

Policy Brief No 1: The Private Sector in International Development

The private sector as the 'unusual suspect' in knowledge brokering for international development

This policy brief is based on the research project **An unusual suspect: the private sector in knowledge brokering in international development** (the Unusual Suspects project) <https://unusualsuspect.org/>

One of the key challenges for the field of international development is knowledge brokering between practice, policy and research in order to improve the evidence base for policy making, programmes and projects. The private sector can play a pivotal role in knowledge brokering activities but important barriers remain that prevent policy makers and practitioners from benefitting from private sector involvement to its fullest potential. One barrier is that there has been very little research to date on the role played by the private sector. The Unusual Suspects research project is addressing this knowledge gap, focusing on knowledge brokering in Europe and Africa. What are the roles, potential and barriers to private sector involvement?

Roles and potential of private sector involvement

High-quality research & funding opportunities

Due to its expansive resources, networks, and platforms, the private sector can contribute information to development practitioners by posing critical research questions and ideas, conducting and harvesting high-quality research, and disseminating findings to relevant users. This includes disseminating information on funding opportunities that may prove invaluable for partner organizations.

Fostering networks & Strategic partnerships

Private actors can foster strategic partnerships across their networks. For example, private actors have linked networks of relevant researchers and knowledge producers with policy makers to disseminate findings on both national and international levels. Furthermore, private actors can also connect other knowledge brokers together to foster collaborative research and influence funding decisions by linking funders with research organizations.

Supporting targeted local institutions

The private sector can strengthen the capacity of target institutions to manage information in three main ways: 1) by enhancing the quality of knowledge products available for decision making; 2) by strengthening platforms available for formal and informal conversations, small group meetings, workshops, conferences, and emailing; and 3) by creating platforms that address local needs and convert conflict into collaboration. Capacity-building on national levels by assisting with translating knowledge and handling big data has been evident though is less frequent.

Science for Using Research (SURE)

The [Unusual Suspects project](#) is one of the research projects of the [NWO-WOTRO SURE research programme](#), aiming to strengthen the scientific and evidence base for knowledge brokering activities in research programmes for international development. SURE focuses on knowledge brokering performed by the five Dutch knowledge platforms:

- [Security and the Rule of Law](#)
- [Food and Business Knowledge Platform](#)
- [Water for Development](#)
- [Share-Net International](#)
- [INCLUDE](#)

One of the key aims of the *Unusual Suspects project* is to provide advice for policy makers and research funders on how to develop a policy framework which facilitates knowledge brokering activities with the private sector, tailored to the NWO-WOTRO and the Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs, while also relevant to others. Project researchers comprise Barbara Regeer and Sarah Cummings of the Athena Institute, VU University Amsterdam, and Suzanne Kiwanuka of Makerere University, Uganda.

Barriers for private sector involvement

Credibility

Given its expertise, the private sector can strengthen and ensure the credibility of research by evaluating the strength of generated and solicited evidence. However, this is subject to 'hidden' agendas and biases borne by the private sector; control mechanisms are therefore imperative to ensure transparency and avoid these biases.

Conflicts of interest

Conflicts of interest most frequently constrain the ability of private sector actors to execute knowledge brokering efforts. These include both explicit conflicts of interest and those more subjectively perceived by partners and stakeholders, the latter leaving partners suspicious of private sector actors bringing along 'hidden' agendas in their knowledge brokering efforts.

Incentives are key and we should not only think of economic incentives. Above all we need trust between parties. This can be built only through transparent communication of plans, objectives, costs, benefits, risks etc. The private sector (especially the small-medium) does not invest in that enough or does not do it effectively.
(Informant from a development organization)

Private sector motivated to reduce risk in South Africa

Four projects involving collaboration between the private and public sectors demonstrate the value of multi-stakeholder partnerships in reducing the risk of disasters associated with floods, wildfires, storm waves, and droughts. Private sector knowledge brokers were senior executives of a national insurer (in the case studies of flood, wildfire, and storm waves), and a large international brewery (in the case study on drought). Private sector partners benefited from knowledge brokering by identifying and fostering mechanisms to reduce disaster related risks but also to benefit their clients.

In some projects, the private sector's motives were questioned by their partners and this threatened their influence. This conflict of interest, whether real or perceived, tended to manifest early in the engagements but sometimes dispelled once trust was established. In these cases, trust building was found to be an important aspect of knowledge brokering processes in terms of not only providing credible information but being perceived to have integrity.

In these projects, knowledge brokering activities resulted in the establishment of learning networks across different groups which yielded multiple benefits such as improved response to disasters job creation program to achieve improved water yield, decreased pumping costs, new investments in eco systems services, shifts in policy and practice and new collaborations in eco system disaster risk reduction. In general the new partnerships led to pooled resources and resulted in shift from short term to longer term disaster management

The 'private sector' itself is a challenge to clearly define. Some stakeholders may be 'privately-funded' but with public goods remits. There is no question that there is an interaction between the public and private, guided by different incentives, in the context of knowledge management.

(Informant from a development organization)

Key Messages for policy makers

- The private sector currently and notably plays six roles in knowledge brokering for development: informing, linking agent, capacity-building, facilitator, evaluator and advocate.
- There is considerable distrust of the private sector by the public sector. Policymakers can create opportunities for face-to-face contact and interaction with the private sector because such contact is effective in removing barriers to collaboration. Long-term collaboration with the private sector is often based on personal relationships.
- To work with the private sector, tap into their motivations, such as risk avoidance, profitability and business survival.
- Development policy encourages cooperation with the private sector in both knowledge brokering and other activities, but it is important to **be realistic about trade-offs** of working with the private sector: some private sector partners are more development-relevant than others.
- In the identification of new partners, benchmarking exercises and standards can be useful for identifying private sector partners which share common perspectives and practices.
- Follow research on the role of the private sector in international development on [Capacity4Dev](#)

Sources

Cummings, S.J., Kiwanuka, N.S., Gillman, H. and Regeer, J.B. (2018), "[The future of knowledge brokering: perspectives from a generational framework of knowledge management for international development.](#)" Information Development, Vol. 35, No. 5, pp. 781-794

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