

Reflecting on evidence and practice in an age of inequality

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The reality of our work in development is to confront the unavoidable certitude of multiple manifestations of inequality that have persisted and in some cases worsened over the past few decades, despite our best efforts.

At the time of writing, we continue to face economic indicators that reveal persistent inequality. We are told that the world's GDP has tripled since 1980, yet inequality is at historically high levels.¹ As the UNDP noted at the end of 2013, 'The world is more unequal today than at any point since World War II'.² Oxfam's 2016 Davos Report stated that 62 people own the same as half the world³, while the World Bank has put forward that, 'almost half of the world's poor are expected to live in countries affected by fragility, conflict and violence by 2030'.⁴

Beyond these numbers, we witness not only economic inequality, but other more ubiquitous, insidious interrelated forms of inequality such as access to vital resources including health, education, and justice. Moreover, unequal impacts of climate change, or every day experience of gender discrimination, disability, living with HIV and AIDS, age, sexual orientation, religion and ethnicity, are part and parcel of intersecting forms of inequality. More often than not, inequality is also about how we as a sector confront it, and who holds the power to drive development agendas.

The experiences that confront us every day are forcing those in government, NGOs, academia, corporations, multilaterals and donors to rethink their role and purpose, while continuing to grapple with absolute poverty.

Such challenges have led to a strengthening narrative and importance allocated to evidence with the promise of the 'best available evidence' to inform innovative responses to inequality. Claims to evidence-based policy and practice have become widespread, commonly accompanied by assumptions that research and evidence will demonstrate impact, and outcomes will be pro-poor, sound, or more rigorous.⁵

It is within this context that Monash University and the Australian Council for International Development University Network, now known as the Research for Development Impact Network (RDI), convened the conference, *Evidence and Practice in an Age of Inequality*, held at Monash University in June 2015.

We posed two broad questions to encourage critical debate and new ideas:

- What do we know about inequality, and how do we know it?
- What is evidence-based policy and practice and how does it work?

This conference was a unique opportunity to bring together multidisciplinary academics, practitioners, policy makers, and local and international students. Development

is often discussed and approached as both a discipline in and of itself but also a 'catch all' for many disciplines requiring different technical skills sets and expertise. As such, we sought to highlight and discuss new forms of cross-sector and interdisciplinary collaboration in responding to inequality. For example:

- How can universities, NGOs and other stakeholders work collaboratively to address inequality?
- How can locally generated evidence be ensured and prioritised?

The conference gave us the opportunity to question what we mean when we talk about 'inequality', to explore the relationship between sustainable development and poverty alleviation, and to debate whether we need new ways of thinking about and addressing inequality. Moreover, we were interested in understanding the elements of power and politics behind which evidence 'counts' and is ultimately used, as well as some of the 'uses and abuses' of this evidence.

The papers included in this volume are a sample of discussions that were held. As Fenton Lutunatabua pointed out during his talk about Climate Warriors in the Pacific facing the unthinkable urgency of climate change, an incomplete narrative is also a form of inequality. The conversation started in the conference, and continued in this edition of the *Development Bulletin*, must continue, encapsulating the voices of our region, and we must ensure that they are heard to avoid further entrenchment of inequality.⁶

Notes

- ¹ Dabla-Norris, ME, MK Kochhar, MN Suphaphiphat, MF Ricka, and E Tsounta, 2015, *Causes and Consequences of Income Inequality: A global perspective*, International Monetary Fund.
- ² UNDP 2013, *Poverty Reduction. Humanity Divided: Confronting inequality in developing countries*. http://www.undp.org/content/dam/undp/library/Poverty%20Reduction/Inclusive%20development/Humanity%20Divided/HumanityDivided_Full-Report.pdf.
- ³ Oxfam 2016, Briefing Paper 210, *An Economy for the 1%*. Accessed 5th May 2016 < <http://oxf.am/Znhx> >.
- ⁴ World Bank, *Overview*, Accessed July 3 2016 < <http://www.worldbank.org/en/topic/fragilityconflictviolence/overview> >.
- ⁵ du Toit, A, 2012, *Making Sense of 'Evidence'. Notes on the discursive politics of research and pro-poor policy making*. http://www.plaas.org.za/sites/default/files/publications-pdf/PLAAS_WorkingPaper21dutoit_0.pdf.
- ⁶ The conference program is available online at <http://acfid.asn.au/get-involved/join-rdi-network>. This journal is available for free download on <http://Crawford.anu.edu.au/rmap/devnet/dev-bulletin.php>.