice is that successful technology development depends on a network of organisations and individuals involved in generating, modifying, and using new knowledge. Science is important but it is only one of many necessary inputs from ancillary bodies in the private and NGO sectors. Innovation, not science, is the centre of gravity.

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Secondly it was introduced as a learning programme. Unlike modern industry where the investing firm routinely accesses whatever new knowledge it needs either from its own R&D departments or outside cognate bodies, the small poor farmer has no similar option. At the same time publicly financed extension systems have ceased to be fit for comparable purpose5. But how can an aid agency fill the gap? This was a question that needed its own investigation. But of course “impact” cannot be identified ex ante for the obvious reason that the outcomes are learned through actually carrying out projects. This proved hard for a government department to manage but DFID has shown it can be done. Thirdly there are wider issues of foreign aid dependence and arguably its relative failure to create independent entrepreneurship and growth in some recipient countries5. So an important aspect of RIU has been to investigate how the private sector can be leveraged into aid programmes both as a contributory player and as potential new local start-up businesses.

Best Bets
These features are illustrated by one of the RIU component activities, the Best Bets sub-programme. The inspiration for the RIU Best Bets initiative came from the successful and popular BBC television programme Dragons’ Den. Versions of this programme had been broadcast around the world under a variety of local names (Money Tigers in Japan; Shark Tank in the USA). The
army worm forecasting system and an
industrial opportunity for synergy (an
army worm control technology; and
two aquaculture proposals) were invited
to amalgamate their proposals. The lead
organisation for the short-listed propos-
als was asked to write a business plan
following a format provided by RIU.
To facilitate this, a grant of £1,500
was made available which teams used
in various ways, such as to bring team
members together to enable them to
work jointly on their plans. Two rep-
resentatives from each proposal were
also supported to attend the “dragon’s
den” event in Nairobi on 26th and 27th
November 2009.

Most of the initial Best Bet proposals fell at an early stage
simply because scientists wished to carry on practicing sci-
ence (producing more seed corn!) and failed to grasp the de-
velopmental nature of the required projects.

At this event, two representatives
of each of the short-listed proposals
presented their idea to the indepen-
dent panel drawn from leaders in the
African business, finance and research
and development communities. The
panellists had already read the business
plans. Following a ten-minute oral pre-
sentation, panellists had 20 minutes to
interrogate the proposal, followed by a
further 10 minutes in private to discuss
the proposal among themselves. At the
end of the day, the panel announced
the proposals they were recommend-
ing that RIU should support. Subject
to due diligence, RIU accepted these
recommendations and proceeded to
issuing contracts.

The money that RIU invested in the
selected Best Bets was in the form of a grant since RIU’s expected return on its investment was not financial; it was to
be in the form of learning. The Best Bet
proposals which RIU supported would
thus become part of an experiment in
enabling innovation. RIU researchers
would rigorously monitor the Best Bets
with a view to teasing out useful lessons;
what worked well, what worked less
well and why? These lessons would
then form an important part of RIU
output and would help shape future
policy and practice to enable research
to have greater impact on small-scale
agricultural innovation. The Best Bet
teams were also expected to work
closely with RIU communication spe-
cialists and journalists to achieve wide-
spread coverage of their research into
use success stories.

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1. In all cases the mobilisation of other linked knowledge sources proved necessary. Often these derived from NGO bodies but included government departments, local and international science bodies as well of course as the private sector itself. Indeed the projects worked best as consortia in which the different stakeholders operated as an holistic innovation system with each player contributing its own unique expertise.

2. In all cases private sector interests have played a key role, both as “product champions” and as the core activity ensuring economic continuity. Clearly economic incentives have an important role in ensuring longer-term sustainability and in some cases markets for established firms have expanded as new outlets have been created. In addition there have been a range of new small businesses created as a result of RIU interventions and there are indications that new forms of financial support will be forthcoming from venture capital sources.

3. The evidence has confirmed the generally held view that formal national government-led extension systems need to be modified (if not replaced) and it became clear that the private sector should now play a much greater role in this respect. In this way it should help to improve the pace and impact of technology development for the rural poor.

4. In many cases RIU Best Bet projects have helped to mobilise national capacities, particularly in universities. This is important in the light of frequent criticisms of Higher Education [HE] sector viability in Africa and the need to encourage local innovation.

5. In all cases RIU project funding played a necessary role in covering pre-investment costs associated with risk and related factors. It is likely that this type of pre-competitive support will continue to be an area for necessary technology development aid.

6. The actual business of technology development was in all cases fairly complex involving applications engineering, negotiations with government regulatory bodies, accessing products through imports (in the absence of local production capacity) and dealing with the many problems that always plague new innovative ventures.

At the same time not all the projects succeeded in output and impact terms. The successful ones helped create entrepreneurship and employment. Others (still on-going) may evolve into success given more time. Yet others have clearly failed. But the DFID experiment has learned a lot. It has for example, shown that an aid agency can manage risk and catalyse technology development in the most unlikely contexts. To do so may require a lighter and imaginative managerial touch. But it will also argue for linking research more directly to production. In the case of the private sector input it is also clear that it can and should make a major contribution to international technology development for the rural poor.

As for scientific communities themselves there is a strong case for going well beyond the “seed corn” model. The original RNRRS projects no doubt produced good science but results often stayed on publication shelves, raw material for more funding from research councils and related bodies. While it is clear that committed scientists have often played a valuable developmental role, the pattern of incentives within which they work tends to minimise the impact they could potentially make. The DFID experiment has shown a way forward. Let us hope that its message will be heard.


About the Author

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References

2. It finished in December 2012.
5. Moyo D (2010) Dead Aid: Why aid is not working and how there is another way for Africa, Amazon Books
6. The RIU panel who worked like the dragons on Dragons’ Den were Judi Wakhungu, Executive Director of the African Centre for Technology Studies; Muchiri Wahome (Chair) Managing Director of Deacons (K) Limited, the leading chain store in the region; Patrick Oketa, Chief Investment Officer at the Kampala-based African Agricultural Capital and Ali A Mufuruki, Chairman and CEO of the Infotech Investment Group in Tanzania.
7. These came from East and Southern Africa. The call then went out to West Africa; this generated 20 more proposals.