

Engaged Excellence in Development Studies

**EADI Webinar
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Context - global development challenges in a complex world

Epidemics, AMR



Climate change

Multiple
inequalities



Urbanisation

Risks and uncertainties

Short-term shocks, long-term stresses

Cross-scale interactions

Technical, social, economic and political dimensions

Pervaded by power relations of many kinds



Insecurity,
extremism,
migration

**And
more....**

Embraced in Agenda 2030 – and beyond



SDGs – and their interconnections, synergies and tensions

Finding transformational pathways

What sort of Development Studies is needed?

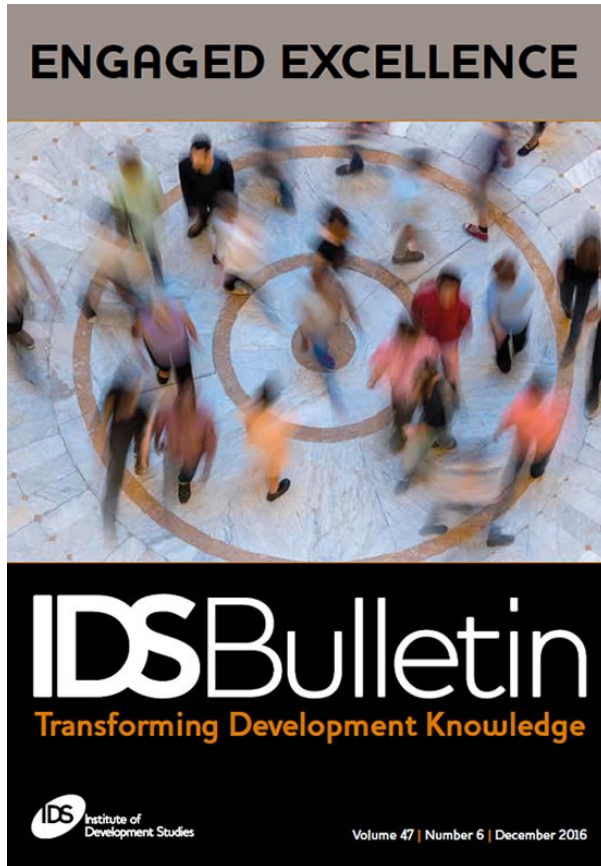
- **Problem- and challenge-focused;** normative (seeking ‘good change’)
- **Relevant** – in a world sceptical of evidence and expertise
- **Globally** alert, yet **locally grounded, contextualised, people-focused**
- **Interdisciplinary** - across diverse social (and natural) sciences
- **Transdisciplinary** - engaged with policy, practice and society, including in real-time

Longstanding strengths, but engaged excellence can reinforce and help further – especially with transdisciplinarity.....

What is engaged excellence?

Engaged excellence is IDS' distinctive approach to constructing and mobilising knowledge, and to teaching and mutual learning for development.

Engaged excellence means that the high quality and impact of our work depend upon us engaging and working with governments and parliaments, international NGOs and local civil society, communities and citizens to achieve positive transformative change, strategically informed by research, evidence and knowledge.



Engaged excellence – historical roots and arguments

1. Epistemological

- Social construction of knowledge
- Feminist critiques of science
- Situated knowledge, standpoint theory
- Objectivity, subjectivity, inter-subjectivity
- Co-production of knowledge and social order – through making identities, institutions, discourses, representations
- Politics of knowledge

2. Pragmatic

- Academic knowledge alone insufficient to address complex development problems
- Relevance and salience to local 'users'; participatory research
- Robustness, through multiple perspectives
- Legitimacy and credibility
- Impact (instrumental, conceptual, capacity-building) better achieved through involving policy and practice actors

3. Normative

- Moral imperative
- Democratising knowledge
- Cognitive justice
- Overcoming marginalisation
- Experience – and its multiple forms of expression
- Participatory action research
- Community-university partnerships
- Decolonising academia

Four pillars of engaged excellence in practice

1. High quality research

Opportunities

- Rigorous methodologies
- Diverse and mixed methods – quant, qual, participatory
- Multi-disciplinarity – equity and balance of different perspectives; richer picture
- Interdisciplinarity – integrated frameworks and approaches
- Robust evidence

Challenges

- Doing rigorous research in difficult contexts
- Bridging differences of concepts, assumptions, language
- Overcoming disciplinary hierarchies and power relations
- Institutional and career incentives don't always support interdisciplinarity

2. Co-constructing knowledge

Opportunities

- Involve diverse people and groups in research process – local community members, practitioners, policymakers, government staff...
- Co-design of questions and framings
- Co-collection of data
- Co-communication of findings
- Contribute to relevance, impacts, cognitive justice

Challenges

- Time, patience
- Power relations amongst stakeholders
- Need for effective processes – and facilitation skills
- Building in co-construction from the beginning – funding constraints

3. Mobilising evidence

Opportunities

- Ensuring that evidence shapes ideas, concepts, decisions, practices
- Direct and less direct (shifting the narrative)
- Different timeframes – including real-time
- Diverse scales – local, national global
- Diverse methods – face to face, online platforms, dialogues, briefings, visual and multi-media

Challenges

- Politics of policy processes – evidence plays situated and sometimes limited role
- Time and capacity of decision-makers to engage
- ‘Post-truth’ politics and discrediting of expertise

4. Building enduring partnerships

Opportunities

- Combining diverse skills, insights, capabilities
- Embedding in local and national contexts
- Bringing comparative learning
- Equitable partnerships – for practical and normative reasons
- Mutual learning and capacity-strengthening

Challenges

- Overcoming embedded power relations, sometimes reinforced by funding relationships
- Overturning established practices – such as S partners do ‘country’ work, N partners do global/comparative
- Capacities very different and take effort to build
- Trust is key – takes time and interpersonal relationships to build

Questions? Comments?

What are your own experiences?

Further resources:

Oswald, K. (2016) Interrogating an Engaged Excellence Approach to Research, *IDS Evidence Report 214*, Brighton: IDS.

<https://opendocs.ids.ac.uk/opendocs/handle/123456789/12685>

Leach, M., J. Gaventa and M. Leach eds (2017) Engaged Excellence. *IDS Bulletin* January 2017, Volume 47 Issue 6

<https://bulletin.ids.ac.uk/idsbo/issue/view/222>