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**Research Report**

## Unhappily non-cooperative: Do development research and practice ignore each other?

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# *Kiel* Policy Brief

**Unhappily non-cooperative –  
Do development research and  
practice ignore each other?**

**Linda Kleemann and  
Maximilian Neumann**

No. 74 | April 2014



## Unhappily non-cooperative — Do development research and practice ignore each other?

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Successful cooperation between development researchers and development policy makers and practitioners<sup>1</sup> translates into better development policies, projects and programmes. Research is relevant if it can provide meaningful input for the practitioners. At the same time, practitioners have to be willing and able to use these findings to improve their work. Through continuous communication, evaluation and feedback cycles both parties should be able to gain additional insights and improve future outcomes. But how close is reality to this ideal state of collaboration between theory and practice? Development researchers are often said to be working in ivory towers – doing research for the sake of publications with results that are hardly relevant or applicable in practice. But is this necessarily so and is it the only reason for the lack of cooperation between research and practice? What role do personal communication, time horizons and the researchers' fear of losing their academic reputation play?

To answer this question, we developed two surveys, one among development researchers and one among development practitioners in Germany, asking them about the intensity and quality of cooperation and feedback linkages between research and practice. We also asked about the main obstacles and the expectations about the future of cooperation between the two groups.

The questionnaires were published on the PEGNet<sup>2</sup> website and contained 27 questions. The researcher questionnaire was sent to about 2000 development researchers in Germany and abroad in early 2014. Within three weeks 145 researchers answered the questionnaire. The practitioner questionnaire was distributed in 2013 (Kleemann and Böhme 2013). Although the results are not representative for the development research sector as a whole they provide some interesting insights into existing problems and what can be done about them.

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<sup>1</sup> Development practitioners in this survey are defined as practitioners and policy makers who are working in ministries, development agencies, multilateral institutions and NGOs.

<sup>2</sup> Poverty Reduction, Equity and Growth Network at the Kiel Institute for the World Economy, [www.pegnet.ifw-kiel.de](http://www.pegnet.ifw-kiel.de).

The results show that both researchers and practitioners are interested in cooperating more. Researchers in particular believe that better collaboration would be mutually beneficial, resulting in additional insights for their research and better development outcomes. From their point of view the current state of cooperation is unsatisfactory because of four main reasons: different interests, different time frames, poor communication and mistrust. The practitioners' and researchers' opinion on the main obstacles for cooperation coincide to a large extent, and in particular on the question of timing. Practitioners complain about the slowness of research wherefore they have to make decisions before the researchers can provide them with their findings (Bell and Squire 2014). Moreover, practitioners claim that researchers are mainly aiming at publishing their results and are therefore neglecting the applicability of their research. Hence, in order to improve the cooperation environment researchers and practitioners have to learn how to trust and respect each other, to communicate better and to find ways to handle differences in timing.

### The current state of cooperation from the research viewpoint

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The typical development researcher who replied to our survey is male (66 %), 39 years old, studied economics (50 %) and holds a doctorate (46 %). He works at a university (53 %) or a research institute or think tank (28 %) and has an average of 10 years of work experience in the field of development research. The regions he most commonly focused his research on in the last five years were Sub-Saharan Africa (62 %), Latin America and Caribbean (27 %) and East Asia and Pacific (24 %)<sup>3</sup>. The concurrent key sectors of research were agricultural and rural development (44 %), economic policy (35 %) and environment and climatic change (27 %)<sup>4</sup>.

60 % of the responding development researchers have previous work experience as a development practitioner and therefore have insights in both fields of work. Moreover most development researchers committed themselves to various forms of cooperation. In the last five years they gave feedback on research results to development practitioners about 4.6 times, accepted 3.9 invitations by practitioners to speak at an event, did 3.6 consultancies for development cooperation and 3.4 joint projects. However, 30 % of all researchers who answered the question have not done any joint projects or consultancies, whereas 8 % and 13 % respectively report to have done over ten over the last five years. The distribution is thus skewed towards some doing a lot and others not cooperating at all.

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<sup>3</sup> Multiple answers were possible such that the share will not add up to 100 %.

<sup>4</sup> As above, several answers were possible.

Their assessment of the current state of cooperation shows a disillusioning picture: The overall quality of cooperation with development practitioners was rated on average at 4.8 on a scale from 1 to 10 (where 1 is “very bad” and 10 “very good”). Only 7 % of the respondents valued the quality of cooperation with a score of 8 or above. Concerning the relevance of cooperating with practitioners in the daily work of a researcher they give on average a score of 6.5, again on a scale from 1 to 10 (“not important at all” to “very important”). Asked about how the importance of cooperation in their daily work is expected to develop in the next three years 45 % of the respondents state a score of 8 or above (“very likely to decrease” to “very likely to increase”).

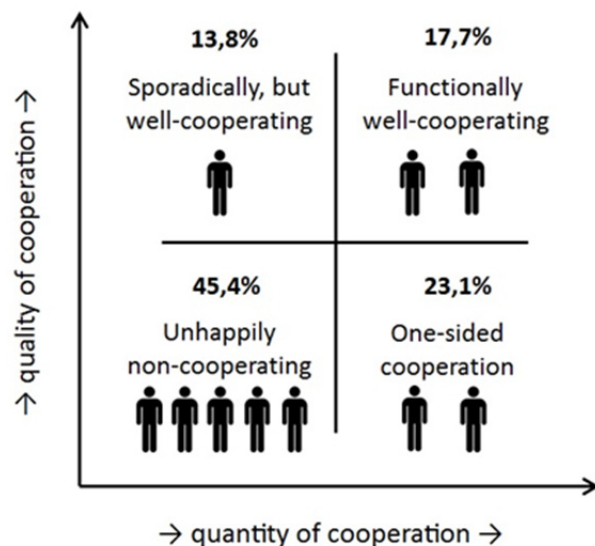
These results indicate that there exists a gap between the current quality of cooperation and the relevance of cooperation now as well as in the future. Combining the two variables “quality of cooperation” and “quantity of cooperation” splits the development researchers into four groups as Figure 1 illustrates. The largest group of development researchers (45.4 %) consists of the “unhappily non-cooperating”. They are unsatisfied with the status quo of cooperation and are simultaneously facing very few options to cooperate.

Only 17.7 % of the development researchers belong to the “functionally well-cooperating” group, which rates both the quantity and the quality of cooperation above average. For the smallest group (13.8 %) there is a low frequency of cooperation, but they highly value the quality of good cooperation. There is no difference with respect to Figure 1 between researchers with experience in development practice or policy and those with no prior experience. Apparently researchers with practical experience cannot use their additional knowledge to improve the state of cooperation.

## Main obstacles for good cooperation

Figure 2 shows a so called “wordle” of the most common obstacles. Words that appear larger were mentioned more often. The most important obstacle (40.9 % of the researchers who answered this question) is the different objectives of researchers and practitioners<sup>5</sup>. Incen-

**Figure 1:**  
Cooperation matrix



<sup>5</sup> In total, 46 % of the respondents offered their opinion on the main obstacles.

tives for researchers are clearly geared towards publication of their research findings in high ranking journals addressing the scientific community. This strictly academic approach may result in papers that are difficult to understand for non-academics. Development practitioners on the other hand are looking for quick and easy solutions.

**Figure 2:**  
Wordle of main obstacles



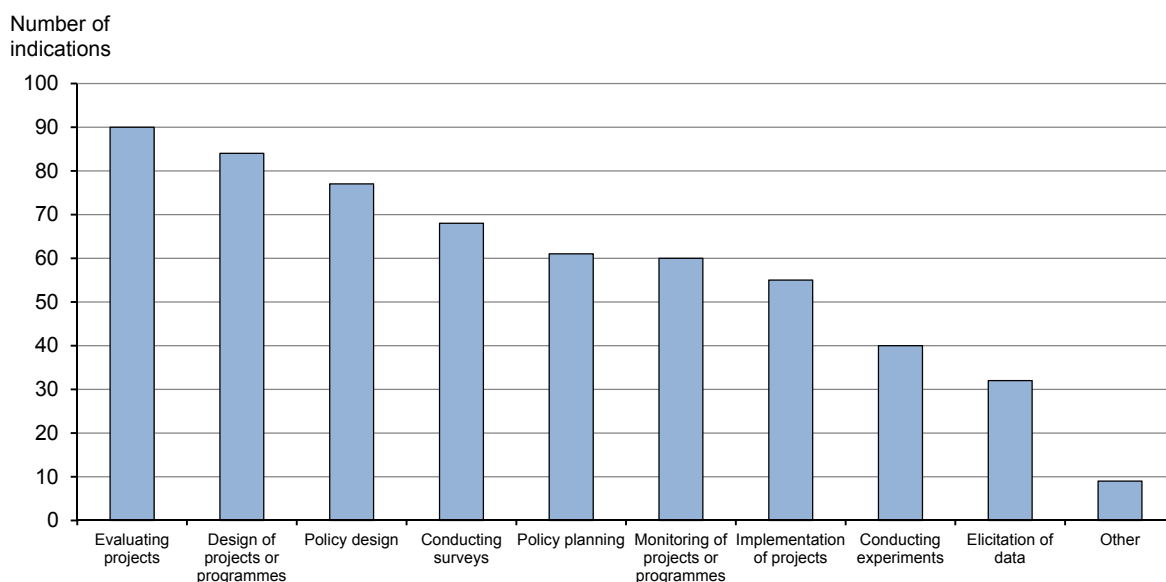
About a quarter of the researchers (24.2 %) named different time frames as a main obstacle for close cooperation. Research often takes a lot longer than the practitioners are willing to wait. They often want quick results to consolidate soon to be made decisions. Narrow time frames also limit the possibilities to understand the needs and interests of both parties. Therefore the collaboration continues to be in a state where on the one side practitioners makers do not respect the researchers' need to publish and on the other side researchers are not able to respect the need of practitioners for "quick and dirty" results.

A related problem is the lack of time and opportunities for communication and networking mentioned by 22.7 % of the respondents. Researchers feel the need for more dialogue with practitioners in Germany and abroad in order to learn from each other and to explore overlapping areas of interest where more cooperation would benefit both parties. Some respondents therefore propose more platforms, joint conferences or workshops to exchange ideas and problems. Mistrust is a second reason for the lack of cooperation, mentioned by 13.6 %. Researchers are afraid of losing their academic freedom by cooperating with development practitioners. They fear the practitioners' unwillingness to publish unfavorable results and that they may not be granted full property rights of collected data which endangers the neutrality of their work. Fueling the mistrust even further is the dependency on funding by development institutions in joint projects.

## Advantages of intensified cooperation

Even having these obstacles in mind researchers still express a strong interest in cooperating more. Development researchers are optimistic that more cooperation would benefit their research as well as the work of the development practitioners. On a scale from 1 to 10 (“not interested at all” to “very interested”) the average respondent enunciates his interest to collaborate more with a score of 8.4, with 44 % of them giving a score of 10. More cooperation is estimated to be especially valuable for evaluating projects, the design of projects and programmes and for policy design (Figure 3).

**Figure 3:**  
Areas of work where researchers would benefit most from more cooperation



Generally, researchers think that coordinating the work of all parties would save money and time. Furthermore through translating theoretical findings into practice the work of researchers could be made more relevant and simultaneously help practitioners to implement better and more sustainable projects. Closer collaboration between theory and practice would also foster trust and the exchange of ideas.

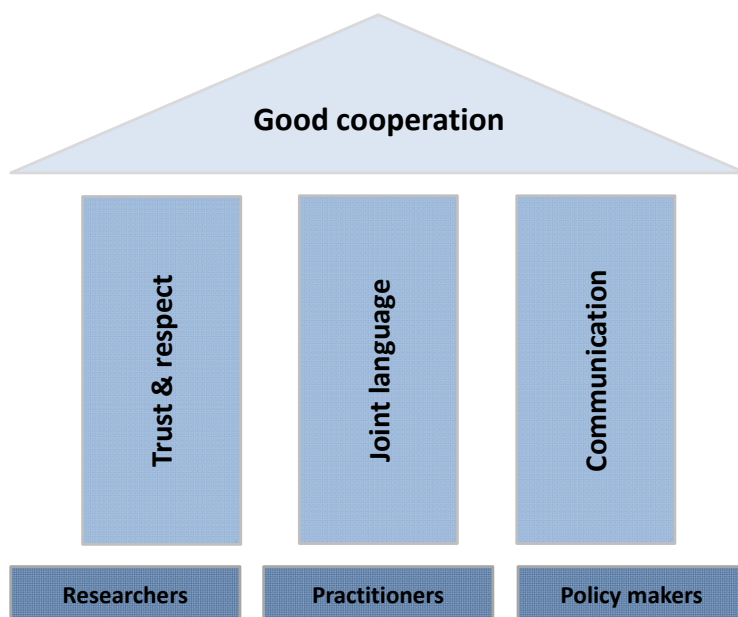
## Main pillars of good cooperation

From collecting the opinions of researchers concerning their definition of good cooperation three main pillars of good cooperation can be deduced: mutual trust and respect, joint language and extensive communication (Figure 4).

From the researcher's point of view it is vital to maintain trust and respect between the cooperating parties. A trustful working atmosphere is needed so that everyone fully commits to collaborate. It also guarantees researchers to preserve their independence and maintain their academic standards in joint projects. This includes having the right to publish the entire data and results and would therefore reduce the existing mistrust between researchers and practitioners. In addition respect for each other's time scales makes it possible to find solutions for differences in hastiness.

Second is joint language. According to the respondents this requires an understanding of the academic approach and its differences to a consulting approach from practitioners. Researchers agree that they would need to put more time and effort into translating academic papers into practical language as well as trying to deliver succinct messages. Why is this not

**Figure 4:**  
Main pillars of good cooperation



done so far? Most researchers either do not know how to write good policy papers or do not have the time to do so. Hence, intermediaries that understand both worlds could fill the gap. Alternatively, appropriate training for and time given to researchers and practitioners may yield a similar result.

The third pillar is intensive communication in general as well as in specific projects. Many respondents mentioned the lack of exchange platforms such as conferences and workshops on a regular basis. These personal meetings offer op-

portunities for sharing best practice approaches and experiences as well as creating a space for networking. We know from our previous survey among practitioners that informal personal exchange is ranked as the most important source of research information. Joint platforms for researchers and practitioners would also make it easier for both parties to find suitable partners for joint projects. On the level of joint projects, the respondents suggest that all stakeholders should be included throughout all the stages of work in order to guarantee the inclusion of all the relevant opinions and needs. Finally, clear feedback of practitioners on research findings would be particularly important in order to make the work of development researchers more relevant and have more of an impact.

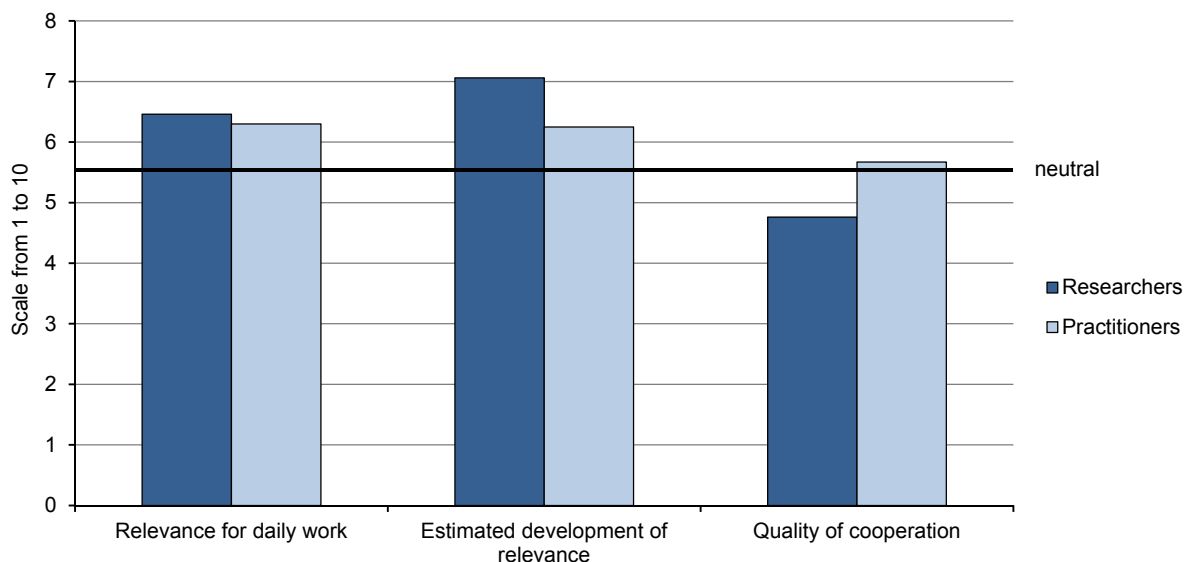


## Comparing researchers' and practitioners' opinions

PEGNet conducted a previous survey on the demand for research among development practitioners in Germany (Kleemann and Böhme 2013)<sup>6</sup>. We now want to know to what extent the results match.

The good news is that researchers as well as practitioners are valuing cooperation in their daily life equally high and that they are both expecting that relevance to increase over the next years. However, researchers and practitioners judge the current quality of cooperation differently. Whereas researchers are dissatisfied with it, practitioners are neutral (Figure 5<sup>7</sup>).

**Figure 5:**  
Comparison of researchers and practitioners



Asked about the main problems both groups mention similar concerns (Figure 6): different objectives and interests, lack of communication and mismatch of time frames. Practitioners mention that they lack both academic knowledge and the appropriate amount of time to become acquainted with all the new research findings. The huge workload they are facing in their daily work limits the opportunities to take a step back and to filter through the big amount of new information development researchers provide. Because of that it becomes difficult for them to adapt the knowledge generated by research into their development

<sup>6</sup> The survey among researchers also targeted researchers in Germany, but reached also international ones. The majority of the responding development researchers however are working in Germany.

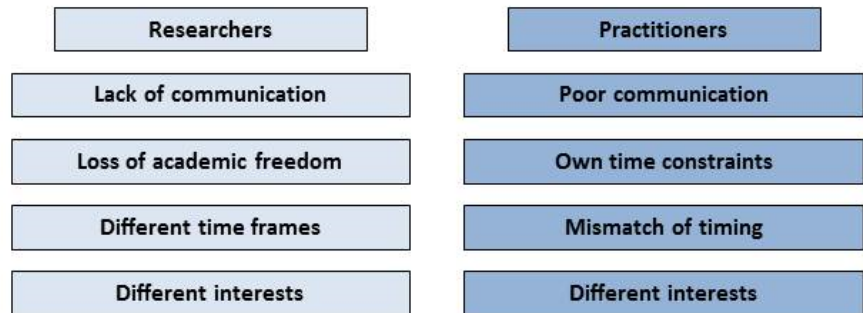
<sup>7</sup> Scales: Relevance for daily work (“not important at all” to “very important”), estimated development of relevance (“very likely to decrease” to “very likely to increase”), quality of cooperation (“very bad” to “very good”).

projects and programmes. Hence, their own time constraints restrict the practitioners in using the research findings in a more efficient way.

Nevertheless, both parties deplore the barely existing network between them. Thus practitioners are facing difficulties to find good research partners for their projects.

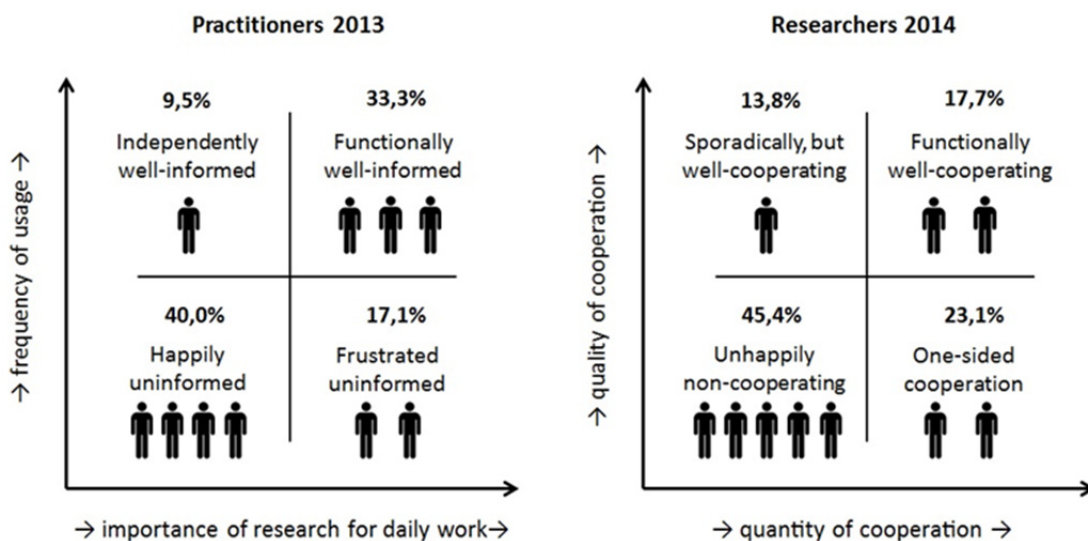
Furthermore both groups express frustration about the frequent mismatch of timing in their projects. This is like a sheep and a cow, where the cow eats very slowly and diligently and re-chews every bit of grass to fully understand its meaning. The sheep in comparison eats very fast and moves haphazardly into different directions while doing so. Now imagine the sheep asks the cow which blade of grass it should eat best next.

**Figure 6:**  
Main obstacles of researchers and practitioners



Comparing the mindset of researchers and practitioners concerning the actual state of cooperation outlines a pretty similar picture (Figure 7). The biggest group is respectively happily uninformed (practitioners, 40.0 %) or unhappily non-cooperating (researchers, 45.4 %). The big difference lies in the respective group which is operating under quite ideal circumstances. Whereas one third of the practitioners is functionally well-informed only 17.7 % of the researchers are functionally well-cooperating.

**Figure 7:**  
State of cooperation for practitioners and researchers



## Steps forward: overcoming the obstacles

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Neither researchers nor practitioners are satisfied by the current state of cooperation. Both groups see the need for more and better cooperation to improve their respective work outcomes. But because of different objectives, time frames, lack of communication and mistrust much potential remain underexploited. Especially the researchers are unhappy about this as they see the necessity to cooperate in order to attain additional insights for their research and to contribute to better and more sustainable development outcomes.

Several measures can be taken to overcome these obstacles. More and better opportunities and time dedicated to network and listen to each other through exchange platforms, conferences and workshops help to dismantle mistrust, increase mutual respect and understanding and find a common language. Agency problems, such as dependency on donor funding in joint projects, do not help to decrease mistrust.

Specialized knowledge brokers could be employed or frequent exchange of personnel could help to mediate, translate policy into research language and research results into policy language and keep both sides up to date thereby reducing conflicts of timing and interest. This would also simplify the search for suitable partners for joint projects. Furthermore the practitioners mentioned that it is vital to have open access to research publications as a precondition for informing themselves about new research.

## Literature

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