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BRIEFING

A narrowed perspective

Knowledge (in)equities in economic advisory work in the Global South

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About this series

The **'Political philanthropy? Perspectives on engaging with governments in the Global South'** series was produced as part of a learning partnership between the Open Society Foundations (OSF), OTT and INASP to jointly explore effective models for supporting progressive government reformers in the Global South. The series examines various aspects of philanthropic engagement with governments in the Global South, focusing on economic advisory work. It aims to distil learnings and offer insights to philanthropic organisations considering such engagement. The series draws on desk reviews, key informant interviews, consultations with an advisory group, and the project team's own experiences.

This briefing was compiled by Jojoh Faal Sy, from an original document, **'A narrowed perspective: A review of (in)equities in knowledge systems related to economic advisory work'**, by Leandro Echt and Jon Harle, INASP.

About OTT

OTT is a global consultancy and platform for change. We support and strengthen the work of research organisations, foundations, governments and others in support of better-informed decision making. We are made up of two parts – OTT Consulting and On Think Tanks – known collectively as OTT.

Our consultancy work focuses on developing tailored solutions to specific challenges. Through services spanning research, learning facilitation, strategy and evaluation, we partner with organisations to drive evidence-informed change.

On Think Tanks is a leading global source of information, support and community for people working in, with and funding think tanks. We create a space to connect, learn and exchange knowledge, ideas and resources.

About INASP

INASP works in partnership with organisations across the majority world to strengthen teaching, learning, and research capabilities, with a focus on gender-responsive and inclusive solutions. We have a 30-year history of partnership with universities, and research institutions, and a global team of experts spanning Africa, Asia and Latin America.

Our vision is of research and knowledge at the heart of development – where decisions are informed by relevant and rigorous evidence, and where knowledge is created with the communities it is intended to serve. That requires many voices, many institutions and many types of knowledge. We call it an equitable knowledge ecosystem. Our mission is to support Southern individuals and institutions to make that possible.

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Overview

This briefing paper, which is based on a full review, characterises the structural inequities in global knowledge systems – with a particular focus on those in the Global South – and explores answers to the question: **What and whose knowledge counts in economic advisory work and in engagement with governments in Southern countries?** It locates this issue within a much broader landscape in which Southern researchers and consultants – especially women, and individuals and organisations based outside the main epicentres of research – encounter significant barriers to making their voices heard as credible producers of knowledge. It then puts forth considerations for philanthropic organisations and knowledge brokers who are seeking to intentionally address knowledge inequities in economic advisory work in the Global South.

Implications of knowledge inequities

Knowledge systems organise and regulate the way knowledge is produced, communicated, evaluated, and applied in practice, as well as how it is funded and commissioned. The inherent power dynamics can manifest in injustices and exclusions both within and between knowledge systems, thus affecting how knowledge is incorporated into decision-making, and ultimately into policy and operational responses (Harle, 2020).

Narrowing of expertise and hegemonic frameworks has real impacts: it limits and homogenises the ‘world of ideas’ used to inform critical policy decisions and the allocation of resources. This becomes even more crucial when problems are complex and ‘wicked’ – requiring genuinely new thinking and inputs from multiple disciplines and contexts – and when successful design and implementation necessitate uniting different interest groups.

This limiting of voice and presence for local experts often means Southern countries lose out on opportunities to take ownership of their economic and development agendas, counterbalance power asymmetries, and better negotiate terms within a highly competitive global economy. The over-prioritising of ‘foreign’ expertise further hinders the evolution of knowledge systems – how priorities are determined, what is funded, who is trained, what knowledge is produced, and how those knowledge systems are sustained.

Emerging themes on knowledge inequities

The full review explored structural inequities within knowledge systems; how these inequities manifest; whose expertise counts; and the consequences of these inequities on policy processes in the Global South.¹ Given the scarcity of published literature that directly examines inequities in economic consulting, advisory work, or policy advice, and the limited consultation of those on the ‘frontline’ of practice, there are blind spots in the analysis of knowledge inequities. The nature of much advisory work (including economic) means it is often carried out discreetly, in closed sessions, and typically assessed retrospectively. Thus, some nuances of practice remain hidden. What is clear, however, is that these knowledge inequities are not exclusive to the field of economics, nor to the practice of economic advisory work.

Despite these limitations, triangulating the existing literature with work on broader dynamics of evidence and expertise in the Global South, alongside first-hand accounts from selected experts, does yield clear themes.

Overlapping inequities within and between knowledge systems

Knowledge inequities today stem from various intersecting historical conditions, including the lasting legacies of colonial and post-colonial knowledge hierarchies, and ingrained biases based on variables such as location or gender. On top of this are the hegemonic, structural conditions that these legacy factors have created – from the curricula of foundational education systems to prevailing epistemologies. Within countries, people who have closer physical proximity to metropolitan centres, who are better connected to global networks, and who have studied and/or worked abroad or for international agencies are better able to position themselves as brokers of knowledge and expertise relative to their peers. Gender is also a differentiating factor, with men’s expertise often featuring more prominently than women’s within a given space.

Many analysts are concerned with misleading binaries, such as ‘Global North vs Global South’, or ‘international vs local’, which disguise a much more nuanced set of dynamics. In reality, knowledge is valued and used based on multiple, overlapping, and sometimes shifting identities, which in turn lead to formal and informal relationships and proximity to other experts. But these dynamics are also material: decisions are still made, and resources allocated, based on these designations.

Historical and identity-based inequities in knowledge systems are also compounded by unequal access to resources for establishing and maintaining knowledge infrastructures. This oversight and the barriers to access lead to gaping holes and blind

¹ To explore these questions, over 60 pieces of academic and grey literature were reviewed, alongside key informant interviews. The analysis considered structural factors, ‘rules of the game’, key stakeholders and incentives, as well as dimensions of knowledge, politics and power in international development, and debates on the decolonisation of knowledge.

spots within knowledge systems. The under-representation of Southern researchers within prominent journals and in development policy and practice, for example, is symptomatic of these inequities.

This structural inequity also operates within countries, with some groups (based on class, gender, and race) having privileged access to better-quality education at the expense of other groups that lag behind. In addition, low spending in the knowledge sectors and low levels of tertiary education in Southern countries fuel a ‘brain drain’ and contribute to the relative shortage of researchers from these countries, constraining their ability to contribute to the global knowledge pool (Amarante & Zurbrigg, 2020; Chelwa, 2021).

Whose expertise counts?

Trustworthiness, credibility, and reliability are critical characteristics for governments to look for in the experts they select. Moreover, their selection is also often shaped by a complex interplay between their experience and education, political and ideological affinity, proximity to influential figures, and informal networks. Markers that often function as ‘shortcuts’ to confirming credibility – such as foreign experience or academic credentials – can be helpful, but can also be instrumentalised as political strategies to secure support or resources.

Understandably, donors seek to connect governments with reliable experts. However, in doing so, the donors’ employment and procurement practices often reinforce structural inequities in knowledge systems (Koch, 2020; Koch & Weingart, 2016; Mabugu et al., 2022). Reliability, in this model, is linked to the capacity of the experts to perform according to donors’ expectations; furthermore, funders often do not have adequate knowledge of the existing expertise across Southern countries, especially outside capital cities and metropolitan areas. When pairing experts with government agencies, funders’ interest in obtaining quick-wins and avoiding risks leads them to reproduce biases and mechanisms of familiarity, connectedness, and convenience – manifesting in a preference and tendency towards working with foreign experts.

Decision makers in the Global South may also lean towards working with experts who can facilitate access to funding or other concrete material benefits using their connections (Chelwa, 2021). Here again, the decision to hire an expert is not based on relative technical competence or the quality and value they may provide, but on the assessment of ‘positive externalities’, which create powerful incentives for decision makers to opt for international experts (Girvan, 2007).

Current progress towards equity

In the last decade, discourses on ‘localisation’, ‘locally owned development’, and ‘equitable partnerships’ have received growing attention in the development sector.

These approaches are based on the understanding that local actors occupy a unique position in their national policy landscape due to their contextual understanding, cultural and linguistic expertise, and access to people and places (Amarante et al., 2022; Burger et al., 2022; Kassouf & Ronconi, 2022; Mabugu et al., 2022; Rethinking Research Collaborative, 2018); and that channelling more support to local experts and organisations will also achieve greater and more sustainable impact (Pul & Levine, 2023).

However, the push for localisation and equitable partnership has remained largely rhetorical and is undermined by continued asymmetry in who controls the funding, decisions, and priorities, as well as in who has access to data (Goldman, 2023).

To break the patterns of exclusion in knowledge ecosystems, several initiatives led by Southern experts – and also specifically by women – have emerged in recent years, including [Partnership for Economic Policy](#), [Decolonising Economics](#), [Women in Economics Initiative](#), [AuthorAID](#), and [Southern Voice](#), among others. These initiatives tend to take the form of global networks that, by strengthening bonds across borders, aim at raising the voices of experts who face barriers to making their voices heard – both globally and within their countries.

Conclusion: Considerations for redressing knowledge inequity

The choice to focus on redressing knowledge inequities is timely, considering the growing recognition of the need for both inclusivity and diversity. Overcoming deeply entrenched inequities, however, is a complex and resource-intensive process, without a single, clear solution. Moreover, there is a marked tension between politically viable approaches and equity-driven policies and processes – particularly in a space where governments hold more power.

It is important to work on **improving both the supply of relevant expertise and the demand for diverse sources of knowledge**. Long-term investment combined with the reinforcement of alternative structures is an example of one clear opportunity to address inequities by piloting innovative practices and progressive approaches. This will need to be accompanied by strategic partnerships with stakeholders – such as funders, national organisations, and regional bodies – to build stronger economic knowledge systems.

Achieving equity will require **redefining what makes for ‘expertise’** beyond single indicators, such as published journal articles. This could be achieved by reassessing the diversity of economic consultants on the roster, considering factors such as consultants’ location/origin, gender, race, age, and the epistemological and methodological paradigms within which their expertise lies.

Philanthropic organisations must be comprehensive in their understanding of national contexts and proactively engage individuals who possess a good understanding of the local culture and politics. This could involve pairing established consultants with those who could offer a different perspective to government policy dialogues and decision-making processes.

Generating more evidence on how economic advice impacts political and policy processes will be key to bridging the gap between a government's economic policy advice needs and the expertise it selects. There is much to be gained by engaging diverse expertise and ensuring the representation of marginalised groups, so as to increase diversity in public and policy debates and improve socio-economic outcomes.

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