

Bridging the Gap Between Applied Disability Research and the Application of Research Findings to Benefit Persons with Disabilities

Introduction

This short paper contains observations and discussion points concerning the perceived gap between applied disability research findings and the application of those findings for the ultimate benefit of persons with disabilities. A group of six East African researchers / community development workers, including three with disabilities were sponsored by FIRAH to attend the Afri-CAN CBR international conference in Nairobi in June 2015. These are disability development practitioners who have also been involved in research and their own ideas and recommendations on how research can be better disseminated and applied at local stakeholder level are included in this paper.

Motivation / Purpose - Why is Disability Research Undertaken

A fundamental issue that determines whether research is ultimately applied, or not, concerns the motivation for undertaking the research.

Academic Researchers

The factors that motivate an academic researcher working in a university or research institute will probably include not only their professional interest and commitment to their field of research but also elements which contribute to the progression of their own academic career. For example, they may be working towards a PhD which requires them to fulfil a number of criteria stipulated by their academic supervisor and external assessors. The university or institution will also have its own research agenda and hierarchy, and students and professional researchers will need to operate within the parameters laid down by the institution. In some cases these may be broad and flexible, accommodating new and innovative research topics, whilst others may be more focused or confining. These academic stipulations are put in place not only to ensure that the research undertaken by the institution is rigorous and contributes to the wider body of knowledge in the field, but also that the reputation of the university is promoted so as to compare favourably with other institutions which may be viewed as competitors for research reputations and grants. Some academic research practitioners we have spoken to who are working in the field of disability explained that they are under significant pressure from their own universities to be published and present papers at conferences etc. They are often expected to publish a number of research papers every year in respected peer reviewed journals, and to present their research at prestigious conferences. Non-peer reviewed papers (known as grey literature) are considered less thorough, and are therefore less widely published even though they may contain findings which have potential for useful practical application. Research 'impact' is often judged by the number of downloads and citations the work attracts. Some universities also have a commercial interest in their intellectual property. This means that although open access to research reports might be desirable, and is often stipulated by funders, sometimes access is restricted to only those willing and able to pay for one-off access or subscriptions to publishing agencies.

In summary, it seems that the motivations for undertaking academic research are not only the researcher's professional interest and commitment to the subject matter, but also the associated academic and institutional factors. Universities have internal structures designed to promote high levels of research rigour and quality, but their inclination to measure the impact or

quality of research by its potential for the findings and recommendations to be applied to the real world is perhaps less evident. That said, many large research commissioning bodies (such as Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC) and Wellcome Trust in the UK) do now expect research applicants to explain how their prospective project is going to have impact in the real world. In the case of the ESRC this section of the proposal progress is known as 'pathways to impact'.

Non-Academic Researchers

Although universities and research institutions are the most conventional research organisations in the disability field, other agencies also conduct research, notably NGOs and especially INGOs. These organisations (eg. World Vision, Handicap International, CBM, Save the Children) are generally motivated to get involved in disability research because the issues are of importance to their development and humanitarian work, and they want to learn from the research so as to improve their policies and practice. This starting point suggests that NGOs are therefore more inclined to choose research topics that have potential to be applied, and also that they may be more committed to putting resources into ensuring the results have a beneficial impact. Research purists, however, may argue that this means that NGOs are not well placed to do objective research because they lack the necessary distance from the issues and are therefore more likely to be biased. One academic we spoke to was dismissive of the quality and accuracy of NGO research.

Research Collaborations

It is now increasingly common for universities and NGOs to form collaborations to undertake research projects. This seems to be a good idea as the core competencies of each partner will complement the other. Universities will provide the research rigour and experience in methodologies and data analysis etc whilst NGOs are likely to have established local stakeholder relationships and knowledge, and will balance the academic rigour with pragmatism and the need for practical impact.

Target Audiences for Research Findings

The co-authors of this paper thought it might be useful to consider what target audiences academic researchers usually have in mind for their research findings and recommendations. The immediate audiences might be their academic examiners and in the case of professional researchers, their peers, especially peer reviewers for important academic journals. They are also likely to consider delegates at conferences as a potential important audience. From our observations at the Afri-CAN CBR conference we saw a large number of presentations which focused on a detailed description of the research process (methodology, data collection methods etc) and spent less time discussing the findings. There was often little or no discussion about the potential or actual application of the results. We speculated that some presenters felt that they needed to justify their research methods with long explanations and complicated Power Point slides so that their peers in the audience would not be critical of their research credentials. It may also be true that if researchers are looking to influence high level policy makers or multi-lateral agencies for example, they feel that it is imperative that they present themselves as rigorous and reliable, so that their recommendations are not discounted.

This thorough and scientific presentation style might be well received by fellow researchers, but those few people in the audience who are practitioners or those devising local policy, require tangible and clear recommendations about what should be done to make positive changes and how that change might be achieved. At the Afri-CAN CBR conference we noted that stakeholders from 'the field' such as community development workers (including members of the FIRAH sponsored delegates) often left the lecture theatre after a presentation unable to make a clear connection between the research that has just been presented and the daily challenges they experience in their communities. Many of the research projects presented at the conference tended towards the collection of quantitative data. For example a study of the number of persons with disabilities who are unemployed in a particular region, but without an

insight into how employment could be increased. As one participant put it, 'the figures and charts are all very nice, but how is this really going to help the people with disabilities in our communities'.

Part of the problem here is that researchers do not often put time into designing simple and effective means of communicating their new knowledge. If they were to adapt their presentation content and media to make it brief, clear and accessible it would be more likely to be understood and taken up by a wider stakeholder audience.

It is also interesting to note that the vast majority of delegates at conferences (as was the case at the Afric-CAN CBR conference) will be 'higher level' professionals, many from academic institutions, INGOs and Government bodies. National level practitioners, and community development workers are not often facilitated to attend large and expensive conferences. They are therefore often not familiar with the latest discourse on disability issues, despite being the people expected to implement the programmes and projects which draw on research evidence for their design.

Funding for Research

It is clear that most research funding originates from high income countries in Europe and America etc. During the research mapping of applied disability research in East Africa, Advantage Africa / FIRA found that most East African research is initiated and managed by universities and institutions based outside Africa itself. Therefore African universities often collaborate with European and American universities and INGOs to help fund their research activities. However this means that the research is ultimately managed from a 'western' perspective, and research which is truly indigenous in inception and implementation is less common, and can be undervalued. Also, there may be a tendency for external researchers to view African culture and practices as an interesting and distracting curiosity, where as to local researchers they are simply the norm. Local people are also best placed to be able to interpret the findings in the context of the local situation.

Recommendations - How can the Dissemination of Research be Promoted?

At the research proposal stage:

Those bodies that commission research (including FIRA) could perhaps review their research proposal process to ensure that they are asking applicants clear questions about how the design of their project will allow the findings to reach the stakeholders and ultimately make an impact at beneficiary level. Traditionally, application forms will ask questions about how the research work will be disseminated. The usual response will be that the research will be published in journals, shared in disability / development networks, presented at conferences and made available on the internet. However, it may be useful to include a question in the research proposal about how the new research knowledge will ultimately achieve the aim of improving the lives of persons with disabilities – ie. how it will be applied. As mentioned above, most large research funders are now including this in their application process.

Dissemination formats and media:

As mentioned above, the conventional means of presenting new research findings is through scientific reports and presentations. More emphasis should be placed upon adapting the dissemination materials to make them inclusive, easily understandable and accessible by a wider number of stakeholders, including those outside the conventional academic circles. The 'oral culture' in Africa is strong and people often trust the spoken word more than the written word. One local researcher in Malawi says 'if you want to hide something in Africa, write it in a book!'. Therefore there is perhaps scope for more audio dissemination formats, including through radio, and in appropriate languages. If new knowledge is clear and simple to understand it is more likely to be picked up and applied. The so called 'digital divide' is also a limiting factor for people in low income countries gaining access to research knowledge. However, in Africa poor landline infrastructure has been superseded by mobile technology.

There are now new opportunities to disseminate to wide audiences through social media and mobile internet data.

Research conclusions and recommendations:

As observed above, research should, as far as possible, provide succinct, clear and easily understandable conclusions and recommendations for practical action. It is too often the case that final research reports have a long list of general or non-specific recommendations, and it is difficult to see how they could be implemented in practice. Often the recommendations are for further research rather than practical interventions for immediate impact. Recommendations are also sometimes unachievable because of the resource implications.

Comparative Approaches - Summary Table of Trends

	Universities	INGOs (& NGOs)	Recommendations
Motivation for undertaking research	Advancing researchers' academic career (eg. PhD or publications / citations) Individual researchers professional interest in the subject matter	To add to knowledge (and solutions) about situations or problems experienced in their programme work	Form research collaborations between academics and practitioners on the ground
Identifying research subject matter	Will attract research funding Will fulfil academic requirements Will contribute to universities' research reputations	Will attract research funding Usually based on experiences at programme level Addresses a real need or issue.	Include a needs assessment from the ultimate beneficiaries of the proposed research (ie. stakeholders with disabilities)
Research process	Must be rigorous, conform to international academic standards Can be long term and time-consuming Can be 'top down approach'	Can be done in addition to existing workload (not too time consuming) Contributes directly to the goals of the organisation More likely to be 'bottom up approach'	Participatory approaches. Include participation of stakeholders with disabilities in the research team (eg. as advisory group)
Audiences	Satisfies academic assessors and peer reviewers Research grant funders	Internal policy and programme staff Other development orgs and multi-lateral agencies Research grant funders	Broaden dissemination to stakeholder audiences using formats below
Dissemination formats and media	Written research reports detailed methodologies Conference presentations	Written research reports Simplified documents for policy and programme staff	Design accessible, simple and clear materials Consider audio and graphic media