How science on-the-go can enhance development efforts

Development projects rarely play by the book. Unpredicted challenges and opportunities can emerge in any project – as the world painfully observed in 2020. 'Accompanying research' embeds continuous, systematic research in development work. In this approach, scientists and change agents work hand in hand on a shared vision: stronger impacts for both research and practice. Our authors give an account of experience from Malagasy-German research cooperation.

By Jonathan Steinke and Alexandra Konzack

Beneficiaries of a nutrition security project in Madagascar join researchers to discuss expected impacts of a range of potential interventions. Photo: Sarah Tojo Mandaharisoa

Development projects frequently cooperate with researchers to legitimise their activities. For example, academic mid-term reviews and post-project evaluations are common practice. By collecting lessons learnt and advancing institutional knowledge, these types of cooperation between science and practice are vital for the design of follow-up projects. In running projects, however, necessary adaptations are often based on ad-hoc decisions by the project team, rather than on systematic inquiry. Permanently embedding research within development projects has the potential to save resources and strengthen impacts.

Yet, as much as every intervention project is unique, there is no standard approach to accompanying research. Currently, researchers at Humboldt University Berlin (Germany) and Université d'Antananarivo (Madagascar) are piloting accompanying research within a project for food and nutrition security in Madagascar led by Deutsche Gesellschaft für Internationale Zusammenarbeit (GIZ). This pilot project, named *Accord-M*, aims at integrating systematic research into all phases of the development project. The research component enables the project to evolve over time, based on empirical evidence.

What's new about accompanying research?

In contrast to extant research-in-development approaches, accompanying research implies continuous, mutual interaction between the on-the-ground activities of the development project and the research agenda. This means that neither the intervention project nor the research project are fully pre-designed: ideally, their respective activities are informed by the other.

The idea behind accompanying research is to provide scientifically grounded advice on all steps of project implementation. This includes a thorough exploration of the target context prior to the design of interventions. Once the intervention project kicks off, research closely observes implementation, for example, the context-based modification of ongoing interventions, or participation barriers experienced by the target group. Although researchers take a passive, observing role in the development project, closely monitored experiments, for example around individual intervention design, are possible.

One key characteristic of accompanying research is the execution of small, self-contained studies on emerging topics identified by the development project. At regular intervals, accompanying research delivers outputs that are meant to inform the decision-making of the cooperating change agents. This allows quickly and flexibly responding to knowledge needs identified 'along the way'. But it also requires a good amount of ongoing communication and coordination from both sides.

A toolkit for mutual learning with development projects

Despite the need for flexibility, agreeing on a research roadmap is crucial for clear communication between all stakeholders. While every accompanying research project will need to design its methodology to match the intervention project, it may be useful to build on the experience of similar collaborations. In our case, the research roadmap for accompanying a project that aims at improving the nutritional status of women and children in Madagascar follows three major stages: first, informing the design of the intervention package by an in-depth analysis of local needs and opportunities, second, informing practical implementation by observing intervention roll-out, and third, after at least two years of implementation, a preliminary, participatory impact assessment and cost-effectiveness analysis.

In all stages, the project combines quantitative and qualitative methods of socio-economic

Selected research topics from *Accord-M*

Before implementation of development interventions	• Target group's problem perception • Local positive deviance in food and nutrition security • Participatory ex-ante impact assessment
During early implementation	• Adaptation of interventions by beneficiaries • Unintended negative side-effects • Trade-offs experienced by target group
Final year of implementation	• Spill-over effects to non-beneficiaries • Effects beyond the targeted food and nutrition indicators • Cost-effectiveness analysis

research. One example is the search for 'positive deviant' households in the intervention region. Using survey data collected by the intervention project, we identified individual households with 'surprisingly' strong food and nutrition security indicators. In the next step, researchers revisited these positive deviants for in-depth interviews, with the aim of identifying uncommon practices that may contribute to their superior situation. This tool helps to outline interventions that are likely to be viable and effective in the targeted context. Another example of how accompanying research can inform the design of the intervention package is participatory ex-ante impact assessment. In this process, a diverse group of future project beneficiaries express their priorities regarding potential project impacts. Then, they discuss and rate expected intervention impacts against these criteria. The insights generated help the development project to prioritise interventions with most positive impact expectations in the most important criteria.

Regular communication between all project stakeholders is key: for researchers to be aware of emerging research questions, and for practitioners to receive new scientific insights in a timely, understandable, and actionable manner. To guide the research agenda, we have established an 'advisory board' that convenes three times a year, reflecting on findings and discussing the next steps. This board includes members of the research team (from Germany and Madagascar alike), the intervention project and the funding organisation. In addition, it is joined by an external academic expert, who was invited to review all research activities and outputs and to provide unbiased, independent feedback and recommendations.

Inherent tensions and opportunities

Along our ongoing project, we have encountered some tensions that challenge the routines of conventional research projects. One challenge, for example, consists in the intervention project's need for quick outputs, which can, sometimes, be hard to align with established standards of scientific rigor. After all, proper socio-economic research demands time-consuming development of research methods, preparation of fieldwork and processing of collected data. We try to speed up the feedback process by delivering preliminary results as quickly as possible, from a slimmed-down set of methods. Fully triangulated results from multiple methods are presented later.

Another trade-off that requires consideration relates to the simultaneous needs for flexibility and planning security. Many researchers pursue long-term scientific projects, such as the development of a methodology across multiple research projects. PhD students, who may invest time and effort into acquiring methodological skills, need to be sure the research needs and priorities will not strongly change in the meantime. To maintain the ability to accommodate emerging knowledge needs while granting adequate planning security, we decided to assign pre-agreed lines of research to PhD students. Post-doctoral staff and graduate students focus on smaller, rapid studies in response to the intervention project's expressed needs. Involving Master's students from both Université d'Antananarivo and Humboldt University as researchers on self-contained topics has so far proven a successful approach.

Lastly, scientific independence is non-negotiable. This means that early in the development of an accompanying research project, discussions should emphasise the mitigation of possible conflicts of interest. In our case, funding for our research originates from the same source as funding for the intervention project, i.e. from GIZ. We believe that this kind of constellation is likely to be typical of accompanying research, where the donor of an intervention project is interested in increasing its effects. We have tried to minimise conflicts of interest by prohibiting double roles between the two projects: no member of the research team can take up responsibilities in the intervention project, and GIZ's role in the research activities is limited to logistic support. In addition, while the intervention project raises questions that emerge from ongoing practice, the research project is free to select methodological approaches, interview partners or case studies. The leading role of Université d'Antananarivo in the research activities on-the-ground has shown to strengthen this independence. Detecting signs of insufficient scientific independence and suggesting coping strategies may also fall within the duties of external advisors acting as a 'critical friend'.

A process of continuous learning

Accompanying research thrives on flexibility and constant exchange between researchers and practitioners. In this respect, we are continuously learning to improve not only our research, but also the meta-methodology of accompanying research. To suggest best-practice for accompanying research, we are planning to evaluate our pilot cooperation systematically. Communication, power distribution and conflict management are major topics for thorough examination and scientific analysis. In this article, we make suggestions on how to address some identified tensions. Other challenges and opportunities may need a closer look and profound scientific exchange after project end.

More than just a tool for advising development projects, accompanying research can also hold a mirror up to science. The close interaction with development practice has the potential to challenge established scholarly wisdom. Researchers may benefit from new perspectives that open up during accompanying research. Finally, highlighting best practice in development projects through scientific analysis can help to up-scale identified successes in the future. We look forward to further applications and development of the approach and welcome lively exchange with researchers, donors and development practitioners.

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