

The ‘Knowledge Bank’ and the Global Development Network

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Abstract

Why has the World Bank devoted funds and personnel to think tank activities through the Global Development Network? Some of the answers lie in broader objectives of the World Bank to become the ‘knowledge bank’. The GDN represents one program to operationalize this new discourse of knowledge and create the global public good of policy relevant research. The impact of ideas or discourses or knowledge can be greatly magnified when in coalition with broader social and economic forces. Consequently, the analysis also draws upon some current thinking on policy networks to suggest that creating public knowledge and sharing research with the aim to promote development serves the interests primarily of the institutions advocating the knowledge agenda and the researchers in their orbit. Researchers gain access to resources while an institution such as the World Bank can partner with a civil society organization that shares a similar outlook on poverty reduction research.

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There are many research networks in existence but few so grand in design as the Global Development Network. Why has the World Bank devoted so much effort and so many resources to think tanks? Some of the answers lie in broader objectives of the World Bank to become the 'knowledge bank'.¹ The GDN represents one program to operationalize this policy discourse of knowledge. The Network is designed to allow greater scope for 'home-grown' policy, information-sharing and enhanced research capacity in and between developing countries for the co-production of local, regional and global knowledge (www.gdnet.org). The World Bank and other sponsors of the Network are promoting the creation and distribution of a global public good – knowledge. Stimulating the supply of both the quantity and quality of policy relevant research aids the transmission of international 'best practices'.

Such laudable aspirations have been welcomed within the development studies community. Yet, there are also concerns about the uncritical view of knowledge and the assumptions about how that knowledge is utilized. There is a rationalist tendency within the GDN that portrays (scientific) research as independent from its social context. Knowledge is utilized as an intellectual tool that allows rational policy actors to reduce and control uncertainty in decision-making and advance social progress. This is best captured in the GDN motto: 'better research\better policy\better world'. However, neither ideas nor the research that codifies them are neutral. Accordingly, this paper outlines a specific form of power – ideational power – that is central to emerging patterns of global governance. Importantly, the impact of ideas or discourses or knowledge can be greatly magnified when in coalition with broader social and economic forces. Consequently, the analysis draws upon some policy network concepts to suggest that creating knowledge and sharing research to promote development serves the interests primarily of the institutions advocating the knowledge agenda and the researchers in their orbit.

¹ See: The World Bank, *Knowledge for Development: World Development Report 1998/99*, New York, Oxford University Press.

‘Knowledge for development’ serves a particular kind of interest – that is, the ‘cognitive interest’ of researchers in their professional regeneration and advancement into new institutional arrangements such as global policy networks.

Under the auspices of the GDN, research that is broadly supportive of open economies and free markets research has been produced and disseminated. Furthermore, it is created predominantly by development economists. Indeed, key objectives of the GDN are cast in the public goods language of economics. This does not mean that the GDN is in the hegemonic grasp of neo-liberal economics. Knowledge is contested within the Network. This paper focuses on GDN dynamics from mid 1999 when the GDN Secretariat was created in the World Bank until the third annual conference in Rio di Janeiro in December 2001 by when the GDN had become an independent non-profit organization.

The following discussion criticises the public goods approach to knowledge for its apolitical assumptions about research utilization. It adopts three network concepts – epistemic communities, embedded knowledge networks and transnational discourse communities. These provide differing interpretations of GDN activities but also provide tools to argue that World Bank sponsored research is not policy neutral but represents a discursive or ideational form of power that helps set and sustain development agendas.

A Global Network for Development Research

In December 1999, the Global Development Network (GDN) – an association of research institutes and think tanks—was launched by the World Bank in co-operation with the United Nations, the Governments of Japan, Germany and Switzerland, seven regional research networks and other private and public international development institutions. The three broad objectives of the GDN are to ‘create, share and apply knowledge’. The Network is intended to incorporate the ‘research community’ of developing and transition countries more efficiently into development policy. It is composed primarily of university research centres and independent think tanks. The assumption is ‘the generation of local

knowledge which when shared with local policy makers will ultimately lead to the solution of local problems'²

One intention is that the GDN become a co-ordinating mechanism – a ‘network of networks’ – for organizations, groups and individuals researching development. Indeed, the ‘building blocks’ are seven regional research networks established over the decade prior to the GDN.

- Africa Economic Research Consortium
- Center for Economic Research and Graduate Education
- East Asian Development Network
- Economic Education and Research Consortium (Russia)
- Economic Research Forum (Middle East and North Africa)
- Latin American and Caribbean Economic Association (LACEA)
- South Asian Network of Economic Institutes

Aside from LACEA and the Eastern European network, these were established with assistance from the World Bank’s Development Economics group.

In December 1999 an international conference in Bonn launched the Network. Since then GDN has consolidated rapidly. A web-site – www.gdnet.org – helps to disseminate research. The Governing Body was appointed at the Tokyo 2000 conference. Additionally, a number of research projects have been in play: the Global Research Project on Growth, the Data Initiative, the Regional Research Competitions and the Global Development Awards. Sponsoring some of these research activities allows the World Bank to pursue its objective of becoming a ‘knowledge bank’ and to legitimize its claims of building partnerships not only with civil society organizations such as research institutes but also with other development agencies. At the same time, development economists in the World Bank, in ‘client’ countries and the regional networks, as well as

² Global Development Network *The Global Development Network: A Snapshot*, Washington DC., GDN, 2001.

other researchers, have found opportunity to extend their professional activity into these global policy knowledge networks.

By the end of 2002, the regional research competitions have channeled approximately \$10 million through open, competitive allocation of research funds. The regional networks determined the priorities of these competitions. The first Global Research Project 'Explaining Growth' was also devolved to the networks.³ The disciplinary focus and dominance of the regional networks in this process has meant research agendas are structured around economic questions, analysis and solutions. Research opportunities for some economists are further enhanced as some of the best candidates from the regional research competitions are channeled towards the International Monetary Fund (IMF) pilot scholarship program. However, this 'mobilization of bias' in favour of economic research varies significantly between the regional networks. Compared to CERGE-EI in Eastern Europe, the more recently established EADN is not as dominated by economics. Moreover, the GDN Governing body has requested the regional networks to open themselves to 'other' social science perspectives where feasible.

Although the GDN moved outside World Bank offices in mid 2001, the Network is still seen by some as a 'child of the World Bank'.⁴ The Network remains dependent on core funding from the World Bank. Criticisms from donor bodies are that the World Bank failed to consult with them regarding more established programmes with research institutes and think tanks. The GDN was perceived by some as a competitor that might 'squeeze out' existing initiatives and by other donors as unnecessary when development

³ The first stage was structured around four political economy topics: 'Sources of Growth'; 'Growth and Markets'; 'Microeconomic Determinants of Growth', and the 'Political Economy of Growth'. Further details on the GDN web-site: www.gdnet.org

⁴ Comments from a representative for a European donor organisation cited in a Back to Office report by another donor representative. The source is confidential.

research could be funded directly by donors rather than through the GDN. Some researchers were of the view that the World Bank was ignoring well established development studies networks and duplicating effort whilst also instituting its favoured group of policy institutes, excluding radical political economy approaches.⁵ Other concerns expressed by donor groups revolve around lack of multi-disciplinarity, poor transparency in Network decision-making, and inadequate representation of user-groups – donors and policy makers. Nevertheless, donors such as the Japan Bank for International Cooperation (JBIC) and – despite its reservations – the UK Department for International Development (DfID) have supported the Awards and the web-site respectively. These and other partners have additional interests in supporting multilateral knowledge partnerships.⁶

Creating Global Public Knowledge

One important platform of thinking behind the GDN is that it is a vehicle for a ‘global public good’. ‘Knowledge gaps’ or an inadequate supply of policy relevant research entails that policy in developing countries is often formulated without access to the best research. One solution to this public goods problem is the creation of policy relevant research. However, it is beyond the self-interest of any one country to engage in a systematic global analysis of policy to overcome ‘knowledge gaps’ as the costs are carried by one whereas the benefits are likely to be enjoyed by many. Policy research is

⁵ See comments by Sheila Page, Tomas Winnen-Lawo and Jeremy Gould in the GDN Governance e-discussion in early 2000 archived at www2.worldbank.org/hm/hmgdnet

⁶ For example, federal German Government and Land Nordrhein-Westfalen support was crucial to the scale and success of the first GDN conference. The German Government could also ‘band-wagon’ its interests through the event. With re-unification, numerous ministries moved from Bonn to Berlin. One objective in GDN sponsorship was to help re-brand the city as an international centre for development.

consumed by ‘free-riding’ actors such as journalists, the educated lay public, the intelligentsia of other countries, colleges and students, civil society organizations and companies who do not usually contribute (directly) to the costs of knowledge production. It leads to under-investment and under-supply in policy research and analysis (in university research institutes, think tanks and training programs). Accordingly, the GDN is an intervention to facilitate both the increased and improved supply of a global public good; development research about ‘best practice’.⁷

By contrast, private goods are those that are excludable. In other words, such goods can be produced and distributed according to their demand; their ownership can be transferred against a price and property rights can be attached to them. These goods can be consumed privately. Public goods are those that have benefits as well as costs that are not confined to a ‘buyer’ (or set of buyers). Once provided, such goods are enjoyed freely by others. Consumption is non-rivalrous. As a consequence, public goods suffer from market failure. A profit cannot be gained by the private sector if it produces non-excludable goods. Consequently, non-market interventions are required to ensure that certain public goods are produced.⁸

Global public goods include a clean environment; a world free from malaria, HIV/AIDS or hepatitis; and peace and security. The benefits are enjoyed by all. By the same stroke, the public is not excluded from the ill-effects of a thinning ozone layer and must consume

⁷ Lyn Squire, ‘Why the World Bank Should Be Involved in Development Research’, in G. L. Gilbert & D. Vines (eds.) *The World Bank: Structure and Policies*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2000: pps 113-14. The global public good attributes of the GDN are specifically addressed in Joseph. Stiglitz (2000) ‘Scan Globally, Reinvent Locally: Knowledge Infrastructure and the Localization of Knowledge’ in Diane Stone (ed.) *Banking on Knowledge: The Genesis of the Global Development Network*, London, Routledge 2000.

⁸ Inge Kaul, Isabelle Grunberg and Marc A. Stern, *Global Public Goods: International Cooperation in the 21st Century*, Oxford, Oxford University Press.

the costs of environmental damage. Similarly, inaccurate research or poor policy analysis incorporated into decision-making can contribute to perverse policy outcomes. These global public goods and bads are in the 'public domain'. Global networks have emerged mostly in response to counter the effects of public bads but also as mechanisms to facilitate the delivery of public goods. The GDN is such a global network to create research and spread knowledge about successful (and failed) policy experiments and innovations of one country that may be of benefit to other countries and communities.

A flaw lies in the assumption that increasing the supply and quality of policy research will lead to policy use. Overcoming the public goods problem of the lack of locally generated policy research does not ensure its application or utilization. Research does not by necessity 'trickle through' into policy. In many circumstances, policy relevant research is ignored or even repressed by governments. Indeed, this is recognized by the GDN Governing Body with its decision to support a new research program on 'Bridging Research and Policy'.

The public goods framework is relatively apolitical and tends to treat knowledge as homogenous, technical and neutral. Reference to 'knowledge' does not signify a single body of knowledge that is commonly recognized. To the contrary, it implies a struggle between different 'knowledges' or what are often described as 'discourses', 'worldviews' and 'regimes of truth'. Accordingly for many, the real issue is not the mere creation and dissemination of knowledge, but the kind of knowledge that is produced and the kind of knowledge that dominates. Little is provided in public goods accounts about the socio-political functions of knowledge or issues of power and hegemony.

Nor is the 'global' 'public' 'good' terminology unpacked. For example, it is unclear who the 'global public' might be or what constitutes the 'global good'. Moreover, while knowledge may well have public good properties the idea of knowledge as a 'club good' goes much further towards accommodating the idea that the benefits are limited to

particular groups. For example, while GDN conferences provide a forum for developing country researchers to present their work, many are ‘part of a global elite’.⁹

Finally, the public goods approach tends to focus on outcomes – production of public goods.¹⁰ However, a focus on process – addressing decision making procedures or resource allocations – draws attention to the kind of knowledge that is reproduced at a global level. In this case, it has been development economics. The GDN2000 Conference in Tokyo provides some examples of implicit biases in resource allocation. The GDN Secretariat scheduled an ‘invitation only’ meeting between donors and the seven regional research networks. This session was designed to ‘provide the network heads with an opportunity to present their work programs to the donor community and explore funding options’. Other institute representatives at GDN2000 did not have such privileged access to donors. A major attraction of the Network is the GDN’s ‘Global Development Awards’. The first were awarded in Tokyo and the research award committee was composed of distinguished economists.¹¹ Nine of the twelve research awardees were

⁹ Comments in a post conference Back to Office report by a donor organisation representative.

¹⁰ An exception can be found in Inge Kaul, ‘Global Public Goods: What Role for Civil Society’, *Non Profit and Voluntary Sector Quarterly*, 30(3), 2001. She argues that civil society organizations play an important role in making international negotiations less statist (multi-actor) and less territorial (multi-level governance).

¹¹ The members of the selection committee for the 2001 Outstanding Research Award were: Nancy Birdsall from the Carnegie Endowment; Francois Bouguignon – World Bank, Takatoshi Ito from the Japanese Ministry of Finance and Nobel Prize winners Amartya Sen and Joseph Stiglitz. The main research prize awards is \$125,000 for work that holds the greatest promise for improving understanding of development. Five Development Medals of \$10,000 and five runner-up awards of \$5,000 were given for research.

economists. Finally, the membership of the GDN Governing Body was announced at Tokyo. The dominant composition of (male) economists drew sharp criticism from assembled research community.

Representatives of the European Association of Development Institutes (EADI) have railed against the ‘exclusive economic ways of looking at development phenomena’ in the GDN where: ‘The (funding) incentive policy of the World Bank and deliberate choice ... almost exclusively supports Economic (!) Research Institutions’. The EADI President declared that ‘the unstated issue is that the World Bank feels a loyalty to the institutes it knows’ in the regional networks.¹²

The importance of knowledge in development is crucial, but it is necessary to clarify:

1. How knowledge is conceptualized or what constitutes knowledge;
2. The social and political context in which knowledge is produced, evaluated and transferred.

Within the GDN, the dominant conceptualisation of knowledge is research undertaken by suitably qualified experts in recognized institutional contexts; that is, research institutes. The GDN promotes *techne* (technical knowledge) and the ‘skillful production of artifacts and the expert mastery of objectified tasks’.¹³ It is a ‘codified’ understanding of knowledge that allows meaningful ‘sharing’ between the highly educated and technically qualified. Not only is the GDN an ‘association of researchers’, knowledge is framed predominantly by the methods and models, professional norms and standards of economists. As discussed below, this orthodoxy is not accidental but symptomatic of the pursuit of ‘cognitive interest’ by professional researchers.

¹² Sheila Page, GDN Governance e-discussion, February 9th 2000 at:
www2.worldbank.org/hm/hmgdnet

¹³ Jurgen Habermas, *Theory and Practice*, Beacon Press, Boston, 1974, p. 44.

Placing ‘knowledge’ (and more specifically research) central to the development process is a profound re-conceptualisation of development not only in the World Bank but also in other development agencies that adopt similar language concerning the benefits of knowledge and research and the advantages of ‘evidence-based policy’.¹⁴ One implication is that the creation, management and transfer of knowledge becomes the primary axis or locus for international cooperation on development.

Sharing Knowledge 1: Networks

Networks are important mechanisms for the delivery of global public goods. Networks are also the means by which organizations individually and in coalition project their personnel and ideas into policy developments across states and within global or regional forums. Through networks, participants can build alliances, develop a common language and construct shared knowledge. From this basis, policy entrepreneurs can work to shape the terms of debate, networking with members of a policy making community, crafting arguments and ‘brokering’ their ideas to potential political supporters and patrons.

‘Global public policy networks’ are ‘alliances of government agencies, international organizations, corporations and elements of civil society that join together to achieve what none can accomplish alone’.¹⁵ These networks are relatively well institutionalized and often issue focused policy partnerships for the delivery of public policy. Examples

¹⁴ For example, the Netherlands Development Assistance Research Council, RAWOO *Utilization of Research for Development Cooperation: Linking Knowledge Production to Development Policy and Practice*, the Hague, RAWOO, 2001; and Danida, *Partnership at the Leading Edge: A Danish Vision for Knowledge, Research and Development*, Copenhagen, Danida, 2001.

¹⁵ Wolfgang Reinicke, ‘The Other World Wide Web: Global Public Policy Networks’, *Foreign Policy* (winter) 1999-2000.

include the Apparel Industry Partnership, the GDN, the Roll Back Malaria Initiative and the Global Environment Facility. With the active participation and involvement of decision-makers, these networks have potential to influence the shape of global governance. Virtually all draw in experts and advisers along with various NGOs, community groups and business interests specific to the policy focus of the network. The expertise, scientific knowledge, data and methods within research communities provide them with some authority to inform policymaking. Decision-makers require technical advice and specialized judgements. They pull researchers and other experts towards them and in so doing recognize the value of their advice and analysis thereby enhancing the authority of institutes individually and the network as a whole. In short, think tanks, institutes and coalitions of researchers are gradually moving from being persuasive societal actors to acquire through global networks, policy as well as epistemic authority.

‘Global public policy networks’ have been described as mechanisms to deliver public goods. While writing in this genre has been useful in mapping the growth of new governance structures for the management of global issues, the framework is empirically descriptive and relatively weak in explaining when, why and how research is useful. The epistemic community model, the ‘embedded knowledge networks’ framework and the transnational discourse community approach are more effective at dissecting the conditions when research and policy ideas might be influential.

The ‘epistemic community’ approach to policy networks highlights the role of scientific opinion and the weight of consensual knowledge of expert groups in shaping policy agendas, especially in circumstances of uncertainty.¹⁶ The dynamics of uncertainty, interpretation and institutionalization at the international level drive policy-makers towards the use of epistemic communities. Policy actors puzzle over the intractability of

¹⁶ Members of an epistemic community have (1) a shared set of normative and principled beliefs; (2) shared causal beliefs; (3) shared notions of validity; and (4) a common policy enterprise. Peter Haas, ‘Introduction: Epistemic Communities and International Policy Coordination’, *International Organization*, 46(1) 1992.

poverty and other development problems, which gives rise to demands for information in an attempt to understand and decode a complex reality. The production of meaning is key to the institutionalization of policy ideas. Epistemic communities that can offer information and interpretation for policy makers are in a pivotal agenda-setting position.

Two types of epistemic community operate. An ‘ad hoc coalition’ aims to solve a particular policy problem whereby the problem shapes the community. The ‘life’ of such communities ‘is limited to the time and space defined by the problem and its solutions’.¹⁷ The other kind is more constant and is aimed at the establishment and perpetuation of beliefs and visions as ‘dominant social discourses’. Of importance here, are the social interactions of the community that (re)produce interpretations of reality and the specific definitions of policy problems. An example would be the neo-liberal orthodoxy described as the Washington consensus. The GDN has epistemic qualities given the character of its members. However, the Network is not an institutional embodiment of one epistemic community but it is a forum where ‘techne’ is valued and a number of epistemic communities interact.

The epistemic community approach has been criticized for its undue emphasis on rationality and technocratic policy making. By contrast, the ‘embedded knowledge networks’ framework stresses the ideological functions of technical knowledge and its connections to material interests. These networks are composed of ‘ostensibly private institutions that possess authority because of their publicly acknowledged track records for solving problems, often acting as disinterested ‘technical’ parties in high-value, high-risk transactions, or in validating sets of norms and practices for a variety of service-provision activities’.¹⁸ While this concept was devised to account for the global influence

¹⁷ Adler and Haas, 1992, 371.

¹⁸ Timothy J. Sinclair, ‘Reinventing Authority; Embedded Knowledge Networks and the New Global Finance’, *Environment and Planning C: Government and Policy*, 18, 2000, pps. 487—502.

of major bond rating agencies rather than think tanks it provides similar emphasis on the importance of authoritative judgement making built and sustained through trade journals, professional associations and research departments (of investment banks) or consultancies. Aspects of policy making are privatized to non-state actors. 'Embedded' signifies that these actors are viewed as legitimate participants in a policy community.

The GDN seeks to embed itself, the regional networks and other developing country research institutes as authoritative actors in development debates. Notwithstanding the public good attributes of knowledge, this approach highlights the interests of the World Bank and other development institutions in 'independent' research and analysis that furthers their policy prescriptions that are largely in favour of pro-capitalist growth strategies to reduce poverty. In other words, certain forms of knowledge can have hegemonic qualities that help sustain a prevailing set of social relations. Knowledge networks are treated as 'deep infrastructural forms' that represent the 'micro-politics of contemporary hegemony'. They are symptomatic of the 'war of position'. The stress is on the link between ideas and the underlying constraints instituted by material interests and structures. Accordingly, think tanks and research institutes are becoming one component of 'globalizing elites': that is, a 'directive strategic element within globalizing capitalism'.¹⁹ In other words, GDN knowledge – research results, data, information about 'best practice' – is flavoured by the values of the post Washington Consensus.²⁰ Think tanks are being engaged in 'partnerships' where a local think tank, or a regional network, acts as an amplifier of World Bank perspectives and priorities. Specific policy approaches are reinforced by partner organizations in their national context and through building regional networks to share information and spread policy lessons. The GDN

¹⁹ Stephen Gill quoted in Sinclair, *op cit*, p. 494.

²⁰ This policy paradigm involved political choices in favour of certain policy practices (privatisation, deregulation, financial liberalisation and macro-economic stability) that promoted national policy harmonization. See Kaul, *op cit*, p. 591.

represents a means for sustaining the neo-liberal capitalist order through the reproduction of ideas supportive of it.

Where embedded knowledge networks highlight the role of ideas as subsidiary to interests, the 'transnational discourse community' perspective allows scope for ideas to have independent force. Discourse is less directed or strategic. The 'transnational discourse communities' concept emphasizes the independent power of symbols, language and policy narrative in shaping public and political understanding and constraining the choice of policy options. This approach is more effective in recognizing the presence and power of counter-discourses. The GDN is composed of many contradictory research narratives. Hegemony is incomplete and partial. A grid-like complex of ideas shaping consciousness and dominating the global order gives little credence to alternative world-views and sites of intellectual resistance within and beyond the GDN.

The transnational character of professional communities allows them to emphasize their professional identity and transcend the 'categories of identity' usually imposed by the nation-state system. In other words, development researchers tend to assume a global or regional outlook on development issues. This applies to the GDN where national identities of researchers, donors and international civil servants are complicated by the professional commitment to questions of development that are increasingly less questions of national determination under the impact of globalization. Transnational communities are discursively defined.

On the one hand, professionals create a transnational community through a boundary drawing discourse that defines who and what is to be considered inside and outside the community. Thus, the specific vocabulary and jargon, the speech and meeting rituals etc. do not only set up possibilities for the professionals who master them. They also serve to delimit access to the

particular community, establishing a distinction between professionals and non-professionals, and between good and bad professionals.²¹

Research narratives are constructed in expert ‘codes’ and generate ‘effects of truth’. That is, ‘normalizing or naturalizing specific ways of thinking and doing things, often with a claim to scientific or other expertise’.

The GDN rhetoric of science, ‘best practice’ and knowledge sharing, and its portrayal as a global partnership to produce public goods de-emphasizes the ideological character of the Network and privileges of technical economic knowledge. What is ‘shared’ indeed, disseminated and broadcast globally via the GDN are broadly similar sets of policy paradigms or development discourse. While access to the GDN is open, participation is restricted to those individuals and institutes that display mastery of *techne* and dominant discourses.

In these three approaches, knowledge is not simply an important resource in a network but represents a form of authority. All have in common the perspective of research and expert knowledge as endemic to the policy process. The knowledge credentials and expertise of network actors gives them credibility and special status in investigating and debating policy issues and in making recommendations. Rather than ascribing power to individual experts or think tanks, the focus is on the collective network endeavours that institutionally embed certain technical discourses as hegemonic within international organizations and global public policy networks.

Despite important differences regarding how ‘science’, ‘ideology’ and ‘discourse’ impacts on policy, these network concepts help take an understanding of global policy partnerships beyond public goods analysis to focus on processes of exclusion and unequal

²¹ Hans Krause Hansen, Dorte Salskov-Iversen and Sven Bislev, ‘Transnational Discourse Communities: Globalizing Public Management’ in R. Higgott & M Ougaard (eds) *Understanding the Global Polity*, London, Routledge, 2002, forthcoming.

(but shifting) positions of power in privatized domains of policy formulation. Rather than seeking to discard two of these concepts in favour of a preferred approach, there is value in each and prospects for synthesis. Whilst this research agenda on the ‘power of ideas’ needs development beyond this paper, it is a strategy that recognizes that the reasons why research becomes influential is multidimensional.

Sharing Knowledge 2: Policy Transfer

Cross-national experience, ‘policy transfer’ or ‘lesson-drawing’ is having an increasingly powerful impact upon decision-makers within the private, public and third sectors of nation-states. ‘Policy transfer’ is a process by which societies adapt or synthesize ‘global forms’ of knowledge to suit local circumstances. It also has a promising reverse effect in the extent to which ‘local knowledge’ is fed back into international organizations and donor agencies. Whilst policy transfer involves primarily the state, as well as international organizations, with key actors being bureaucrats and politicians, non-state entities can also be involved in the export of ideas. They are concerned with ‘*knowledge* about how policies, administrative arrangements, institutions and ideas in one political setting (past or present) is used in the development of policies, administrative arrangements, institutions and ideas in another political setting’.²² Knowledge actors (individuals, organizations and networks) act as ‘policy entrepreneurs’ and engage with officials in government and international organization in the international spread of ideas and information.

Whilst the phrase ‘lesson-drawing’ signifies a voluntaristic process of policy learning, the word diffusion can suggest either the organic spread or natural percolation of policy

²² David Dolowitz and David Marsh, David. ‘Learning From Abroad: The Role of Policy Transfer in Contemporary Policy Making’, *Governance* 13 (1) 2000. p. 5.

ideas or it can evoke the idea of ‘contagion’.²³ By contrast, ‘policy penetration’ and ‘direct coercive transfer’ – are terms that convey a compulsion to conform. Conditionality imposed by the International Monetary Fund (IMF) or the development banks is the most obvious example of coercion to conform to a set of internationally determined standards and ‘best practice’. Emulation, by contrast, involves borrowing ideas and adapting policy approaches, tools or structures to local conditions. Another nation or jurisdiction can be viewed as a policy innovator and an exemplar where policy practice can be monitored by policy elites and analysts elsewhere for lessons and insights to shape policies at home. Ideas or policies are imported. This is the manner in which the GDN is portrayed. The language adopted by leading World Bank figures and in its official documents is revealing. It is the apolitical language of ‘diffusion’ and ‘sharing knowledge’ alongside the technical or neutral terms of ‘scanning globally’ for ‘best practice’ suitable for ‘local adaptation’.²⁴ Former World Bank Chief Economist, Joseph Stiglitz (2000) advised the GDN partner institutes that:

If the developing countries are really to be ‘in the drivers’ seat’ they have to have the capacity to analyse the often difficult economic issues which they face. Local researchers, combining the knowledge of local conditions—including knowledge of local political and social structures—with the learning derived from global experiences, provides the best prospects for deriving policies which are both effective and engender broad-based support. That is why locally-based research institutions are so important.²⁵

²³ Stephen Walt, ‘Fads, Fevers and firestorms’ *Foreign Policy*, Nov/Dec 2000, pps.34-42.

²⁴ Stiglitz, op cit.

²⁵ Ibid.

Non-state actors – like the most of the institutes in the GDN – are better at the 'soft transfer' of broad policy ideas influencing public opinion and policy agendas.²⁶ The spread of ideas and research standards is achieved softly via the Global Development Awards and the IMF fellowship scheme. By contrast, officials are more involved in 'hard' transfer of policy practices and instruments involving formal decision-making. Scientific associations, foundations, training institutes, NGOs, consultants and other knowledge actors stimulate the spread of policy ideas through conferences and research collaboration but also through co-operative engagement and partnerships with official actors. Their intellectual authority or market expertise reinforces and legitimates certain forms of policy or normative standards as 'best practice'. Importantly, network interactions help form common patterns of understanding – an 'elite consensus' of the kind associated with epistemic communities – regarding the appropriate policies to stimulate economic growth.

The GDN encourages the co-production of local, regional and global knowledge on 'best practice'. The key agents of transfer are think tanks. They have four-fold capacity. Firstly, think tanks are a mechanism to bridge the national and the international domains of policy through their networking ability. Secondly, they are regarded (sometimes incorrectly) as a vehicle of civil society traversing the governmental and non-governmental domains helping to build wider social and political support for policy reform. Thirdly, they have the intellectual infrastructure to construct channels of communication between the political and the research worlds thereby facilitating the flow of knowledge into policy. Finally, they have the expert credentials and scholarly legitimacy to judge, evaluate, synthesize and weed out 'useful' or 'valid' research and analysis from among the cacophonous welter of information pressed upon public bodies by NGOs, corporations, lobbyists and others.

²⁶ Mark Evans and Jonathon Davies, 'Understanding Policy Transfer: A Multi-level, Multi-disciplinary Perspective', *Public Administration*, 77 (2) 1999, pps. 361-385.

The form of knowledge that is mobilized by the World Bank is primarily focussed on economic liberalisation and market globalization. Unsurprisingly, the World Bank partners with organizations that exhibit common values and norms. Furthermore, the structural power of World Bank in shaping not only the supply but also demand for development knowledge is significant. Indeed, ‘New ideas are more likely to travel if they have powerful partisans’.²⁷ Political themes and policy approaches are reinforced by Bank capacity-building programs for research institutes at a domestic level and through building regional and global policy networks to share information, spread policy lessons and promote technical knowledge on the causes of, and solutions to, poverty and stalled economic development. Alternative perspectives on development and grass-roots knowledge are not excluded in either the Bank or the GDN but can have a more difficult passage given the credence placed on academic credentials and the institutional strength of professional economists.

Using and Embedding Knowledge

In the first two years of its existence, the GDN was on a path of development that structurally favoured certain groups of researchers – development economists. This was evident in conference participation, awards procedures and allocation of funds to early research programs. The constriction of research agendas not only has implications for the kinds of researchers attracted to the Network but also the manner in which development issues are framed, problems defined and solutions proposed. This has been noted by the GDN Governing Body which introduced measures to rectify perceived imbalances.²⁸

²⁷ Walt, op cit. p. 38.

²⁸ GDN Governing Body ‘Promotion of Research in All Social Sciences’, Washington DC., GDN, 2001.

The dominance of economic frameworks and thinking has resulted to great extent because of the apparent relevance of the discipline to development questions but also as a consequence of the ‘cognitive interest’ of embedded knowledge actors (development economists but also other consultants and experts) in professional regeneration and institutional entrenchment. These professionals attempt to secure control over resources, prestige and position within the Network. As noted by one donor representative, the GDN is supply led by researchers rather than a demand-driven initiative.²⁹

If researchers are to be ‘suppliers of solutions’ through policy research they need to define development problems in such a way as to encourage recourse to their expertise. Not doing so would mean that researchers define themselves out of consideration as possible providers of solutions.³⁰ Accordingly, a lack of knowledge is defined as part of the (development) problem. Experts, consultants and advisors have a professional stake in the ‘knowledge agenda’ of the ‘knowledge bank’ and of other international organizations. The ‘cognitive interest’ of development researchers is met, in small part, through the GDN with its support for research institutes and the dissemination of knowledge (the web-site at: www.gdnet.org, the annual conference, etc). The Network also provides grants and scholarship information, training and data initiatives that aid the regeneration of researchers.

This general tendency coincides with the more specific professional dominance of economic thinking and prescription within the World Bank. Traditionally, economics has

²⁹ Dag Ehrenpreis, Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development, ‘Comments on GDN and its work program from a donor perspective’, GDN Annual Conference, Rio di Janeiro, 2002. http://www.gdnet.org/subpages/t4-frame.html?http://www.gdnet.org/subpages/events_rio_Ehrenpreis.htm

³⁰ Knut Knutsen and Ole Sending ‘The Instrumentalisation of Development Knowledge’, in Diane Stone (ed.) *Banking on Knowledge: The Genesis of the Global Development Network*, London, Routledge , 2000.

been the most important discipline from which Bank staff are recruited.³¹ Not only are development economists ‘embedded’, they also have a cognitive interest in the selective use of their mode of problem definition, methodological approaches and policy solutions. Consequently, cognitive interests compete not only in scientific terms but engage in rent-seeking to gain access to resources and recognition. Development economists in the World Bank and their partner organizations attempt to extend their professional interests into the GDN. This is no surprise: individual researchers and organizations will seek to take advantage of opportunities that promote their careers, provide access to resources or potential for mutually beneficial partnerships. Yet, their preferred pursuit of technical knowledge becomes a self-reinforcing dynamic that encourages resistance to other disciplinary approaches as well as practical knowledge.

Notwithstanding these tendencies, it is not the case that the World Bank is a monolithic entity with a united and coherent position on all questions of development to which staff happily subscribe. To portray the Bank in this fashion misses the complexity of perspectives in the organisation. There are constant bureaucratic battles that modify and dilute hegemonic uniformity and consistency of purpose in Bank operations. This is not to suggest that there is not a broad policy consensus amongst many Bank personnel as well as among many of their counterparts in ‘client countries’. However, epistemic neo-liberal unity exists only amongst some and it is in constant contest with other perspectives. In other words, the discourse of poverty reduction is shared but there are divergent positions on how to achieve this aspiration.

³¹ This is reflected in the categorisation of career grades for professional staff: economist, senior economist, lead economist, principal economist and chief economist or what would be identified as ‘boundary drawing’ in discourse analysis. However, this has slowly been modified with redirections in Bank policy that has placed greater credence on other disciplinary insights and lead to wider recruitment practices. There are staff with the designation ‘senior social scientist’ or ‘senior specialist’.

Similarly, the Global Development Network is grappling with the question of how best to accommodate social science diversity. It is a research community driven by scientific competition as much as any other, more altruistic motive to produce global public goods. This tendency is not uncontested,³² nor is it unchangeable. The GDN is still evolving and now that it is outside the Bank, it is increasingly subject to pressures from a more diverse range of stakeholders. However, cultural change comes about slowly in large, federal global networks and potentially not as fast as the waning interest of some donor groups might dictate.

Conclusion

The World Bank has not acted alone in its nurturing of the GDN – it is a multilateral initiative. The IMF, the UN and the OECD amongst others are highly professionalised organisations with core research staff can also be thought of as ‘knowledge organisations’. Similarly, the world’s major foundations – Ford, MacArthur, Sasakawa, – and the civil servants based in development agencies like DfID or JBIC have strong ‘cognitive’ interest in research informing policy. Research organizations and individual experts adapt to the ‘knowledge for development’ discourse coming from donors. However, they also meet the challenges and opportunities afforded by new multilateral initiatives and nascent global institutions. In other words, researchers are able to pursue their cognitive interests in new institutional developments such as global public policy networks, of which the GDN is only one manifestation. Consequently, knowledge organizations and their networks are likely to be a fruitful domain for further analysis and research.

³² There has been criticism from key groups within the GDN concerning undemocratic procedures and an unequal distribution of network resources and position. See the GDN electronic discussions archived at: <http://www.worldbank.org/devforum>

The 'embedded knowledge network' framework is useful in highlighting how private associations or in this case, networks, ascribe authority through collective action. Through patronage from and partnerships with multilateral agencies and governments, GDN institutes are recognized and legitimized as expert sources of policy research. These inter-relationships help embed the GDN as a global policy network. Experts become embedded and reinforce a dominant ideology. The approach is less, effective, however, in accounting for contests between knowledges within the Network and the 'coded ways' of representing development problems. Similarly, it is less successful in accounting for the autonomous technocratic pursuit towards policy relevant research or what has been described here as 'cognitive interest'.

The epistemic community framework better accounts for the scientific character of the Network and the feasibility of the independent impact and power of ideas in conditions of policy uncertainty or the intractability of many development problems. The approach can better accommodate the notion of 'cognitive interest' where epistemic communities promote 'consensual knowledge' into public domains and policy realms. Yet, the GDN is not an epistemic community of development economists. Development economists share many common professional standards, but what is missing amongst this field is a common policy project expressed through the GDN.

Discourse approaches stress the boundary drawing discourses of meetings, e-discussions, and research projects. Not only does the elite, technical and mostly economic language of the Network help establish new research possibilities for the professionals that master it, it also limits access to the Network establishing 'a distinction between professionals and non-professionals and, between good and bad professionals'. Implicit in the conflict over multi-disciplinarity in the Network are differences about what constitutes quality research. There are a variety of discourse communities represented in the GDN. However, they are not on an equal footing. A discourse coalition of development economists has achieved discourse structuration – that is, it has been able to set most research agendas. It has not institutionalised (or become 'embedded') and this is the front line of the GDN where the battle of ideas is being waged.

The most relevant research findings do not always capture political attention and much policy research lies fallow without a dialogue with those in power. The receptivity of decision-makers to new ideas is often politically determined in situations where science and expertise is not seen as 'objective knowledge' but as 'contested information'. Accordingly, the conditions and practices by which ideas are recognized and selected by governments or international organizations and then interpreted, applied, modified or rejected need to be understood.

The thrust of this article has been to suggest that networks are one social technology that amplifies the power of research or development knowledge in policy. Yet, the diffusion of ideas, the mobilisation of knowledge and the transfer of 'best practice' is not uncontroversial. A certain type of knowledge, a particular way of looking at and interpreting the world, and the best practices as determined by the international financial institutions, corporations and worlds leading governments are mobilised through networks.