

Let practitioners set the agenda for research in fields of action

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Doers should determine what needs to be studied in areas where practice matters more than theory

There is no doubt that research is an important dimension for us to improve upon as a society; but for this, we need to fundamentally change the power equations in our research ecosystems, with people at the front line of practice determining what should be researched. This is how I ended my last column. One of my friends who has for the past 12 years reviewed each of my columns suggested that the line be “softened” to something like “... with the people in the front line of practice actively involved in deciding what should be researched”. It was a wise suggestion, but I didn’t heed it.

The reason is simple. The voice and role of practitioners is so non-existent in the research ecosystem, and power so concentrated with academia and policymakers, that ‘active involvement’ could side-step the basic changes required and maintain the status quo. Before going further, a recap: This discussion is about fields like education, public health, livelihood generation, economics, etc, that directly and immediately affect the lives of people in fields of action. It is not about, say, physics, math or sociology, where the effects on human lives are indirect and distant, at most. In fields such as these, descriptions and explanations are worthy ends in themselves.

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Better understanding of our social and natural world may eventually lead to improving human well-being. We can't even imagine, let alone predict, the use of all such knowledge. Which is why seemingly useless knowledge in such fields may someday be useful; let's call these 'explanatory fields'.

On the other hand, fields such as education and health impact human lives in the here-and-now. And therefore, knowledge developed in such 'action fields' is worthy if useful in improving lives here and now. Economics could well be an explanatory field, but the avatar that it has adopted for itself, more and more over the years, is that of an action field: wanting to effect policy through to action on the ground.

So, in action fields, what questions and issues must be explored should be determined by the real world out there. It should focus on issues that are most important for improving people's lives. The nuances of this are better judged by people deeply connected with actual action: i.e., the practitioners. Therefore, it is practitioners who must take the lead in the prioritization of questions.

Restructuring power equations in research ecosystems such that practitioners determine what gets researched is insufficient for this to happen. There is an issue of capacity. Those on the ground—

practitioners, including organizations and institutions—rarely have the capacity for rigorous research. Since they do not see this as their business, they haven't developed that capacity.

So, we are caught in this double-bind. Those who know what needs to be researched do not have the capacity and those who have the research capacity are too often disconnected from reality.

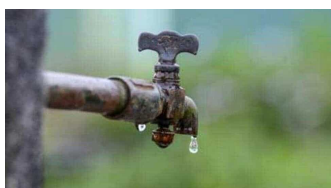
One approach to solving this conundrum is close collaboration between organizations with research capacity and those which are deeply embedded in the real world. Over the past 8 years, we have run a sizeable 'research grants' programme in a range of fields to financially support other organizations doing useful research. The hundreds of proposals we received have only underscored this separation of research capacity from the wisdom of where to use it. As with any such thing in our country, it would be naïve to suggest there are no organizations that combine both wisdom and capacity. Clearly, there are. Some organizations across the research- practitioner divide do collaborate productively, but the numbers are nowhere near what the country requires.

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Only empowering practitioner organizations to ask the research questions and backing it with funding to conduct such research may also be insufficient. Practitioner organisations would have to act in other complementary ways.

First, they must adequately prioritize their contribution to such research. Of the hundreds of such organizations that I am familiar with, too few even try to do so. They have good reasons. Limited bandwidth, almost no financial support, and just the daily struggle in their messy reality to get their work done stymies their other intentions and efforts. Like all significant changes, any such efforts by these organizations are difficult. But practitioner organizations could be energized by the real possibility that if they engage with such research, their contribution to society would be manifold more. Second, they need to build productive collaborations with organizations that have research capacity. If they try, they will certainly find a few enlightened research organizations that do not sit atop an ivory-tower but are willing to battle shoulder-to-shoulder in the heat and dust of our country.

Given the fraught history of any kind of system change in our country, we cannot wait for systemic changes in the research ecosystem, which may get a boost when the National Research Foundation proposed by the National Education Policy 2020 becomes a reality. But for now, much like any pioneering effort, some people need to take the lead—including practitioners, researchers and funders—to join the few who are already attempting to take this path. India will be better off as a result.

Anurag Behar is CEO of Azim Premji Foundation

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