**TRANSCRIPT – EPISODE 4: How does research impact on practice?**

ANNOUNCER:
Welcome to thinking on development, a podcast by the Institute for Global Development at UNSW. Each episode we are joined by new guests to explore some of developments biggest questions. This episode is produced in partnership with the chief editorial team at development in practice, a journal focused on bridging the gap between research and practice and development. It is also supported by the Development Studies Association of Australia, as well as the Research for Development Impact Network. More information on our partners is available in the episode description.

DAVID SANDERSON:
Hello, my name is David Sanderson. In today's podcast, we're asking how does research impact on practice? Not that long ago, it was thought that just doing good to help the poorest was good enough. Some still do think that. But just doing good doesn't mean it helps, lots of efforts aimed at reducing poverty have actually done harm. Today, the appetite for evidences and development is high, especially among donors needing to prove their money is well spent, especially at a time of COVID also among aid agencies committed to ending poverty. But development is broad and even saying what evidence is hotly debated. Divisions between research and practice also run deep. The stereotype is that practitioners see researchers as detached from reality. Well, perhaps researchers wonder why practice ignores the evidence. How then does research impact on practice? Who takes it up and how? And how do we get better at making research usable? Well, to discuss this, I'm joined by three people who really know what the issues are.

DAVID SANDERSON:
Joyce Wu is a senior lecturer in the School of Social Sciences at UNSW. She's also a Fulbright senior scholar, a visiting fellow at the Australian National University. Joyce's research includes sexual and gendered violence in conflict situations. Rochelle Spencer is a senior lecturer at Murdoch University and co-director of the Centre for Responsible Citizenship and Sustainability. Rochelle is also a founding member of the Development Studies Association of Australia and is the university chair for the Research for Development Impact Network. Patrick Kilby is a senior lecturer at the Australian National University and convener of the masters of Applied Anthropology and Participatory Development program. Patrick is also adjunct professor at Western Sydney University.

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Joyce Rochelle and Patrick make up the chief editorial team at developments in practice, a journal currently managed by the Development Studies Association of Australia that aims to bridge the gap between practitioners and academics. So, who better to discuss this topic? I think with Joyce, Rochelle, and Patrick were very good hands and welcome, and thank you for finding the time to join us for this podcast. Rochelle, let me start with you, you're chair of the research for the Development Impact Network. What do we mean by research impact in development?

ROCHELLE SPENCER:
Thank you, David. First, I would like to acknowledge the Whadjuk people of the Noongar nation who remain the spiritual and cultural Beaghera of these Korbenak boodja. They play a really significant role for our community in Western Australia to flourish. And so I wanna pay my respects to elder's past, present and merging. That's pretty important question that you raise David, thank you. Particularly in, I don't know, this new era of a post-truth politics, I think a lack of research to provide evidence is the potential to... It has the potential to have a really dramatic effect on knowledge production and knowledge brokering if you like because it undermines the importance of scribe to evidence as the fundamental basis for good policymaking and that aid and international development space.

ROCHELLE SPENCER:
So, I think the importance of trust and legitimacy in knowledge production is very important. And it resonates with the recent challenges that we see being placed on the value of evidence. So, for example, in my various roles with national bodies, I've seen that there's a lack of value placed on research in the main development institutions and the main development funding bodies in Australia. I have solid example I can give you is that there is no research section in defect any longer. And I think that really reflects a low commitment to research evidence and it means that decisions are not usually based in the Australian aid program on evidence. So, that relationship between decision-making and evidence is becoming ever more challenging.

DAVID SANDERSON:
Rochelle, I think our listeners will be amazed by that, that the Australian government's Department for Foreign Affairs and Trade, the Australian wing for the aid world, and developments that not so much based on research. Is that really the case?

ROCHELLE SPENCER:
Yes, indeed, that is the case. What we see less core government agencies having that connection to research partners. And I suppose with the constrained fiscal environment that we're seeing as budgets contract, the sector has seen a real decline in the funding and on emphasis on both not only research but also monitoring and evaluation and learning. We saw that, David, with the amalgamation of AusAID into DFAT in 2012, where the research expertise was lost really and outsourced. We saw it with the Australian development research awards scheme ending several years ago, and no plans for a new strategy to fill that gap. And there's been no update to DFAT research strategy since the AusAID research strategy of 2012 16. So, it is really a big issue for us in Australia. And as funding constraints due to the pandemic, it's likely that further losses in expertise will occur across the sector. This really quickly changing landscape means that policies and programs are less likely to be evidence-based. And that connection across the sector, as well as shared and reliable sources of knowledge are probably more crucial than ever, I would say, right now.

DAVID SANDERSON:
Maybe, Rochelle, can I ask operational agencies? If you're not doing your work based on research, then you perhaps shouldn't be doing or based on evidence I should say, it's surely there's a duty for any operational agency and also for academics to find the funds, find the means it can't just sit with the donor?

ROCHELLE SPENCER:
Yes, that's right. And it is a real issue for Australian universities as well because we're also seeing our funding cut in that sector. So, it's across both sectors that we're working in. But you touched on something really important those cross-sector linkages. And the engagement between communities of academics and practitioners is really important for meaningful development research to have impact.

DAVID SANDERSON:
Absolutely, perhaps I can bring you into the conversation, Joyce. Joyce, before joining academia, you worked for the UN on Violence Against Women, how did research inform your practice in your work?

JOYCE WU:
The question, David. And I... Well, we've got sort of two stories different from different spectrums. So, one was actually enjoying on Rochelle's comment earlier about DFAT was, I was in my book about more than 10 years ago, I was just fresh out I sort of optimistic young person at AusAID. And back at the time, the Minister whom I shall not name for this podcast, the minister used to come and sort of give us this speech, AusAID staff around Christmas. Well done everybody sort of like a gf type of speech. And it was interesting. So, the minister was talking about how well we've been doing, and then he sort of paused and said, but you know, there's something you could always improve on, and that is in these briefings to the minister in the recommendations, I do not want to hear this requires further research. And he gives us pause, and he says, I want answers. I want results. I don't want to hear more research. (LAUGHS) And so in that...

So, in that sense, that's a very interesting take on research in the sense that it has to have this product a tangible outcome, research for results, which is palatable for policymakers in terms of having this neat package of answers and ready-made solutions.

JOYCE WU:
On the other hand, though, in terms of research in the development space, I think there is a huge appetite for it all the time because in the work that I'm currently doing, actually also with Patrick is one of the collaborators, we are looking at whether smartphone applications can support migrant and refugee women who are survivors of domestic violence. And so we've been talking to a number of domestic violence service providers, refugee and migrant services, and the amount of insights and reflections that they provide, and the emphasis that they say we need more research on this, but as practitioners, we don't get the time to sit down and think about and question the processes of the things we do, as well as the ideas around women's empowerment, or any gender-based violence, theory of change, all of those things which make up so much of what underpins community development program to... Overseas aid programs, but practitioners often don't have that time to sit down and reflect all that. And so in that sense, there's a real concern for practitioners as well, that we don't actually get to question the things that we do.

DAVID SANDERSON:
And is that and not having the time, is that because it's not sufficiently valued? That actually we know the answers, we intuitively know what we should be doing based on our experience?

JOYCE WU:
Well, I think sometimes, and as with all sectors that focus on social justice, sometimes is a risk that there's a sense that, because we're doing ostensibly good things, social justice, gender equality, climate change, youth empowerment, so on. So, for racial equality, there's often a sense of, because we're doing good we have to feel good. We can't question the things that we do, because, hey, we're doing good. And so in that sense, I think there is a tension between there's need to question the things that we do. But then what if we don't like the answers that the research turns out? So, there's always that tension between, yes, we want to question, but what happens if we don't like the answer? And what if we don't like the answer, because it has a real financial impact in terms of the donors? Will then say, well, clearly, because you found covered... Because your research is saying you're not doing 120%? good, we're going to be cutting off your funding. So, the donors are not there in the sense of having a more nuanced perspective of what research can teach us.

And in terms of how we can improve practices, donors also want to have perfect answers.

DAVID SANDERSON:
An alarming picture is developing here (LAUGHS). Perhaps I can bring you into the conversation, Patrick, with the answers (LAUGHS). Do you think about development practice is based on research, is evidence-based I should say?

PATRICK KILBY:
Well, I'm agreeing with my two colleagues, I think. But it is interesting, I think what Joyce said about mindsets, I remember I did my research on impairment. So, I talked to a whole lot of women's groups across southern India and had the same conversation with each one. And we basically talk about their lives. I was changed in them. And so it wasn't questionnaire-based, but it was a focus group with guiding questions. And then a couple of times, the women were really quite... What's the word? They really enjoyed the conversation and a couple of times, they said, nobody's ever talked to us about this stuff before. And I thought, isn't that the NGOs feel staff job to talk to people about their lives, and what they're doing is changing their lives.

PATRICK KILBY:
And so the whole issue about research in development, it's not just about academics, and people trying to influence policy, but it goes right down to the very local, where a little local district-based NGO has that sort of determined thing, which is partly their own sort of worldview. But partly the donor is giving them money, who wishes to see through port and so many meetings and stuff and to find out what's going on, seems to be a luxury, except finding out what's going on. Well, it may seem a luxury is rather central to effectiveness. And so I remember I saw we don't have time to talk about those things, 'cause we're trying to get the women to repay their repayments. And I said, well, you could actually there's the meeting where talking about what's going on first, and then talk about the repayment later. And they sort of looked at me as if that was a little bit impossible.

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So, I think the whole research and development it does make a difference in a sense that there are a lot of practitioners out there who do reflect and who do try to change the work in their agencies and I do extend and there some fantastic examples as well of people within a university institution running their own prize NGO under the cover of the university, doing absolutely fantastic stuff. And being very careful about the donors they choose and who tells them how to do the work. As long as the people themselves are telling them how to do the work, they don't really want anybody else to. So, there lots and lots of fantastic examples of good stuff happening. The problem is it's often not picked up to scale by the larger agencies and the like.

DAVID SANDERSON:
Do you have any particular examples that come to mind, Patrick of good takeup?

PATRICK KILBY:
Oh. (LAUGHS) Yeah, that's a slight Dorothy Diksa. There's a little NGO run out of the Women's University in Pune, in India, and it's a waste pickup program. It was aiming at organizing waste pickers who get treated rather badly by the authorities, the local council, the police all sorts, and it wanted to organize them into a union to fight for their rights and to argue they're actually a positive asset because they're central to the recycling process. And they only had half a dozen organizers, and the organizers, they had to live as a waste picker for three months before they got the job. Sort of a bit of reality check. And it was is a very strong sense of solidarity, they had massive wins. So, over the space of 10 years, they even had a contract to stop picking up the waste in the street, but do door to door waste collection, all that sort of stuff, which was a good win. Of course, the system fought back and so there is this endless wave, the success is not permanent.

And I think that's an important part of development is that continuing process, where you end up having two steps forward and one step back.

PATRICK KILBY:
And so the idea of ticking a box saying that solved because I look at the white speaker program on their website, and there's always struggles. There's always private. The system gets privatized, and they get marginalized, have to fight back to get where they were at, but that's 20 years I've been in touch with them 30 years now, actually. And they're still there, they're still doing stuff, but they haven't had an absolute win and haven't had an absolute loss. And they're quite different to what they were 30 years ago. And their great aspiration is when I asked them, so what's the big change? They said the big change in our lives is our children are not going to do what we do. And that is a big statement, because before that their children would just follow in their parents' footsteps.

DAVID SANDERSON:
Well, so we discussed so far the barriers for research take up and it's the donors, it's the aid agencies. And I'm wondering what the cases for and against researchers themselves and we're happy, is wonderful this podcast we have the editorial team of development in practice. So, the clues in your very well-known journal and hugely successful journal, what's the case for research? Is it translating it better? Is it research uptake? How do we get better at that? Is it making it more interesting in some ways? Rochelle, maybe you can provide some thoughts on that.

ROCHELLE SPENCER:
Thanks, David. So, the question is, how do we get better at research impact, if you like in development? So, it's kind of a complex question, I guess, because impact means different things, doesn't it for different people? And it has different connotations to a whole range of stakeholders that might be involved in the research process, whether that's for the researchers, the beneficiaries of the research, or the partners of the research. So, I guess the impact that may be more measurable and quantifiable that NGOs might use in their mail programs, may not be considered beneficial to many of the individuals and communities at the other end of the development process. So, increasingly, what we're seeing is in funding applications, in particular, that we need to be identifying right at the outset what our theory of change is. We're being asked to talk about pathways to impact increasingly.

ROCHELLE SPENCER:
And I guess, being pushed as researchers to being far more aware of research that is extractive in nature, or that which disregards indigenous knowledge. And I think that's really encouraging that we're seeing these changes being foregrounded. These are the kind of thinking processes that we're being pushed into when we write our research programs and our research applications. And I guess, as the university chair of the Research for Development Impact Network this, in fact, is the focus of the work that we do. So, initiatives like co-creating sector standards and guidance notes, convening spaces for policy debate and improving cross-sector engagement and evidence-based policy and practice, ethical development, research practice guidelines, and importantly developing open-access resources and publications. These are really important principles to uphold and ensuring that these sorts of tools are available to stakeholders so that you do have good impact or good opportunity rather for impact.

DAVID SANDERSON:
Yeah, you mentioned monitoring, evaluation, and learning, of course, within NGOs, I suppose what I'm driving at also is what's the responsibility of universities and academics and researchers in those places? As we know, the metric for success in academic careers is a publication in top-quality journals. Whether those get picked up or read by practitioners is anyone's guess, do we have a responsibility to just get better and how we package? How we sell our research beyond the top journals?

JOYCE WU:
I think one of the key challenges and one of the key strengths as well with development and practice is Development Studies. And if we look at Development Studies Association of Australia is that you have a group of academics who extensively, we all see ourselves as doing development studies but we all come from very diverse range of research specializations and disciplines. So, we have anthropologists, economists, historians, philosophers, all these. With a focus on development studies, and I think one of the challenges worth doing research and practice as well is how to let go of this disciplinary egos. And I'm saying that sort of thinking about, for example, you have a water project, water quality project, and that might necessitate different disciplines of specialists working together, say, engineers, hydrologists, anthropologist, gender specialists, and they all come in with their preset assumptions on what is research methodology? What counts good debt? What constitutes good data? And what constitutes expert?

JOYCE WU:
A agenda specialists may say, well, the community is the expert. The water specialist may say, well, no, actually, it is the hydrologist who could speak authoritatively on what's good water or not. And so the challenge, I think, for us also whether as researchers and practitioners is how do you let go of those egos and to work together and find a universal language and also humility, to say, OK, here's the outcome we're all going for, but we have different methods and processes. But can we talk and can we work together? And I think that's one of the things that one of the goals of development and practice is how do we showcase these different forms of collaboration and how these collaborations can generate knowledge and wisdom. And they can be shared with everyone.

DAVID SANDERSON:
(CROSSTALK) Egos in the university, sort of (INAUDIBLE), I'm sorry Patrick go ahead.

PATRICK KILBY:
I think another part of it is to make sure we get the research back to the people. So, it's research with us, not research about us. And so part of it is to ensure in the research, is you go back to the communities and sit down. However, that's not as easy as it sounds, but it's certainly worth investing in to get the stories out so those communities at least, can learn from what we did and they become part of the research. I think that's an important part of it, not being stuck in an ivory tower. The other part of it is to broaden the conversations beyond the journal. Now, development practice, I think has around about 10%, open access, and we can have a conversation about with them, with Taylor and Francis about how we select those 10%. And certainly, we would like them to be those which are of most interest as the new ideas to go more broadly, rather than a continuation of the existing research. But that'll be a tricky conversation, even among us, let alone with Taylor and Francis.

PATRICK KILBY:
But part of it, is that extension work? How much do we get out there to tell the story of our research, and at the moment, they do want us to do media, they do want us to do stories and stuff about our research more broadly? But I would like us to go beyond that and have those conversations with communities in developing countries. And so we can partner more effectively with local research institutes and local NGOs to try to get their stories out there and try to find the resources to be able to do it. One interesting part of COVID is that it has forced us to talk to our collaborators in developing countries in a different way. And that may put space in developing countries for them to become the medium for our research message going out there.

ROCHELLE SPENCER:
Yeah, I think I just like to add to that, I think that's really important point that Patrick makes, that with COVID has really pushed us into walking the talk of localization and co-design and co-production and decolonizing research practices, it's meant that we really have had to think about how to work more equitably with our research partners in countries where we can no longer travel to that present. And so I think that's been a really positive outcome, actually, of what's happening at the moment. In this brave new world of pandemic that we have started to really rely much more heavily on working with partners, as opposed to us designing research from our ivory towers if you like.

DAVID SANDERSON:
Is it the case, therefore, that COVID is making us, well, may do make a small relevance and less remote? Perhaps there is an argument that, as I think, I started by kicking off the university researchers can be seen as remote and you mentioned Rochelle, the proverbial ivory tower, that actually we need to be more linked. Is it that if practices less taking up our research that it finds our research not that useful? Joyce, you mentioned mobile phones that has great traction usage. And then there's so much other research, which is three or four steps removed from practice, which may or may not be useful or relevant, 'cause we just don't know. And there's an argument for blue sky research. But if it's so far away, there ain't gonna be many NGOs picking that up.

JOYCE WU:
Just to pick on that point, David, I think it's also about how, for example, how research, fundings are structured. So, in terms of the current situation in Australia, for example, the Australian Research Council grant, these days, it seems to be quite become quite politically driven in terms of what is the government of the days interests and goals and so on. And in that sense, it can become a buzzword exercise. So, national security is the flavor of the day, China is a security threat, and so on. And I think that's the real risk of when we have a very politicians and sort of government of the day type of research agenda, I think that can narrow down a lot of creativity and also partnership and collaboration. And also, it actually fosters competition and rivalry, which is not helpful.

DAVID SANDERSON:
So, we're saying there's less of a sort of, I'll just use the word blue sky because it sounds a bit lost, but actually the greatest innovations that actually can make profound differences, is there not enough funding for that?

PATRICK KILBY:
It's interesting, what's in innovation. A huge innovation for a poor community is a mobile phone. That is transforming. We're looking at migration and migrant workers and the like. And their life is still very rough. And there's a lot of abuse and stuff. But the mobile phone has enabled a lot of change and transformation in their lives in very many ways. Now, I've talked to women in West Bengal in quite remote areas, and the community has a mobile phone. And when somebody goes into town, they plug it into chargers. And then they bring it back 'cause there's no electricity in the village. But it is the way they connect. And that is transformative, and that is blue sky to them. So, the important part of blue sky research is what innovation is most relevant? And the innovation may be old hat to some of us or to elites or to whomever. But for local communities, they may be life transforming. And so I think it's good for us to think about in whose eyes is it innovative? And we don't do that thinking enough, either.

But sometimes just I don't know, they need mobile phones and people's, you get a shrug. What does that mean? Well, it means an awful lot. And so it may seem very minor where we are in a very big deal somewhere else.

DAVID SANDERSON:
Wow, we're coming towards the final few minutes of our podcast, I can't believe it, it feels like we just started. But maybe that's a good place to ask each of you if I may, a good example of where research has informed practice and it can be as you say, incremental innovations, I suppose that what may be seen to be small is actually very profound as the example you just gave Patrick. Rochelle, can you particularly think of any example where research has really informed practice, which may then have also virtuously informed research?

ROCHELLE SPENCER:
Well, I can give an example from one of my own research projects. For about four years, I was working on an Australian development research award-funded project. The partner was Catholic Relief Services, a USA-funded NGO, but based in Zambia, and the research was looking at one of the Feed the Future USAID programs being run through Zambia and Malawi. And it was a very big development intervention across two countries, multiple regions, multiple provinces, and involving hundreds of smallholder farmers. And so the four or five years, we talked to a lot of the smallholder farmers as researchers to find out what their experiences were of this particular development intervention that was being imposed and I use that word quite deliberately because understanding the experiences of smallholder farmers came kind of after the design of the intervention, it wasn't actually part of a co-design process.

ROCHELLE SPENCER:
And so it meant that we did an action research project to go and find out what experiences are smallholder farmers having with this particular intervention? And how can we ensure that if it's not responding directly to their needs, that it does respond to their needs, that it is reshaped, so that it's appropriate for them. And as you might expect, a lot of the farmers to begin with in the early couple of years, sort of they took the time to talk with us in their very busy rural livelihoods. And didn't really expect that they'd see us again, but we kept coming back two to three times a year, every year, over five years, four or five years, and built relationships with these farmers where we really begin to understand how their livelihoods were changing, or not changing. And we were able to influence that NGO intervention and get it responding to the various needs because obviously, what was relevant in one part of Zambia was not relevant to let's say Southern Malawi. The context was different. And so that was really beneficial to be able to continually keep coming back to the NGO headquarters.

And presenting to them these are the findings from the research in the field, this is what farmers are saying, this is where the gaps are, this is how you can strengthen your programming and be really responsive, immediately not waiting until a mid-year, a midterm review or the end of the project.

DAVID SANDERSON:
That's a great example. Thank you very much. Joyce, could any particular examples strike here where researchers have one practice and possibly the other way as well?

JOYCE WU:
Well, an example a personal example was when I was working with the Pakistan Council of Research in Water Resources PCRWR, which is a national body, which looks at primarily on water quality in the country. And the project that I collaborated with them was they wanted to look at the social impacts of drinking water degradation of Manchar lake which is one of the largest freshwater lake in Pakistan, and Sindh province, which has actually became drinkable as the freshwater due to poor irrigation and infrastructural designs over the decades. And so PCRWR wanted to look at... They wanted to collect data from the local communities. And they were frustrated, in a sense that they had these big surveys, very big, big surveys and they couldn't get information, they couldn't get people to respondents to complete it. They were saying people will just walk off halfway through, they just refused to do it. And so I said, look, why don't we just do a qualitative data collection, we just talked to the people, we have focus groups with separately with men and women separately.

JOYCE WU:
And they were initially it was interesting because the scientists were sort of like, I think of about 70% men, 30% woman. All the men are sort of like expressing doubt and saying, how could you? How is that possible? How we were talking to farmers and fisherfolk? They don't know anything about water quality. And the director of the Center was actually very... He knew where this was coming from. And he was saying, look, let's just give this a chance. You haven't tried it yet, how do you know that doesn't work? And so we went to Manchar lake and we, in first day it's always good indicators of what were the focus group is useful or not is. The whole time the scientists were taking notes. They were was so busy taking notes they didn't look. And afterwards, at the end of the fieldwork, there were say, oh, this is astonishing we've never thought just by talking to people, we can actually get so much as opposed to doing a whole bunch of surveys. And we're going to be incorporating that now, in all our water quality assessments. So, yeah, that was...

DAVID SANDERSON:
Who would have thought just ask people and listen? Often comes full circle about dignity and respect and engaging in the words of Robert Chambers whose reality counts actually was the reality that matters here. Just before we finish, my favorite one is post-disaster recovery space about the use of cash based on the book from 30 years ago, called just give people cash. And now the evidence base for the positive impacts of cash-based programming has been very strong, of course, not perfect, like all sectors, but the evidence is proving again and again, that that's a very powerful approach, but evidence-based. So, thank you. I'm very grateful to our three guests, Joyce Wu, Rochelle Spencer, and Patrick Kilby, for a really interesting conversation about very vital and often overlooked parts of the puzzle when it comes to development research. Thank you very much. Goodbye.