

What does research into use actually mean: a view from the reality of practice?

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Abstract:

Research into use embraces holistic approach to governance and management and integrates activities with innovation systems that would work better than working in isolation. Locating processes through which research can be used to address development challenges viz. poverty reduction is increasingly seen crucial. With reference to Research into Use project in Nepal, we will discuss about myriad of processes, many unanticipated that need to be undertaken to make innovation happen. This involves several reflexive exercises, relationship innovation and unconventional modes of cooperation, which are often bypassed in development programs. We conclude that understanding the processes that lead development innovations can lead to identification of practical responses to address complex challenges of the real world. Questioning the relevanc of understanding RIU as impacts, we identify the need to promote discursive debates solidifying the way RIU shall be understood and also, implemented.

Key words: innovation, adaptive capacity, impact, poverty, forestry, Nepal, evaluation

1. INTRODUCTION

Just after the Mid-term review evaluation, we (the project team) sat for self-reflection and review of the evaluation meeting we just had with the evaluators. This reflection is a regular activity that we used to do in the project after every event/activity, focusing on the essence and learning of such activities to our understanding and overall improvisation. All of us had unanimous opinion that the evaluation went really well and that we had been able to showcase the project's ground realities and its achievements made so far in social, economic, environmental and multi actor innovations in the project sites. Our understanding was, however, laid down by the evaluation. The evaluation reported that the aims and objectives of the project team do not fit with those of the project and that the project should be brought to an early closure. Moreover, the evaluation was of the opinion that project should not have received the funding and that the modalities and working methods are entirely different than designed by the program concepts, putting research into use. The review totally contradicted our understanding about putting research into use- the very project.

This contradiction is the theme of the discussion paper- putting research into use: in realities of practice and in evaluations of practice. It revolves around several contested understanding of “putting research into use” and how such contestations can sometimes totally differ and may also be unable to grasp the complex realities taking place within the project. While the whole concept of the discussion paper evolved after a negative evaluation report (noting the fact that evaluation carries currency for project’s success or failure), we do not aim to provide an exhaustive list and framework of evaluation measures. Rather, we aim to focus on processes through which research can address development challenges by showcasing the processes of innovation. Such processes take time, laden with conflict, and often intangible. Yet, these are central to our overall understanding of how research can make impact through its usage, in real worlds.

Our reason for problematizing these issues is our own involvement in a project on reducing poverty through innovation in community forestry (shortly called as RPISF/RIU Nepal). This project is an action and learning initiative project funded by Research into Use RIU/DFID. We could say that the project has been a success. We were able to conduct all the programs designed according to the log frame. We also possess detailed design plans of about 48 CFUGs. We also gained a fair understanding of multistakeholder processes and how dynamics within these processes can affect poverty reduction strategies at community level (peer-reviewed papers published, presentations at international conference delivered). However, with evaluation’s response, we had to be aware of the contested views through which research into use can be understood/evaluated.

As many researchers and other interested parties currently are involved with putting research into use for poverty reduction and overall development, we think understanding the practical ways of putting research for development can clearly lay out the spectrum in which innovation occurs. However, development is also understood as listing of successful impacts only. In this paper, we analyze what research into use actually entails in real world and what importance it carries to development. Further, we contrast the real world practice with the existing understanding RIU as list of successful impacts only. Questioning the relevance of understanding RIU as impacts, we identify the need to promote discursive debates solidifying the way RIU shall be understood and also, implemented.

2. THE PROJECT-RPISF/RIU

RPISF-RIU is built on the understanding that holistic approach to governance and management and integrating activities with innovation systems would work better than working in isolation. Its’ strategy involves i) facilitating key activity on ground with partnership of stakeholders as appropriate, ii) reflecting on the processes and outcomes of each events/activities, and iii) providing policy feedback and establishing link with other levels based on key lessons in concrete terms these are (see Figure 1-). It is successfully managed by the coalition of diverse organizations including ForestAction, Federation of Community Forest Users Groups, Nepal (FECOFUN), Forum for Environmental Journalists

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(NEFEJ), Nepal Herbs and Herbal Product Association, and Tribhuvan University.

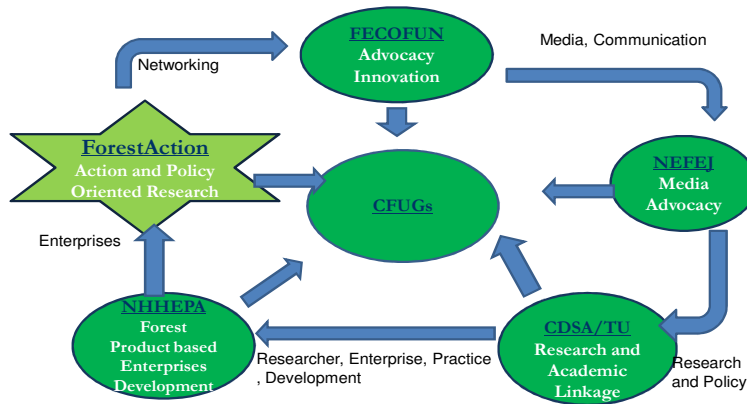


Figure 1: Approach and partners of RPISF-RIU

As Figure 1 shows, RPISF-RIU has used several combinations to put research into use. These range from novel arrangements within community (such as Thematic committees) to bonding mechanisms from community to meso to national level (increasing the responsiveness and accountability of the decision-makers). Also, the design has also focused on partnerships with relevant public, private and civil society organizations at local, national and regional levels, so that the promotion and adoption of research outputs takes place through, and builds capacity. While the practice-such as participatory setting and decentralized connections might just be the same or similar if compared to any other development projects, the process of reflecting and translating the lessons encountered into processes led to innovative outcomes in RPISF-RIU.

Thus, the overall understanding of putting research into use was to elucidate the process through which research can be better used to promote social and economic development (similar understanding of RIU has been provided at www.researchintouse.com). This understanding has been achieved under five objectives in the project RPISF-RIU, with several activities and scaling up of lessons at different levels, finally contributing to social economic development as indicated by following evidences.

3. HOW CAN RESEARCH WORK FOR DEVELOPMENT IN REAL WORLDS?

Innovations emerge from using a learning and improvising approach through generated, tested, encountered lessons. It involves myriad of processes that

goes behind RPISF initiatives and partnerships. Locaitng innovations in RPISF substantially revolved around local communities, regional and national stakeholders to identify the settings, contexts, people, policies and institutions that are important to link social and economic development. While some of the activities are pre-designed (aligning to the log-frame), we discovered various spectrum of challenges and innovations lessons whilst putting the research for development.

3.1 Initial gearing and consultation on processes can help to spot innovations. RPISF-RIU strive to orient partners, NGOs, communities etc towards embracing the concept of makign research work for development was challenging and taxing. As an example, despite the existing research indicating inadequacies in CFUG instiutional functioning, mainly in benefit-sharing, leadership representation and transparney, the local communities should be made able to fperceive the differences first to come up with innovative solutions. Thus, several forest management and governance workshops were provided to local communities, where they were made aware of existing inadequacies. This led the communities to revise their existing work plan with strict mandates on benefit-sharing system, leadership representation and transparency. Several of CFUGs have proposed to change the leadership and brought forth inclusive (e.g. women, low caste, ethnic mintories were represented in executive comittee of Communitz Forestry) representation of their community. Likewise, in severa CFUGs, many of the executive mebers informed local user groups about the existing fund status, which have not been shared for a decade. Local communities also crafted their short-term and long-term visioning plan with them seeking assistance from various other projects (not related to RPISF and its partners). Also, RPISF-RIU visioning programs have helped to dismantle the existing social discrimination such as caste and gender based discrimination, while also work towards setting up enterprises based on value chain analysis and interaction with concerned stakeholders.

3.2 Investment in institutional systems can strengthen innovative lessons. RIU investment has played a significant role in strengthening the existing institutional system (e.g. CFUGs, Local level federations, FECOFUN district chapters) and has introduced new organizational system (e.g. Thematic Working Committees, Hamlet Based Committee within CFUGs, Community Based Resource Centers (established and well functioning in Baglung and Lalitpur district). These initiatives of RIU are recognized as the best practices of working with communities by the Government and, therefore, one of the RIU working CFUG e.g. Binaybagar CFUG of Nawalparasi was selected for awarding the Best community Forests of Nawalparasi district. In addition to this, CBRCs established by RIU have their own management committee, a staff hired for day to day operation, is the example of expansion, and the CBRC established by RIU was also recognized by the Government of Nepal. The Ministry of Science and Technology (MOST) have already start supporting to CBRC.Support has been provided in the form of computers, and other instrument as demanded by the management committee of CBRC Lalitpur in 2009. The Lamatar Village

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Development Committee has already allocated NRs. 50,000 for the further development of CBRC.

3.3 Lessons gained from a site has helped to improvise practice at other sites. As an example, in a less-resource dependant community in Lamatar cluster, different approach of labor and reward mechanisms has been used to set up bio-briquette enterprise (see lessons of quarterly report Y2Q3). Local communities and district stakeholders, during several interactions, stated that such an arrangement is apt and will help the poor people, while providing disincentives to free-riding population (who only wanted to reap benefits due to collectvely owned enterprises).

3.4 Cross-linking with institutions can lead to better understanding of processes. As an example, FECOFUN has strong institutional linkage with local communities, however, it lacks technical know-how about potentiality of micro-enterprises, identification of medicinal plants potential for commercialization and other matter embedded with it. With lessons from other research interventions of FA, it worked with RPSIF/RIU to establish the knowledge system that RPISF/RIU has been generating in relation to micro-enterprise development, long term planning for sustainable livelihoods etc. beyond the RIU project.

3.5 Linking practice and policy through various platforms. RPISF/RIU provided common platforms like district level stakeholder interaction, national level sharing to reflect the lessons and challenges of working to all concerned stakeholders such as a government officers, private agencies, researchers and citizen networks. Reflection and evidences from RPISF/RIU are used to inform the concerned stakeholders and engage them in deliberative discussion on key issues of forest management, group governance and enterprise development. Linking everyday practice and unraveling associated complexity through such deliberation helps to identify the major gaps and possible solutions, which need to be incorporated, both in practice and in policy. As examples, reflective workshops and interaction meetings between communities and concerned agencies leads to development of common models (.e.g. Bio-Briquette production in Lalitpur, Timber processing in Nawalparasi) for economic change. Such linkage of research into use-both in practice and policy is key to implementing RPISF-RIU. Such regular interaction among concerned agencies reduces confusions was found to calrify their roles and spaces and enhanced energy and enthusiasm among them, thereby increasing collective commitment to engage in the process of innovation.

3.6 Amalgamting other lessons from Forest Action's project to develop processes through which solutions can be crafted. As an example, FA recommended a need of clear provision for pro-poor and community based enterprise development on the existing national policies (Forest Act 1993, the industrial enterprise act 1992, Community forestry directives 1995, the company act 2006, Industrial policy 2009, Micro-enterprise policy 2008). ForestAction through its various community based initiatives by working with several national

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and international organizations (RRI, ODI, PKF Foundation, CARE Nepal, LFP, UNDP, IDRC, ICRAF, MEDEP, EU-VCP, RIU-IDRC, CCO-FNR, WB-PTF) has gained several lessons and has been continuously working to develop a well established relationship of working with private sector in order to find sustainable solutions in the matter embedded to our scope of working.

3.7 Varied modes of knowledge and dissemination channles add to exapnsion of innovative practices.

Community based resources centers are established to document to local knowledge, practices, and out-scale best practices of one community to others. Access to information and communciaiton channels through resoruce centeres has been proven effective to narrow gap on communciaiton and dissemination. Also, regular Radio programs are becoming community friendly tools of distance learning as they are only source of information in the rural areas in project sites and are becoming means of out-scaling the lessons

3.8 New challenges requiries novel modes of cooperations: When enterprises were about to evolve in many of RPISF-RIU sites, the role and conflict owing to state's regulatory policies became more apparent. These findings have been shared at community, regional, national and international levels through several cluster workshops, district stakeholder interactions and use of policy networks. Also, to solve these challenges, RPISF-RIU has worked in close collaboration with state forest agencies to develop exemplary constitutions of two CFUGs in Lalitpur district. Such joint collaboration of state and non-state actors, i.e. Department of Forest (a government agency) and ForestAction Nepal (a NGO), are reported to be perceived more trustworthy and accountable by the CFUG members. Also, the state forest agencies have stated that if programs are jointly organized with civil society like ForestAction, people feel secure and participate and often claim ownership on the program, while also clarifying their legal roles, rights and space to state partners. This is also reported to increase the responsiveness of state forest agencies to clarify the legal hurdles to community forestry based entrepreneurship.

3.8 Enhancing capacity lead to innovative outcomes. With RPISF-RIU substantive engagement, CFUGs have moved towards sustainable use and management of community forest from conventional protection oriented management. Elements of active management and economic benefits through payment for ecosystem services (PES), eco-tourism, and forestry based micro enterprises are being practiced in these CFUGs (PES mechanism in Patle and Goldada CFUG of Lalitpur, Eco-tourism in Lamatar cluster, NTFP processing and selling in Sundari CFUG, Binaybagar CFUG and Vedabari CFUG in Nawalparasi).

4. CONTESTED VIEWS OF RESEARCH INTO USE AND ITS IMPLICATION

Over the span of about two and a half years, the project team and the RIU management has mulled over building concrete understanding about "what does

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Research into Use actually mean and how shall it be implemented” (see www.researchintouse.com). Initially, the call for the proposal (in 2006 announcement of RIU) specifically wanted previous research results to be put into use and not limited to establish business models. In response to the call, ForestAction wanted to consolidate previous research findings, generated through renewal natural resource research strategy (RNRRS) and other support systems, into wider use and dissemination, while also trying to address specific research questions (see original RIU proposal submitted by ForesAction) as part of learning through the scaling up process. Later when RIU revised its mandate more towards research into use, we have also consolidated our research processes and plans.

Also, to ensure that RIU team has similar understanding, several homework has been carried out over the project period, viz. refining of log frame, provision of senior level statistician, several round of coalition meetings and consultation with experts to ensure project modality fits in RIU frame meetings its objectives of research into policy use. Refining program’s log-frame, strategy etc. had been a regular activity in RIU contrary to the only-three year span of RIU projects. Such rigorous and frequent exercise can also be understood as an indication of the complexity and confusion that the term, “research into use” entails.

And indeed, the complexity and confusion was huge in terms of understanding research into use. Even within the project partners of RPISF-RIU, each partner has their own interpretation of understanding research into use, and thus the difference in implementation patterns to realize the objectives. In the beginning, partners have been tempted to fulfill the objectives as “products” e.g. having a said number of trainings delivered. But with research into use, the processes has to be made apparent, researchable, and thus, to be well-captured. Most of the early training reports included only number of participants, often categorized by their sections such as caste, gender, poverty etc. The essence of the processes such as the motivation that the local user groups/members have in the trainings, changes that these groups/members foresee after the trainings etc. have often been not reported in the initial reports. This has called for RPISF-RIU project team discuss about understanding both products and processes related to putting research into use. But with existent development practice, where development has often been understood as delivery and project implementation merely as meeting up the indicators of log-frame, it was quite a challenge to evolve an “alter-image” of process-orientated development, the research into use. It was also difficult to generate data- local user groups were also not acquainted with questions of “how” but with “how many”. Likewise, equally challenging was to rectify the local user groups’ perception of research into use as one another development project, that may offer lots of substantive deliverables viz. RPISF-RIU received communications from various local user groups for (financial) support for many of development- related work (such as road construction, school-building etc.). The notion of substantive deliverables is so well crafted in local’s minds that each of RPISF-RIU interaction at local level would start by interacting (while also informing and clarifying) that RPISF-RIU is

Papaer of the workshop, IASC.

a research project, and not a development project with substantive deliverables. This was tough on RPISF-RIU project team because the locals' may show and in many cases, have initially shown disinterest after knowing about the project.

The disinterest of the locals can also be attributed to the way development and NGOs work is framed in existent settings of developing country, like Nepal. NGOs were often portrayed as “cultivating dollars” (Dollar ko kheti in Nepali language) and, providing substantive deliverables to the community (e.g. distributing handpipes for water resources, substantive subsidy to road, school construction etc.). Thus, locals had perceived of receiving substantive returns from RPISF-RIU in return to their participation into the project. Also, because of the very common substantive returns associated with every development project/practice, it was also difficult on part of locals to think about processes and not necessarily products that can capacitate them. To brainstorm about the designed scenario and process of development that the locals want (mainly through community forestry), RPISF-RIU team had to innovate several formal and informal discussion sessions to capture the best-practices and put them into use.

Likewise, similar perceptions were encountered with the state officials. When RPISF-RIU team interacted with state officials about the project, state officials would want to change the project sites- in case both of us would be working in the same site. They also held the opinion that RPISF-RIU (huge) resources should not be vested into the same site (where state is also using its resources but is to be shared to some other sites). Again, RPISF-RIU had to explain hard about the mode of the research project and its focus on reflection about processes to achieve social and economic development. “That sounds research, not development,” was a common response.

Similarly, the evaluators had different understanding of putting research into use. Though RIU emphasized evaluation of six narratives (RIU, 2010)- Poor-led innovation, Public private partnership innovation, capacity development–led innovation, opportunity-led innovation, investment-led innovation, and research communication led innovation and likewise to evaluate poverty impact, social impact, process impact and policy impact as possible central themes for its impact evaluation (*ibid*); understanding research into use as bearings of some and not all of these elements can provide an incomplete and contrasting to realities' scenario. As an example, understanding reserch into use as primarily focusing on “public private partnership-led innovation” and “investment-led innovation”, can largely overlook other important themes such as poor-led innovation, capacity development–led innovation, and research communication led innovation. Also, if the lens of private sector involvement with specific clients, transactions, resources and spread etc. is used to understand/evaluate public sector innovation, it is quite likely that policy, networking and relationship innovations that have been critical for the public sector will go unnoticed.

5. INNOVATIVE PROCESS-LED OUTCOMES LEAD TO DEVELOPMENT

There are significant variations in the way research into use has been understood and evaluated. Such variations reflect sharp contradictions on how research into use actually occurs in real world. Implementing research for development requires a close focus on processes with a keen eye on innovative clicks that work at one context and fail at the other. Thus, the process involves a wider spectrum of surprises and pitfalls, not anticipated in project design, nor indicated in the log-frame.

However, sustainable development of projects are often measured within the framework of replicating/expanding/spreading the projects' ideas and programs. Thus, development is measured as successful interventions improvised against program baseline only. More commonly, the normal way of understanding development follows an approach of "what research leads to how many products", and limited on understanding the "how story" behind such interventions i.e. what has been in place to make the interventions, even if these interventions did not work, what lessons have been generated, to be effectively used to locate alternative modes of innovations? What about the projects- where the designed programs fail but community can sustain by designing/adapting/changing to new propositions that more aptly fits them?

Putting research into development requires novel processes to understand sustainability, to nuances that increase the adaptive innovative capacity and management of the target in question. Narrow understanding of research to come up with quick results instead of focusing on building innovation capacities run the risk of closing the programs after the project terminates.

Research into use is about exploring and working with the whole breath of the innovation context and process and trying to find ways of muddling through and getting a sense of what might fit best, when and where and how to deal with surprises along the way. However, given the contradictions and power positions behind conceptualizing RIU and its actions can impinge the process of putting research into use. As an example, with evaluators in a deciding position with contrasting views of research into use, the project RPISF-RIU has been called for early closure based on the certain questionnaire developed by the evaluators (see Annex 1 for detailed responses about their and our understanding about the RIU project in Nepal and relevant contradictions).

Acknowledgements

We greatly recognize RIU programme and colleagues – Mr. Kamal Bhandari, Mrs. Jeni Maharjan, Mr. Maniram Banjade, Dr. Naya Sharma Paudel and Dr. Hemant R. Ojha for their reflections and inputs in this paper. We acknowledge funding from IDRC and DFID/RIU in the project.

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