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INTRODUCTION: WHY DEVELOPMENT RESEARCH MATTERS

What is research? What is the best approach to research for development work? What are the different ways in which research is used in development work? This chapter aims to lay the foundations for the rest of the manual by attempting to answer these questions.

The book is written for development workers, and is intended to give you the tools to use research as effectively as possible in your work. We draw on examples from international development work and from work in the UK to improve the wellbeing of disadvantaged communities. We take a definition of human development compatible with the following, that ‘human development aims to expand people’s freedoms – the worthwhile capabilities people value – and to empower people to engage actively in development processes, on a shared planet. And it seeks to do so in ways that appropriately advance equity, efficiency, sustainability and other key principles’ (Alkire, 2010). For development workers, research is one approach to improving social wellbeing. Ideas are proposed to assist in deciding when a research approach is the best one to take.

Research is used in development work for a variety of purposes. It may set out to explore an issue in order to plan a programme; it may, more broadly, ask people in an area about their own needs; or it may aim to collect in-depth information about a specific issue, to make a case for change. Research methods are also used in programme monitoring, evaluation and review. What we call research can range from very small local pieces of work (perhaps just reviewing existing information) to major international projects.

Research involves collecting new information in a systematic way, and effective research often challenges received wisdom and ideas that are taken for granted. So, what can be achieved through using research in development work? We begin with some real-life examples focused on various aspects of child wellbeing.

In the first example, research into the situation of children working stitching footballs in Pakistan gave information which could be used both to plan Save the Children's own programme of work and to influence policy on child labour internationally.

FOR EXAMPLE

Child Labour Project, Sialkot, Pakistan

Save the Children's research in Sialkot was the foundation for its involvement in a coalition working to phase out child labour in football production. The research provided detailed information about why children stitch footballs, their working conditions, the problems they and their families face and how to help them exit the workforce. It challenged some of the myths that were floating around, for example that the work prevented child stitchers from attending school, and revealed for the first time the large numbers of women football stitchers. On the basis of this new and important information, Save the Children was able to plan its own contributions to a programme to assist children's transition out of the workforce.

The research was also very timely. The initial findings were available at the same time as the International Labour Organization was planning its own programme, and the completed research was ready by the time most of the partners in the Sialkot programme were starting to plan their activities. It was thus possible to use them to influence other partners' activities to promote family welfare, for example by finding ways women could continue working after their children stopped. The research provided the basis for broader advocacy on child labour issues with industry, international organizations and consumers, among others.

In Pakistan and internationally, the research played an important role in establishing Save the Children as a credible actor on child labour issues. The fact that it was rigorous – based on a carefully thought-out methodology – and was widely seen to be impartial was important in Save the Children's ability to exert an influence on the programme and to speak with authority on the issue.

Source: Save the Children UK (1997a)

Research is also important to ensure that development programmes are appropriate to the needs they aim to address. In addition to carrying out research themselves, development organizations should encourage the greater use of existing research. Especially in emergency situations, there is often a failure to seek out relevant research – for example work produced by anthropologists on a group suffering a crisis – and this can compromise effective intervention.

FOR EXAMPLE

Appropriate aid for nomads in Somaliland

A failure to read ethnography on Somaliland, led agencies in the immediate post-conflict phase to build schools in pastoral nomadic communities which would normally move continuously with their herds to water sources. Schools created a focal point for settlement but also provided a target for grenades: by bringing people together they rendered them more vulnerable to attack.

Making use of existing research to identify mechanisms to address school violence

FOR EXAMPLE

Cruel and humiliating forms of psychological punishment, gender-based violence and bullying remain a daily reality for millions of schoolchildren. Aiming to stop this growing global problem, Plan launched the Learn Without Fear campaign (<http://plan-international.org/learnwithoutfear>) in October 2008.

In order to inform the campaign with the most updated, relevant and actionable evidence, Plan commissioned a review of existing research from the Overseas Development Institute to identify policies, programmes and legal instruments that address school violence in the developing world, and to draw implications for policy, practice and research.

The paper (<http://plan-international.org/learnwithoutfear/files/painful-lessons-english>) focused on bullying and sexual violence in school contexts only. This choice of focus was influenced by an international consultation process undertaken by Plan in 2007.

The report shows that:

- Girls as young as ten are being forced to have sex by their teachers to pass exams and threatened with poor grades and failure if they refuse.
- In a multi-country World Health Organization study, between 20 and 65 per cent of school-aged children reported having been verbally or physically bullied over the past 30 days.
- Gender-based violence in schools is reinforced by sexist and discriminatory content of educational materials. In Nicaragua, for instance, educational authorities approved a conservative religious-inspired module on sexual education, popularly known as the 'catechism of sexuality', to be used in schools.
- Girls' likelihood of molestation increases with the distance to school.
- Bullying is also seen to be linked to experiences of domestic violence, as children learn that violence is a primary mechanism for negotiating relationships. Children who suffer from family violence are more likely to be bullies and/or to be bullied.

Violence in schools ruins the one real chance of a better and more prosperous life for many children, and denies to communities and countries a vital national asset. Since violence against schoolchildren is preventable, Plan will continue to use research to guide campaign and programme work to ensure children's right to a safe school environment.

Development agencies are increasingly using participatory research methods. These enable community members to have a say on both the issue itself and how the research is carried out. Participatory work can contribute both to programme development and to influencing policy at national or international level.

Participatory needs assessment in Vietnam

FOR EXAMPLE

A participatory needs assessment in four communes in Thanh Chuong district, Nghe An province, Vietnam, looked at livelihood strategies and credit and savings. The purpose was to improve the quality of Save the Children's assistance and enhance its impact on partner agencies and beneficiaries. The assessment had the goal of obtaining a better understanding of local conditions and needs; constraints and problems; and opportunities and potential. The participatory process was to lead into communities participating in project design and implementation and management in the longer term.

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Multidisciplinary teams, including a credit specialist, an agriculturalist, a district representative and two representatives from each commune, carried out the research using a mix of techniques and a variety of sources of information. Observation, semi-structured interviewing, diagrams, livelihood analysis and ranking enabled analysis of elders, children, leaders, women, men, the poor, the better-off, etc. The teams could thus gain a more informed understanding of the locality and the issues facing the population. The use of records and observation verified information gathered. The process yielded a set of priorities for interventions based on community members' experience and views.

Source: Save the Children UK (1993)

FOR EXAMPLE

The contribution of older people to development: Ghana and South Africa

Older people are often invisible in development issues, although they make up an increasing proportion of the population of developing countries. HelpAge International carried out a major study of the contribution of older people to development, including Ghana and South Africa case studies. The purpose was to help policies and services respond better to the needs and capabilities of poor and disadvantaged older people in African and other countries.

Fieldwork took place in a number of locations in each country. Approaches included interviews, focus group discussions and methods drawn from Participatory Learning and Action, a development from the tradition of Participatory Rapid Appraisal. These emphasize visual work – mapping, diagramming, ranking and scoring exercises – which enables participants to share information and to debate its meaning as a group.

Findings drew attention to the different kinds of contributions older women and older men make: in addition to being income generators, older people are health-care providers, asset managers, educators, mentors and carers. The research then began to feed older people's views into policy discussion on ageing in Ghana and South Africa. It again involved older people directly at the point when the findings were presented to national-level government officials, as HelpAge saw it as a catalyst to develop processes to include older people in mainstream decision making about issues that affect their lives.

Source: HelpAge International (1999)

Another style of participatory research – peer research, led by young people themselves – influenced UK politicians on the issue of support to care leavers. The research helped the young people to get their experience and views listened to.

FOR EXAMPLE

Peer research by young care leavers in the UK

Every year in the UK, thousands of young people leave local authority care, some of them having spent all their lives in residential or foster homes. Many are only 16 years old when they face the challenge of living independently. Previous research has produced worrying statistics on the numbers becoming homeless and experiencing other problems.

Save the Children asked a group of young people who had left care not long before to investigate the issues. The group planned and carried out their own research, supported

by youth workers and a research advisor. They presented the research to a well-attended meeting at the Houses of Parliament, and MPs from several parties agreed to take up the issue. The research contributed to an increase in concern for this group of young people, and subsequent legislation increased local authorities' duties to assist young people after the age of 16, although there remains much room for improvement.

Source: West (1995)

1.1 So what *is* research?

A major challenge in writing this manual is that what we mean by research covers a large and diverse group of processes. And everything about research is argued over. There is fierce debate between researchers and those who use research about the validity of different approaches. It would be so much easier to explain something like plumbing, where it is so much less a matter of opinion whether things work or not.

When we consulted practitioners on what they would like to see in this manual, they asked for clear answers to the questions: What is research? What are the 'rules of the game' if you are doing research? These are reasonable questions, but huge numbers of books exist discussing the answers – and not just academic ones: the debate emerges regularly in daily life for those doing research for development work.

Evaluating community health development projects: the debate

FOR EXAMPLE

Save the Children in the UK and internationally sets up community development projects to improve the health of different groups of people. Usually, these work in partnership with government health services. At a certain point, Save the Children staff meet with government research staff, often practitioners of public-health medicine, to discuss how to conduct the necessary evaluation.

Typically, public health practitioners insist that the only valid evaluation compares objectively measurable 'health gains' – children growing taller, people living longer – in the area where the intervention occurs and in a 'control' area where no such development work is going on. The model is the randomized controlled trial. Many issues arise, though: What are appropriate measures of success? How could the effect of the intervention be isolated from other changes in the area? How can the cost of such a major study be met?

An alternative approach may then be suggested, which concentrates attention on community members' views on the development work and the issues they raise as important. Development is about the empowerment of community members, not about fulfilling aims set by outsiders. And the process of carrying out an intervention, as much as the direct outcomes, may be valuable in the long term. Importance is placed on learning throughout the project rather than just making a judgement at the end.

A complex discussion then takes place, which community development workers usually find engaging. Questions of values, practicalities, costs, validity, philosophies of knowledge (What counts as a real effect? Whose opinion counts?) and possible research methods all fly around the room in a chaotic muddle.

The medical model of research is particularly well defined. Also, doctors hold great authority in most societies, and may have an influence on the survival of health-related projects. This makes negotiations of this sort particularly fraught. It is crucial to any partnership process to agree an approach to evaluation that will be acceptable to the key partners, but sometimes there

seems to be no way through the conflicts. Focusing on evaluation and research does not soften any differences of approach; rather, it usually sharpens the outlines of the matters at issue.

Similar patterns can crop up in dealings with economists, agronomists and psychologists, among others.

This book has been prepared by professional researchers who have frequently supported development workers in situations like this. But there is no simple solution. Arguing about whose truth matters is important – it is an important part of the process of development to try to ensure the voices of less powerful people are heard.¹ Equally, it is essential to argue about how we can measure the success of our work in a way that is convincing to those who need to be convinced (see, for example, Davies et al., 2005 and DFID, 2006). What this manual hopes to achieve is increased confidence for development workers when they take part in this kind of discussion.

1.2 ‘But I’m not a researcher’: the contribution of the development worker

This handbook is designed to be accessible and useful to a wide range of readers, including students and first-time researchers who are looking for an introduction to designing and conducting research projects related to international development. That being said, it is written primarily with development practitioners in mind – professional people who do not intend to become full-time researchers – to give them a greater sense of control in using research in their work. Looking at things from a more research-oriented point of view can help in avoiding mistakes in programme design resulting from ill-informed assumptions about a situation, as the following examples illustrate.

FOR EXAMPLE

Why were children missing school in northern Iraq?

Save the Children was concerned about low school attendance within a Kurdish community in northern Iraq. The organization had assumed that the cause was parents’ lack of money. However, when researchers talked to children, they found teachers were beating them so severely that they were afraid to go to school. There were also allegations of sexual abuse. The agency was then able to discuss with the local authorities a programme of teacher training to address how children should be treated as well as how to convey information.

FOR EXAMPLE

Identifying an effective intervention: Child Labour Project, Sialkot, Pakistan

The research into children stitching footballs aimed partly to identify how Save the Children could intervene most usefully. Some campaign groups were pressing for the building of more schools, but the research established that it was not a lack of schools that was preventing children from attending. Rather, the key factors were the high cost and low quality of schooling, as well as families’ need for income. In this case, it would have been ineffective to set up more schools.

How do you feel about research?

Without thinking too much about it, jot down the feelings, ideas and images that emerge when you think about 'research'.

- What about the words 'enquiry' and 'investigation'?
 - What do these feelings mean for you in thinking about how you will use this manual?
 - Where do they come from? Experience at work? Your schooling?
 - Doing this as a group could be useful.
-

Ordinarily, development practitioners do some similar work to researchers. They are very likely to undertake needs assessments. They investigate people's opinions and probe their explanations of problems in their lives. They work with people to help them to analyse their situation – to make sense of things beyond the individual.

They also use some of the same methods as researchers. Both may conduct interviews, undertake observation, hold discussions and ask groups what is most important to them. However, development workers generally specialize in being with people in an informal way, to build trust. This makes it possible for people without the confidence bred by formal education to discuss issues of importance to them.

It is not the intention of this manual simply to re-label development workers' methods as research. All of the many schools of thought about research have a set of rules defining 'good data'. Development work has its own, different, standards and priorities.

Take the example of a development worker discussing unemployment with a young person. Like a researcher, they are likely to be listening for themes they have heard from other young people they have talked to, so as to understand what is important to the whole group. But the development worker will also be observing the conversation for ways to enable the young person to feel more in control. They might let contradictory statements pass, if they are at the stage of building trust with the person.

A researcher would be much more concerned to record things exactly as the young person puts them. If they are engaged in work of any depth, and they hear apparently conflicting points of view, they will gently ask questions to tease out the way the person is thinking. The researcher is not trying to effect change in the young person, but to understand the situation.

If the young person says something which offends the development worker's principles, for instance taking the blame for events the latter regards as caused by wider social forces, the development worker is likely to challenge that interpretation. Depending on their school of thought regarding different approaches (see Section 2.2), a researcher may simply record such a comment, or they may put forward a different view, usually in a neutral way, such as 'some people might say ...', and then record the response.

In encouraging development workers to learn more about research, the hope is they will take from the disciplines of research the things that could be most useful to them. Doing research does change your point of view.

Meanwhile, development workers' skills and knowledge have a great deal to contribute to research processes. One key role is that of identifying issues for research. With their knowledge of the situation and the needs of a group of people, combined with an understanding of broader social processes, they can frame issues which are 'live' and meaningful to those concerned. Second, development workers' skill in building relationships with people, including those who face discrimination, is invaluable in facilitating research that actively involves community members.

A different way of seeing – through researchers' eyes

- A questioning approach to everything, including everyone's pet theories;
- Concern to understand what people say very accurately, to hear them without bias;
- Appreciating that how we ask questions can determine the answers we get;
- An analytical approach – that is, looking for patterns in things, probing behind surface appearances;
- Trying to get inside how people make sense of things – especially when the sense is not immediately obvious;
- Becoming ever more conscious of the researcher's own impact on people and their responses.

Research methods can be seen as a set of tools you can use in various ways – but they are complex tools and there are risks attached to their use. It is important to learn to use them properly in order to avoid accidents.

Accordingly, some types of research are best left to experienced research professionals. Large-scale surveys, complex statistics and subtle qualitative research on sensitive issues are best done by researchers with specialist training. Development workers may wish to commission this type of work; Chapters 3 and 4 aim to help them to do so. But many kinds of research approach are straightforward to use and can enable development workers to understand the issues they are working with in more depth and represent people's views more accurately.

1.3 Who should do research for development work? The broader issues

This section discusses wider questions arising from choices made about who does what research. Development workers are in the business of creating social change, and need to take a pragmatic approach to the use of research. At times, it may well be that an expert view from a famous university is exactly what is needed. However, some broader issues need to be considered, beyond the immediate piece of work.

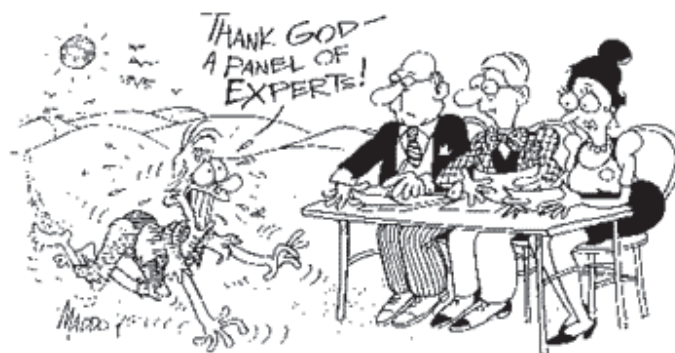
The traditional model of development research has, until relatively recently, concentrated internationally recognized expertise in a few elite centres. Historically, much of the research into Southern issues has been carried out by people based in or coming from the North. In recent years, though, there has been a welcome trend of growth in development research centres, think-tanks and academic departments throughout the South, which now produce a large volume of cutting-edge research on

both local and international themes. Deep inequalities persist, however – as Girvan (2007) notes, ‘knowledge hierarchies’ favouring Northern over Southern knowledge remain deeply entrenched in the development community.

With this in mind, it is important to remember some issues which may well arise in the production of development knowledge within elite Northern research centres:

- These centres are typically not situated in the countries or among the people in question. Meanwhile, knowledge in any country is more likely to be concentrated in elite, urban centres – heightening the geographical as well as conceptual divide between the researchers and the ‘researched’ (see, for example, Utting, 2006). Centres also tend to be closer to funding institutions, which can raise issues of impartiality and independence.
- Research is often done by highly paid academics or consultants who make brief visits to poverty-stricken areas and then return to their base with their data, which may never return to the place they relate to. This can encourage the dangerous perception that answers lie with outsiders and not with those directly involved.
- Without sufficient awareness of competing Southern perspectives, the traditional predominance of Northern approaches and ideologies in development thinking, which have come to be seen as universally applicable, can all too easily be replicated in research. Indeed, these approaches are often unthinkingly favoured over ‘local’ knowledge which is equally, if not far more, relevant to the context.
- Overreliance on Northern research centres can lead to fewer opportunities for Southern people or non-academics to learn from research processes.

Of course, many excellent Northern knowledge centres take great pains to address such concerns, and the continuing growth of Southern knowledge production (including North–South and South–South research cooperation) continues to improve the situation. Nonetheless, these challenges remain embedded in the fabric of development knowledge production, and should be considered carefully in any research project.



Cartoon by Peter Maddocks, reproduced with kind permission of id21/Insights.

There are, of course, more and less sensitive ways in which researchers/consultants can operate, but a power imbalance seems an inevitable part of this pattern. (See Chapter 9 on undertaking ethical research for more on issues of power in research.) One purpose of this manual is to encourage development workers to play a role in supporting researchers in the South and in disadvantaged communities in

the North. In this way, it will be possible to do more research closer to communities whose lives are its focus.

Checklist: developing research skills in disadvantaged communities

- ☑ Where possible, hire researchers from Southern countries/disadvantaged groups.
- ☑ Build some training and development work for local workers into any research brief, so they can learn from a variety of research processes (see Chapter 6 on learning development research skills).
- ☑ Seek to develop research ideas which are locally generated and owned, so there will be demand to keep the data locally, even if research is conducted by outsiders.
- ☑ Ensure that if data are removed from the context, they are copied or returned to those who can use them for development purposes (unless issues of confidentiality prevent this).
- ☑ Give appropriate feedback on findings to local agencies and community members² themselves as well as to decision makers.
- ☑ Ensure research processes are carried out in an open way and demystified for all participants.
- ☑ Organize participatory training workshops in research skills as part of your ongoing staff development work.
- ☑ Ensure that, where researchers are relatively inexperienced, they have a clear brief and sufficient support – coaching and supervision from those with relevant experience (see Chapter 3).

1.4 Research and social change

Development work usually aims to create social change of some sort. It might aim to assist a minority community in moving out of poverty, or be directed towards increasing educational opportunities for children and adults across a whole region. There are many theories as to how social change takes place, and on top of these many more as to how development workers can and should intervene in these processes. One way of thinking about the use of research-type activities within development is to focus on how they can contribute towards processes of change.

There are a number of different ways of looking at this. Perhaps the dominant model is what you might call the rationalist, or engineering, approach. This suggests we have a social problem (and its definition is straightforward). Information is needed to understand it better in order to solve it. Research collects such information, and policy will change in light of such findings. Researchers are seen as engineers, providing technical data to solve technical problems.

There are many problems with this model. In reality, things are much more complicated. There may not even be agreement about the nature of the problem. Policy change does not automatically follow on from research – the process is much more contradictory (see Chapters 3 and 15). The assumptions behind this model see governments and the powerful in general as benignly and openly seeking to improve things: the complexities of political reality are left out.

Much participatory research works with a quite different model of the links between research and social change (see Chapter 12). Ordinary people are seen as important, and research aims to empower them to better understand their situation and hence take action to change it. Information is not neutral, but reflects different standpoints. The key is to give voice to the experience and knowledge of oppressed people.

For non-governmental organizations, campaigning can be a route to social change – in this case, research is seen as providing ‘ammunition’. This is really a kind of engineering approach, but it sees public opinion as important, whereas the traditional model aims to influence decision makers through nothing more than the strength of the evidence.

Finally, development organizations routinely seek to effect social change by directly engaging policymakers through research. Under this model, research knowledge can be a decisive factor in shaping the development of evidence-informed policy. As a result, it is conducted with an eye towards policy relevance, and is promoted strategically so as to maximize its chances of uptake by policymakers (see Chapter 15 for more).

Which approaches are chosen depends on many things. It may be a tactical choice, depending on the issue in question and the kind of change desired – for example legal, economic or a change of ordinary people’s attitudes. But it may also spring from professionals’ own beliefs about how change takes place. Some place their faith in parliamentary processes, others in grassroots education and action.

Suppose, for example, the aim is to influence some aspect of professional practice, perhaps in social welfare. Some see the best hope of achieving this as being through scientific-style research which aims to ‘prove’ the success of a particular method. Others want to engage directly with the professionals in cooperative enquiry. Still others want to give information to service users or the general public to encourage them to pressure the professionals to change their practices.

It is worth reflecting on these issues in reading this manual, so you can be conscious of the framework you are working within. It is not surprising that the research we do in development is so diverse, when it is performing a number of very different functions in each organization’s work for change.

What model of change do you use?

In the table below, list projects you are familiar with which you think fit into each approach. How many fit squarely in one category?

Ask two other people to fill in the table separately, then discuss any issues that arise.

If the fit is bad, can you think of a better way of describing the model of social change behind your work?

Model of research for social change	Projects fitting this model
1. Rationalist/engineering	
2. Empowerment	
3. Campaigning	
4. Policy influence	

1.5 How to tell when research is the best approach to a problem

Development workers have other tools at their disposal: this manual does not intend to suggest that research is appropriate to all situations. Indeed, it has certain built-in disadvantages in many instances. Where people do not read or write, or have been taught not to criticize, research approaches are difficult for them to get to grips with. Although many methods can enable non-literate people to contribute to data collection and, to some extent, analysis, a research approach will still tend to introduce barriers to their full participation. This does not mean research is illegitimate in these situations – agencies need information for their own reasons. But research is unlikely to be the best method when the key aim is to directly empower people.

If you are planning a participatory project, remember there are many different ways of working alongside community members to investigate their issues and to help them to express their needs and views.

FOR EXAMPLE

Making videos about dynamite fishing in Tanzania

Dynamite fishing is a major problem on the coast of Tanzania. In 1994, a group of fishermen and women learnt at a conference that authorities typically blamed the environmental destruction on local fishers' ignorance. During the next six days, they made a video in which they explained their perceptions of the true situation to fellow villagers and to 'an establishment of anonymous decision makers.' Participants were able to exert control over production by watching and approving the results of the day's shooting every evening. 'People [...] want to speak loud and clear. Many of those who have never had access to modern, public fora seem to love the concept of being seen saying something for the records.' The participants revealed the dynamiting of fish and the destruction of the local marine environment, even giving the names of corrupt police and dynamite dealers.

When the facilitator of this project returned to Tanzania in 1996, he discovered that the video had had an extraordinary impact. It had engendered community mobilization on a massive scale, bridging regional and ethnic divisions between villagers, instilling confidence and inspiring action – only for villagers to be let down time and time again by corrupt local police and fisheries officers. 'The video really did make policymakers listen to villagers, even when they seemed unable to act. [...] We have an amazing video statement of an almost shocked MP who makes analogies with burning a forest or bombing a village.'

Source: Johansson (1994), in Holland and Blackburn (1998)

A range of creative approaches can be effective, as can more traditional community development methods.

Some poor and disadvantaged communities, both in the global North and in parts of the South, complain of too much research being done 'on' them. Different researchers keep appearing in people's homes, asking similar sets of questions, but nothing seems to be done as a result. It is essential to make sure the information you

need is not already available before undertaking new research, especially with people who are as hard-pressed for time as are those living in poverty.

In some situations, it may also be that, when you want to start a project, doing research to investigate needs can create a focus on the negative that is counterproductive. Mollison (2000) contrasts the ‘appreciative inquiry’ approach of a highly successful Bombay-based community organization, Pratham, with the conventional approach. Rather than asking what people’s needs are, appreciative inquiry (Elliott, 1999) looks at community resources, and asks ‘What have been our most inspiring experiences?’ and ‘How can we have more of them?’

The ‘normal way’ to start an education project is to study why poor children do not go to school. [...] Typical findings are that the poor do not expect to do well in school, that poor families need their children to work because of poverty and that poor children feel that they are treated badly in schools. Sometimes the physical infrastructure is also found wanting. Once these problems have been identified a project is designed to tackle them. Thus, for example, a project plan might aim to reform the existing education system [...], to mount a major school repair or building programme and to establish income generating projects [...].

Had Pratham taken this approach they would have needed a huge budget from the beginning and might still be struggling to succeed on a small scale. They might also be finding that many of the originally intended ‘beneficiaries’ had somehow been excluded from the programme. The potential enthusiasm for education that Pratham have in fact unleashed would not have been uncovered. Instead, the project would have demonstrated to the poor (assuming it reached the poor at all) that it is we who want their children to go to school and that we are willing – for a while – to pay for it. (Mollison, 2000)

Table 1.1 Conditions for research

When research may be an effective approach	When research is not likely to be helpful
✓ When no one has much information on a situation;	✗ When it is clear what needs to be done, but no one is getting on with it;
✓ When there is only ‘anecdotal’ evidence of a ‘hidden’ problem;	✗ When your programme is trying to decide where to start, in a known environment;
✓ When the group you are working with feels their point of view has not been heard;	✗ When political conflict or state repression are particularly intense;
✓ When policymakers are considering a policy change and want to investigate its possible impact;	✗ When communities have already been the subject of many research projects;
✓ When it is important to show you have represented people’s views accurately;	✗ When the main purpose is to increase people’s participation and build their personal development;
✓ When you know past attempts to address this issue through programmes have made mistakes.	✗ Where there are no resources to follow up research with any action;
	✗ To avoid making a decision.

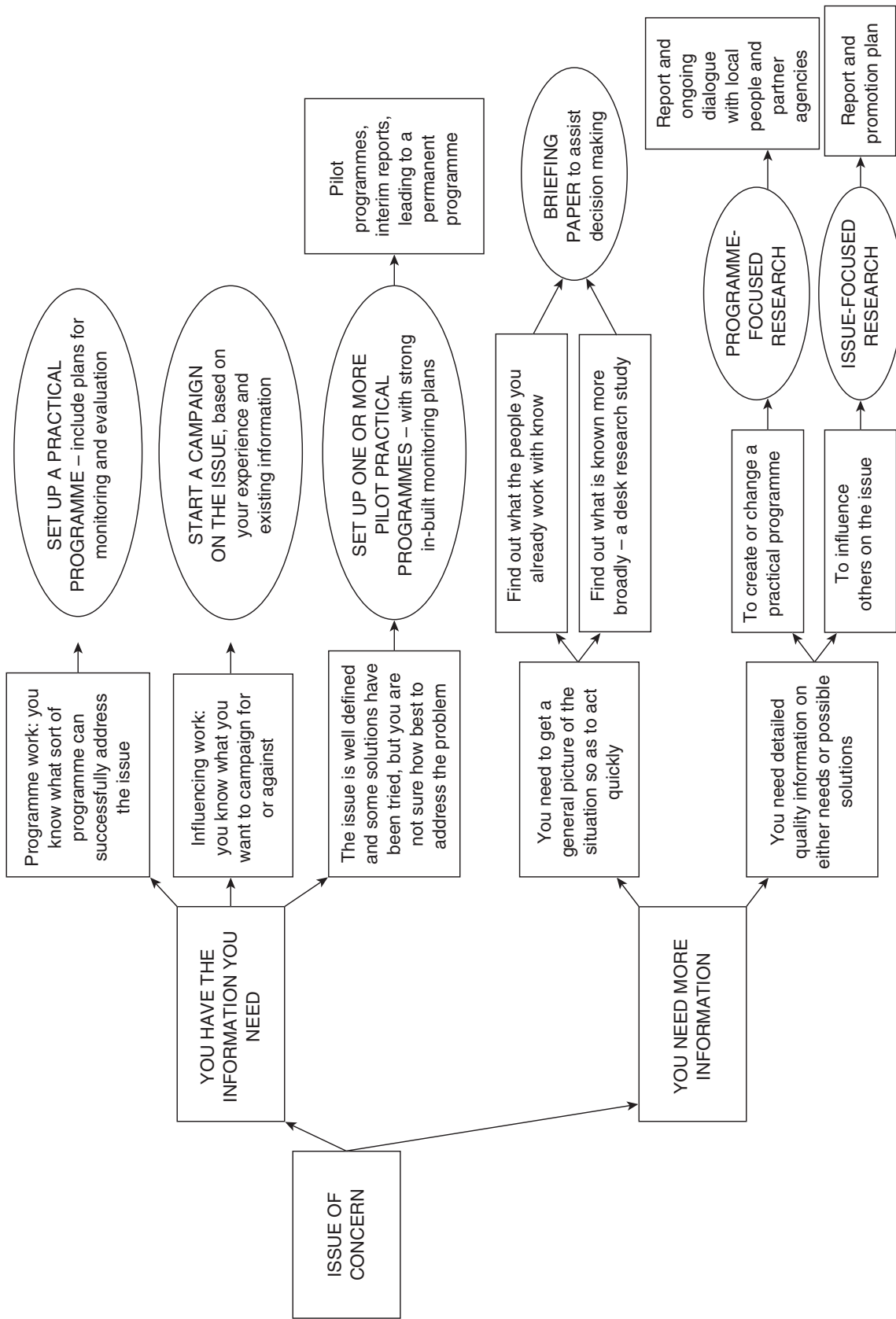


Figure 1.1 Is research the right thing to do?

1.5.1 What role will your research play?

Research can fulfil different roles in a process of working for change. It will be helpful to be clear where you are in the process and what you hope to achieve through the research.

Table 1.2 Different roles for research in development processes

Policy-focused research	Programme-focused research
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Raising a new issue in the public domain; • Putting forward a new perspective on a 'live' issue or reframing an existing issue in a new way; • Producing strong evidence of the benefit or harm of a particular policy; • Drawing together learning from different studies to support a policy position. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Investigating the needs of a community or specific group of people; • Investigating the need for a particular programme; • Demonstrating convincingly the effectiveness of a particular programme (evaluation).

Each of these situations has its own key requirements for how the work is carried out. You need to think of the research work as linked closely into either advocacy processes – perhaps an organized campaign to influence policy – or programme planning and development. To be an effective part of development work, research needs to be planned and carried out in cooperation with others with related responsibilities.

15.1.2 If in doubt ...

Perhaps you are not sure that research is the right approach to the problem you hope to address. Research is not the only way of investigating a question, and it may not be the most useful one. At times, a much simpler investigation is all that is required, more like what a journalist might do to gain a greater understanding of an issue or to dramatize it for their readers. Calling it 'research' may overcomplicate your task.

If in doubt: things you could do before starting a full-scale research project

Small-scale internal fact finding

Find out what people inside your organization and those working closely with you already know about the issue – and what they think should be done. This can be done more or less formally (a meeting, a short questionnaire), as appropriate.

A mini-literature search and review

Spend some time collecting existing research on the issue you are interested in, and write a summary of what you have found. Make an effort to contact people

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who have grappled with the same type of problems in different geographical areas.

Carry out a small pilot study

After clarifying your research questions, carry out a small study to get some general impressions of the information you could collect. For example, carry out five interviews with local people on your issue, or raise it at a group meeting that is already scheduled and facilitate a short discussion. Make sure you record your data properly, as you may need them later if you proceed to do more extensive research.

Test the idea for the research project

If you are concerned about committing your organization to a research project, it may be helpful to carry out a Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities, Threats (SWOT) analysis on the project, making guesses about future outcomes. (This tool is introduced in Section 3.4.) And do the same for any alternative strategy you can think of.

The amount of energy you put into research-type exercises should depend on the use you intend to make of the material you collect. There is no one recipe – what you do needs to be appropriate to its purpose (see Chapter 3 on planning for effective research).

Key points from this chapter

This chapter has aimed to show the positive contribution research can make to development work. It suggests that development workers have an important role in identifying issues that require investigation, and in planning and carrying out research. The contested nature of ideas on research is discussed, and readers are encouraged to try to understand these issues sufficiently so as not to be intimidated in defending their methods. It is important to be conscious of the various issues of power inequality involved in research work. Different approaches to research in development work are considered in relation to what they say about how change comes about. There is also a discussion on how to tell when research is the best approach to take to a problem, and what other courses of action might be considered.

Checklist: using research in development work

- Research can be a powerful tool in working for social change, and can be used in a variety of different ways.
- Development workers need a good understanding of research because it is important in their jobs whenever they need to produce, or assess, evidence for any claim about what is really going on.
- There is debate about most research issues!

- ☑ Development workers do many similar tasks to researchers, but their training leads them to approach these in different ways.
- ☑ A research perspective can contribute a questioning attitude, a concern to hear people's views accurately, an analytical approach and reflection on how our own actions determine the responses we get.
- ☑ It is very important to build research capacity in the South and in disadvantaged communities in the North.
- ☑ Research is a useful approach in only some situations – there are others where it would be useless, wasteful and possibly harmful.
- ☑ If in doubt as to whether research is needed, there are a number of things you can do, short of a full-blown research project, which will give you a better sense of the issues in question.



Further reading

Bulmer, M. (1982) *The Uses of Social Research: Social Investigation in Public Policy-making*. London: George Allen and Unwin.

Offers models for thinking about the relationship between research and decision making in public policy.

Desai, V. and Potter, R. (eds) (2006) *Doing Development Research*. New Delhi, Thousand Oaks, CA, London: Sage.

A comprehensive introduction for anyone carrying out research in developing countries, this brings together experts with extensive experience of overseas research and presents an overview of the core methodologies used.

Mikkelsen, B. (2005) *Methods for Development Work and Research: A Guide for Practitioners*. New Delhi, Thousand Oaks, CA, London: Sage.

This book provides an introduction to a variety of methods and methodological considerations to help the development practitioner to match issues and approaches in their research. Based on long experience, it offers practical guidance and critical reflection on methods for development work and research.

Notes

- 1 See, for example, Holland and Blackburn (1998) and Robb (2002). Some of the fundamental difficulties in 'hearing' the voices of the less powerful are explored in Spivak's seminal article 'Can the Subaltern Speak?' (1988).
- 2 'Community member' is used as a very broad term to refer to those the development worker/researcher relates to. They might be villagers, young women or disabled people, for example. Community links and support may be strong or weak.