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In this issue:

Partnering for social and
environmental justice

See Focus on, page 2

Partnering with higher education institutions for social and environmental justice in the global South: lessons from the Sierra Leone Urban Research Centre

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In the context of the £1.5 billion aid money that the UK government is now channelling through UK research institutions, this article explores the importance of building local institutions and capacity in order to establish equitable research partnerships that respond to local concerns. It will also explore the role of these institutions in brokering local partnerships for urban justice.

GCRF debate

As far back as 1970, UN member nations classified as ‘economically advanced’ committed themselves to increasing “... official development assistance to the developing countries ... to reach a minimum net amount of 0.7 percent of its gross national product at market prices”. The UK is one of only six countries that uphold this commitment today, having made it central to its foreign policy. UK ODA has resisted government cuts but, in the context of austerity, it has been difficult to maintain the legitimacy of this conspicuous investment, with increasing pressure to use ODA to the benefit of the UK economy. The government has therefore now taken the opportunity to support an underfunded higher education sector, at risk of losing their EU funding. As a result, UK universities and research institutions are now receiving £1.5 billion of ODA.

David Hulme, head of the Development Studies Association, the most important professional organisation of academics working on international development, argued that the Global Challenges Research Fund (GCRF) risks ‘ripping off’ the poorest people in the world because it moves resources away from the poorest and puts them into sectors where investments have the highest returns for UK society. On the other hand, current UK aid policies allocate large amounts of money to multi-national companies and private sector consultancies for programmes that many consider problematic.¹ Therefore, universities may do a better job of spending these funds. For instance, the practice-oriented work of the DPU has always been supported by ODA.

Nonetheless, these funds pose ethical challenges to universities. It is important

that researchers do not see GCRF as just more research money to continue ‘research as usual’, taking for granted that their research will benefit a developing country. A fundamental question for researchers is how best can we use these funds, given that they should lead to improved well-being for some of the poorest women and men. We share our reflections to support researchers’ thinking about how to create and engage in the partnerships needed for ODA research.

The need for strategic research partnerships in the

What we often witness ourselves and hear from colleagues in the global South is that foreign researchers hire local academics as individual consultants to do data collection and other research tasks. Local academics targeted by international researchers are often among the best academics in the country and are usually happy to join such projects if paid international rates. This directs their time and energy away from local universities and organisations, including the government, which desperately need their input. Local academics thus have more incentive to conduct work which responds to external research agendas in projects that may hold little immediate benefit for local universities.

The responsibility lies with UK-based researchers, although their practices are understandable. It takes a couple of emails to agree a daily fee with a local researcher, but it takes months or years to develop a strategic partnership with a local university in which the terms of engagement in research projects for staff are openly discussed and arrangements identified that benefit all parties. But if Northern researchers do not want to take resources away from global South higher education and government institutions by offering a parallel salary and diverting people from their critical work, then a long-term partnership approach is the only viable option. Having equitable partnerships with local research institutions, however, is not enough. To improve well-being for women and men living in poverty, the global South partner institution also needs to have strong relationships with communities and their

organisations. Through the discussion of the DPU experience with Njala University in setting up the Sierra Leone Urban Research Centre, we will highlight some of the challenges and potential of building these complex partnerships.

The Sierra Leone Urban Research Centre (SLURC)

Between 1991 and 2002, the Sierra Leone civil war displaced about one third of the population and left the country with fragile institutions, poor infrastructure, and a weak economy. In 2014, post-war recovery was undermined by the Ebola epidemic, which killed approximately 4,000 people in Sierra Leone (and many more in neighbouring countries) and had a major impact on the country’s economy. Sierra Leone remains at the bottom of the Human Development Index, ranking 179th out of 188. 78% of the population is in multidimensional poverty² and a further 15% is at risk of falling into multidimensional poverty, while maternal mortality is the highest in the world.

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Below: Workshopping urban settlements, Freetown.
Photo by SLURC.



Recognising the scarcity of reliable data and other information about Freetown, and the limitations of local research capacity, the UK NGO Comic Relief, which had a portfolio of funded projects in informal settlements in the city, asked the DPU to conduct scoping research on the knowledge available with a local lecturer. When they approached the DPU again to commission research into some of the important knowledge



gaps identified, we asked ourselves what the legacy of such a project would be. This prompted discussions with Njala University, the leading academic institution in Sierra Leone, after which a case was made to Comic Relief about the need for a larger investment. The project proposed to establish a research institution to build research capacity of urban professionals and communities in Sierra Leone, to set a locally-relevant research agenda, to deliver high quality research in partnership with others, to disseminate research outputs, and to work in partnership with urban actors to advocate for urban justice.

The Sierra Leone Urban Research Centre (SLURC) was officially launched in early 2016, aided by sustained support from the Njala University management, whose Deputy Vice-Chancellor and Dean of the Environmental Science Faculty have remained directly involved throughout. SLURC is based at the Institute of Geography and Development Studies at Njala University. Therefore, a financially autonomous legal structure – controlled by a board composed of Njala University, the DPU and a local civil society representative – was set up to ensure the operational flexibility needed to implement complex practice-oriented research projects. Njala University also seconded, on a part-time basis, two of its lecturers to direct SLURC: **Joseph Macarthy** and **Braima Koroma**. The DPU hired a project manager who is full-time seconded to SLURC for an initial period of three years. Currently the centre is co-managed by a committee of two SLURC

directors and two DPU lecturers: **Alexandre Apsan Frediani** and **Andrea Rigon**, with the aim of getting DPU lecturers to progressively withdraw from management. The centre then hired researchers and administrative staff.

This was not an easy arrangement to set up. Firstly, both UCL and Njala bureaucracies had to negotiate an acceptable agreement. Secondly, that agreement had to be implemented.

Partnerships for justice

To achieve its goals, SLURC needed to establish important relationships, most crucially with communities living in informal settlements. The centre was part of a larger programme funded by Comic Relief involving international and local NGOs implementing development projects in Freetown's slum communities. This network allowed SLURC to build relationships with communities and set up a research and training agenda relevant to the needs of these communities and their organisations. In particular, SLURC was able to build on the legitimacy that these NGOs had established over many years, and to communicate the role of a research organisation. SLURC was accepted by local governance actors, including local chiefs, community disaster management committees as well as by members of the urban poor federation. Moreover, this network was able to participate in a 4 cities initiative, also involving Cape Town, Kampala, and Lusaka, aimed at improving the lives of slum dwellers. This created

Above: Cockle Bay settlement. Photo by SLURC

opportunities for learning between cities.

Another element that illustrates the importance of this partnership between research institutions is the complementarity of the networks provided by the DPU and Njala University. The DPU's international network facilitated access to key stakeholders such as DFID, IIED, Cities Alliance, foreign governments and donors, as well as recruiting expertise for the international advisory committee. The network also helped SLURC to learn from the experiences of DPU's friends, such as the lessons from **Arif Hasan** in setting up the Urban Resource Centre in Karachi, which Arif shared during a visit to London by the SLURC team, and also from the struggles for tenure regularisation of the Los Pinos community in Quito which the team visited with the Mayor of Freetown during the Habitat III conference.

However, the strong network in Sierra Leone cultivated by Njala University lecturers was equally vital to the project. As a research institution highly involved in practice work and training, SLURC has positioned itself as an institution trusted by communities, NGOs, government and international organisations and is therefore capable of brokering partnerships that can transform urban development paths in Sierra Leone. For example, SLURC served as a mediating platform between city authorities and NGO representatives who have not always trusted each other.

SLURC trainings are opportunities for community members, academics, NGO staff and government officials to work together, get to know each other and to build relationships. The centre has already fostered conversation between international and local actors to explore the possibility of a city-wide slum-upgrading programme in Freetown. And, in October 2016, SLURC organised a delegation to Habitat III including the Mayor of Freetown, who met with the UN Secretary-General and key donors, bringing Freetown needs to international attention.

As a result of these synergies, SLURC and the DPU have initiated key research projects drawing on the agenda of local groups and SLURC partners. For example, research on urban livelihoods in informal settlements conducted by Braima Koroma and Sudie Sellu of SLURC, with Andrea Rigon and **Julian Walker** of the DPU, worked with the Federation of the Urban Poor and the Pul Slum Pan People (PSP) network of NGOs working in Freetown's informal settlements. The findings were launched at a high-level workshop in Freetown in August 2017. The research revealed the importance of labour-intensive livelihood systems for the employment and wellbeing of women and men in informal settlements, as well as for the wider city level economy and social cohesion. It also highlighted the extent to which these livelihoods are threatened by current approaches to urban governance. Another project, led by Joseph Macarthy and Suleiman Kamara of SLURC with Alexandre Apsan Frediani of the DPU, has focused on the role that urban humanitarian responses have played in the empowerment of informal settlement communities in Freetown. This generated important

evidence about the capacities of local communities in responding to disasters, as well as the institutional barriers to involve communities in wider policy and planning processes. Our next piece of research will focus on the role of action area plans in bringing about more inclusive and just city-making.

Partnership challenges

SLURC initially faced a number of organisational challenges. To begin with, because it was difficult to clearly anticipate the workload that was expected from co-directors, only a few working days were arranged for their involvement with the centre. Once the centre became fully operational, with more new research funding opportunities emerging, it became clear that more was needed of their time than was originally thought. Coupled with their existing teaching and other academic workloads at the university, it has been difficult for them to easily take on the added work. Moreover, because running a research centre was a relatively new experience for the local university, it was difficult to find candidates with the relevant training for the different positions created at the centre. SLURC therefore prioritises skill- and knowledge-building of its staff. However, it has also been a challenge to retain some of the centre's highly-skilled and performing staff in view of the strong competition from other organisations. To address this, efforts have been put in place to recognise and motivate staff, and to ensure staff expectations are in line with the organisational vision.

Another challenge is the management of relationships with other stakeholders. SLURC activities generally require the active involvement of different stakeholder

organisations, including NGOs, the government as well as communities and their groups. As this usually involves making collective decisions across institutional boundaries, it has sometimes been difficult to ensure the active participation of some stakeholders and/or their commitment to the issues. Moreover, while in the case of the Comic Relief-funded partners, it was occasionally possible to make decisions based on consensus, the implementation of actions was often challenging due to varying capacities among organisations as well as the differing strategies they pursue.

Regarding the sustainability of the centre, a key challenge lies in searching for additional funding opportunities, especially in the face of on-going changes in donor financing mechanisms following the global financial crisis. Partnering with the DPU and other organisations to prepare funding applications has required not only reshaping SLURC's organisational structure but also adapting activities and strategies to the fluctuating funding environment. This has required staff to be proactive and to make decisions in a timely manner, as well as cultivating new skills and knowledge to effectively mobilise resources.

The importance of building local institutions and capacity

A key focus of the partnership is on building capacity of a wide number of stakeholders. Therefore, the first condition of SLURC to any potential research partner is that their work must also involve a major capacity building component. For example, research projects start with training in which SLURC brings together residents of informal settlements, NGO staff, academics, civil servants and other urban professionals.

Unlike a single research project, such a strategic partnership needs institutional commitment and the involvement of many people. This is truly a DPU-wide project, with almost 20 DPU staff already collaborating with SLURC. Alexandre Apsan Frediani and Andrea Rigon direct the project on the DPU side, while **Giovanna Astolfo** ensures smooth implementation and coordinates activities. **Nkenji Okpara** and **Elsa Taddesse** support the complex management and relationship with UCL central finance and contribute to the training of SLURC staff. **Michael Walls** sits on the SLURC International Advisory Committee representing UCL and delivered the keynote lecture at the SLURC high-level conference on the Freetown economy. **Caren Levy** provided key input in the



Left: Livelihoods research on fisheries at Portee Rokupa, Freetown. Photo by SLURC

development of the proposal and now sits with **Julio Davila, Julian Walker, Adriana Allen** and Michael Walls as senior advisors on the project. Julio Davila has also played a key role in negotiating the contradictions between UCL's structures and procedures and the Sierra Leonean institutional context.

DPU investment and commitment has been substantial but benefits are also significant. SLURC has become a platform that has enabled UCL researchers to conduct ethical and meaningful research in Freetown. For example, **Adriana Allen, Cassidy Johnson, Emmanuel Osuteye** and **Rita Lambert** conducted research and training in Freetown as part of the Urban ARK project, and are now preparing to take MSc Environment and Sustainable Development students to Freetown for their fieldtrip in 2018. **Daniel Oviedo** recently submitted a research proposal on transport with SLURC directors.

SLURC is also a key partner in the GCRF ESRC project Knowledge in Action for Urban Equality led by Caren Levy (see also the announcement under Research in this edition of DPU News). This £7 million project, involving a range of research partnerships sharing similar principles with SLURC, is a demonstration of how GCRF can be used to build research capacity through partnerships for social justice.

Other activities involving DPU staff include Walker and Rigon's training and research on gender and livelihoods. Frediani and colleagues from Architecture Sans Frontières-UK delivered a training on participatory planning and design. **Magdalena Gatica** and **Milimer Morgado** conducted fieldwork for their MSc dissertations in Freetown and Morgado also contributed to an IIED-funded research project with Frediani. More DPU students will be working on SLURC-related dissertations this year. ESD alumnus **Alexander Stone** is now spending 9 months at SLURC as the Information and Data Management Officer. Many more DPU staff will be progressively involved; for instance, SLURC has already discussed working together on urban health with **Haim Yacobi**. This list does not include other researchers at UCL and in other institutions who have interacted with SLURC so far.

When setting up such an institution, fundamental capacities do not only relate to academics – the skills of professional services staff are just as important. During a capacity building trip to London, SLURC staff were able to learn and exchange

experiences with UCL research, library, and finance staff. Discussions with the UCL Vice-Provost International contemplated the creation of a secondment scheme for UCL staff to SLURC and also discussed other initiatives.

Final reflections

Setting up such a partnership and building a sustainable institution requires an enormous amount of very labour-intensive work.

Are academics willing and able to spend significant time dealing with financial management, contracts, legal registration, consultants, recruitment processes, internal policy development, management meetings, staff mentoring, and networking and advocacy meetings rather than working on research and publications? Does the

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Below: Participants of the Gender and Urban Livelihoods Training Programme. Photo by SLURC.



current university structure acknowledge the importance of these efforts, given that academic promotion is strongly based on peer reviewed publications? We were lucky to receive internal support from colleagues at the DPU and UCL, which allowed us to commit to SLURC, but this may not be the case for others.

While SLURC received praise and support directly from the top management of UCL, the increasing centralisation of many university bureaucracies, with processes and systems designed to work in the UK or the EU or North American contexts, poses further obstacles for academic staff trying to set up such partnerships and arrangements. These are institutional barriers that we should work to challenge. Moreover, traditional research funding may not always be suitable to set up an institution; a creative funding strategy, exploring a broader range of funders, including NGOs, may be necessary.

Such a partnership also implies unlearning and relearning how to work together, across institutions, from small

tasks like booking flights with routes that minimise visa requirements, to identifying common priorities and languages. Today, SLURC management meetings are very efficient, we have identified a common vision and language, and we understand each other's ways of working. Such a relationship is a long-term project: it has taken three years to get to this point.

Despite the challenges, we are convinced of the fundamental importance of this approach. The spirit of the SLURC project builds on a long history of DPU strategic partnerships to build the capacity of research institutions in the global South: from the Institute of Technology Bandung school of planning in the 1980s to the more recent support for curriculum development at the Indian Institute of Human Settlements, and now including SLURC. It is also part of the same ethos of the new GCRF project **Knowledge in Action for Urban Equality**, whose award demonstrates how funding bodies are recognising the importance of partnership. Finally, we feel that SLURC embodies the core principles behind UCL's Global Engagement Strategy, which aims to build partnerships to support the capacity of local institutions rather than building UCL campuses across the world.

UCL's Global Engagement Strategy was on our side, as was our shared departmental vision of creating partnerships of equivalence aimed at strengthening local higher education institutions in the global South. Therefore, this experience demonstrates that for meaningful partnerships to come about, the process cannot rely solely on the motivations of individual academics. It requires institutional support that values long-term collaborations, committed to tackle the power asymmetries between higher education institutions, backed by the commitment of tangible resources to permit those partnerships to develop.

1 Witness, for example, the scandal surrounding the consultancy Adam Smith International or ASI – <https://www.theguardian.com/politics/2017/mar/02/uk-aid-company-bosses-quit-crackdown-profiteering-adam-smith-international> (accessed 5/9/17)

2 For a definition of multidimensional poverty, see the Oxford University OPHI website <http://www.ophi.org.uk/research/multidimensional-poverty/> (accessed 5/9/17)