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The Need for Policy Coherence and New  
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**Missing the way? Taking a critical look at the multiple  
roles, functions and aims of development research in  
Austria.**

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## Abstract

All over Europe small and large institutions involved in development research, both training and research institutions, large think-tanks as well as NGO-type organisations in smaller countries are asking themselves rather similar questions: do we still have a role to fulfill in the global research and development arena? Is there still demand for the kind of work we can offer? Are we able and willing to engage in the newly emerging forms of development research? Or is it all about (re-)inventing a (new) discipline?

Looking at the Austrian situation, we are facing a multitude of actors claiming to represent what has been very vaguely defined as development-relevant research. On the other hand, there is a similarly diverse field of actors claiming to have a stake in deciding what development research is *supposed* to be, which roles and aims it has to fulfill, and who is supposed to do it. Due to globalization and its side effects, issues of global concern such as climate change and security as well as policy trends in development cooperation such as harmonisation and aid effectiveness, there has been a shift in how policy makers, donors and researchers themselves define development research and its aims.

We suggest that in Austria, and this may be true for other parts of Europe as well, there are three main pillars and two horizontal fields constituting what is now known as development research:

- *research on development*, that is undertaken mainly by social sciences, humanities and economics: research on development as social phenomenon
- *research for development*, mainly technical, agro- and natural sciences with social science orientation: applied research, supporting innovation processes in DCs
- *development policy research*, covering different fields of research: research about/for policy, strategy and practice of development cooperation, and on development politics.

As horizontal fields we consider research *in the context of* development issues, and random or *unintended* development-related research. Both of them are likely to play an increasingly significant role in the future and therefore need careful consideration.

However, we believe that *all* of these different fields have to be considered when discussing development research. There are different groups of actors promoting these; they all have different aims and functions, and the donors have a different agenda as well. The powerful influence of donors over the aims and targets of interventions, contracted research and research policy as such may have a huge influence on the direction of Austrian development research in the future. In addition, the global trend of commoditization of higher education and research affects development research in terms of a permanent quest for funding sources and reduced independence in research contents and methods. Especially in light of this there needs to be a clear distinction between development research that aims at a critical reflection of such trends and policies and development research aiming at supporting research policies with the outcomes of funded research or contracted studies.

Added to this there is the debate postulating that in spite of a clear global shift in policies of development cooperation, advocating ownership and partnership as key words in a new development discourse, Austrian development research does not seem quite ready to embark on a joint and mutual exchange of experiences.

Globalisation and its side effects such as unsustainable exploitation of natural resources, food and energy crises, diseases and health risks and many others, has generated new challenges for development research that are complex and of global relevance by nature. The question arises whether Austrian development research is prepared to respond to the manifold challenges that have emerged in the global development debate.

## 1. Introduction - A changing context for development research

### 1.1. Debating change

As the world is changing rapidly, so are the roles of the actors involved in trying to contribute to this change. In Europe there has been a debate on the launch of a European Development Report (EDR) in 2006, which two years later still has not yielded any official results. The confusion and struggle for leadership<sup>1</sup> in the wake of the invention of the EDR has, if nothing else, at least triggered a debate on the context and mandate for European development research. This has been underlined by a wave of institutional change among European development research institutes from development institutes to institutes of global development or international studies (EADI 2007). In fact many European development institutes, while celebrating their forty-something anniversaries, are in a process of change and transformation: ‘*Does development research need reinventing?*’ was the question asked at the 40<sup>th</sup> anniversary conference at the Institute for Development Studies (IDS) at Sussex University, and by 46 roundtables organised all over the world in the preparation for this conference (Haddad and Knowles 2007).

Historically, there have always been differences in discourse, theory and paradigms within Europe and the developing world regarding development research. This will become more evident to the reader in part 2 of this paper, where the Austrian structures and approaches are explained in more detail. They are very different in origin and paradigms from traditions in countries with a stronger colonial background over longer periods of time outside of Europe. Nevertheless, independent from post-colonial legacies over the last 15 years, institutional structures in development research have changed rapidly in Europe: there are in fact a rising number of development research institutes in the New Member States of the European Union, that have not shared the discourse and paradigms predominant in the rest of Europe over the last 40 years. And with an increasing number of strong development research institutes outside of Europe, particularly in the developing world, is there still a mandate for European development research at all?

This paper attempts to grasp a glimpse of the ongoing debate, and most of all tries to analyse the current discourse in relation to the multiple roles, functions and aims of development research in Austria. The analysis in this paper is based on a presentation given at a policy-oriented meeting in the Ministry for Foreign Affairs in Vienna that served as a pre-conference to the symposium ‘Perspectives on Development Studies’ in October 2007.

We would like to emphasise at this point that, while talking about development research, we do not refer to development studies as it is often understood in the Anglo-American context. In our understanding, based on the Central European institutional context, development research needs to be understood as an overarching concept including natural, technical and social as well as socio-economic sciences. Therefore, specifically in the Austrian context, it is particularly interesting to look at the growing synergies and interactions between actors involved in the debate on development *and* sustainable development, and why and how these have become particularly relevant over the last 10-15 years.

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<sup>1</sup> When the European development institutes learned about the intentions of the EC to publish a European Development Report as opposed to the World Development Report by the World Bank, the question of legitimacy and leadership arose. Which institutions would be represented in the editorial board? Who would be in charge of shaping the contents and directions of the report? (EADI 2006)

## 1.2 From change to crisis: a revival of theory and social sciences?

Schicho and Parnreither (2005) ascertain a crisis in development research due to the rising influence of publications such as Jeffrey Sachs' *The End of Poverty*. Their huge impact on the market exerts a substantial influence on the discourse in development cooperation, research and politics, and according to the authors, development research is more and more restricted in its thematic and theoretical plurality by the powerful paradigms arising from such bestsellers in development critique. Haddad (2008) calls it the battle of the grand narratives, but he takes a different position, applauding authors such as Sachs, Easterly and Collier for their contribution to the debate, yet also warns of treating these and other narratives as blueprints. While the huge influence of these grand narratives may be somewhat disconcerting to some development theorists, they nevertheless have to take up the challenge, and counterbalance the rapidly changing hypes in development talk with substantiated theory and a discourse grounded in the challenges of our time.

Southern researchers take widely different positions on the debate on development research as well. This section of this paper exemplarily discusses the work of Olukoshi (2007), because it has been very prominently presented both at the level of EADI's directors meetings (EADI 2006; EADI 2007), and the Austrian debate (PFZ forthcoming). Olukoshi's (2007:23) main criticism is that development research from its origin was a discussion '*about the other*', and that this has led to a discourse on '*how to make the developing countries become like the developed countries*' (Olukoshi 2007:23). Hence in his view, development research tended to be '*ahistorical*' and was '*carried out by analogy*', and furthermore neglected to '*engage with the intellectual production of the countries whose experiences are being studied*' (Olukoshi 2007:24). There cannot be a '*one-size-fits-it-all-model of development thinking*': he suggests multidisciplinary approaches, the rediscovery of social sciences in development research and its qualitative tools, and less focus on technical solutions: '*development is about people and that what they think and how they feel matters*' (Olukoshi 2007:25).

Olukoshi (2007) in his paper focuses on a more economic point in relation to social change, and is less concerned with the wider implications of development research, such as in the areas of environment and health. However, in line with him we argue that development research today is moving beyond the traditional understanding of doing research *on* development or *for* development. Development research has not been a discipline of its own in the past, and should not aim to be one in the future. In order to fulfil a meaningful role in the future, it seems preferable to become a cross-disciplinary theme, as discussed by Sumner and Tribe (2007)<sup>2</sup>. The authors mention that there are a number of potential epistemological contradictions at the heart of development studies. For instance, there is both '*the implicit assumption that all developing countries share some common characteristics*', but also the recognition '*of the highly diverse political, social, economic and cultural contexts*' (Sumner and Tribe 2007:6). This suggests that what we really need in development research is reconciliation rather than division, and an attempt to '*bringing disciplines together*'.

It is not easy to see clearly in the web and mist of development research. It cannot detach itself from its own context, and yet seeks to reflect on itself, its very meaning, even to an extent where it questions its own existence (Faschingeder 2007). Let us try to take development research out of this context, and compare it with a wider debate on science and society as such. Extensive work on these issues in relation to science, technology and

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<sup>2</sup> There is currently no academic conformity with regard to the definitions of inter-, multi- und transdisciplinarity. In this article we generally use: 'cross-disciplinarity as a generic term meaning any kind of mixing of disciplines' (Sumner and Tribe 2007:4).

sustainability has been done by Leach and Scoones (2005), Leach *et al.* (2007), Stirling *et al.* (2007) and others based at the STEPS centre, recently established and defining itself as ‘*a new interdisciplinary global research and policy engagement hub*’<sup>3</sup>.

A lot of the emerging themes that development research already deals with, and will have to deal with over the coming years, are strongly related to issues of equal concern to Northern societies as to societies in other parts of the world. Nevertheless, the way these issues are being framed by policy and society itself may diverge. Typical examples are the debates around the introduction of genetically modified crops, and other new forms of agro-biotechnology: the risks and uncertainties associated with these have been perceived in different ways by societies in different parts of the world (Stirling *et al.* 2007, Leach *et al.* 2007, Leach and Scoones 2005).

Health issues such as HIV/AIDS and pandemic diseases such as SARS and avian flu have given an indication of the close connectedness of social and health issues as well as how these rapidly affect the whole globe rather than limited groups in a society *somewhere in some remote part of the world*. There is perceived growing inequality between and within countries *all over the globe*, and people with special needs as well as other vulnerable groups suffer from being even further marginalized. Societies are more and more divided in many parts of the world. Then there is the big topic of environment and global change, environmental services and global public goods, the energy and the food crisis and the heated debate around biofuels. The *World Development Report 2008* propagates a return of agriculture and rural development as a response to these issues and as a pathway out of poverty for hundreds of millions of people: ‘*In the 21<sup>st</sup> century, agriculture continues to be a fundamental instrument for sustainable development and poverty reduction*’ (World Bank 2007:21).

How does development research address this wide range of issues? Added to all these challenges, it has to deal with changing aid policies and their impact on development research. Donors play a powerful role in shaping the agendas of development *and* research. While it is true that not all development research is donor-dependent, the impact and role of donors in providing the framing for our work is hard to dispute (Haddad 2007).

As Leach and Scoones (2005:3) put it, ‘*Globalization is changing the nature of science and technology, as it is being shaped by their developments [...] many of the categories that might once have been used to think about these engagements in different parts of the world – North and South, developed and developing countries, indigenous and modern – no longer seem salient.*’

### **1.3 Science and technology and development research – about old and new narratives**

We argue that there are and will have to be new forms of development research to meet the challenges mentioned above. Within the framework of science and technology, the distinction is not easily made. Leach and Scoones (2006:12-14) describe the three races in science and technology that are said to dominate current policy debates leading down particular paths:

- (1) **The race to the top in the global economy:** Development is seen as ‘*modernisation, presuming that developing countries will move through a series of stages towards industrial and postindustrial glory*’ (Leach and Scoones 2006:12). This view supports the

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<sup>3</sup> <http://www.steps-centre.org/aboutus/index.html>

idea of growth leading to poverty-reduction, and is reflected in the UN Millennium Project report on science, technology and innovation (Leach and Scoones 2006).

- (2) **The race to the universal fix:** This view counts on breakthroughs in science and technology, with adaptation of development models of the so-called green revolution, and *'with a view of development as a matter of common interest and global responsibility, where science and technology are directed towards the problem of poverty'* (Leach and Scoones 2006:13).
- (3) **The slow race to citizens' solutions:** This pathway regards social, cultural and institutional dimensions as key issues where science and technology become part of a process, that is participatory and bottom-up: *'Rather than being viewed as passive beneficiaries of trickle-down development or technology transfer, in this race, citizens are seen as knowledgeable, active and centrally involved in both the 'upstream' choice and design of technologies, and their 'downstream' delivery and regulation'* (Leach and Scoones 2006:14).

On the one hand, there is strong support for the *Big Push*, to enable a 'leapfrog'-type of development. The definition of development by economic growth, as has been observed in a number of emerging economies, means investing in centres of excellence of science and technology (Juma and Yee-Cheong 2005). Does this also leave space for development research aiming at a critical reflection of the choice of investment? Who decides what research needs to be done? For whom is it supposed to 'achieve development'?

On the other hand we also see a move to support a softer approach, supported by *social constructivist* thinking, looking at development research more holistically, in a systems approach and trans-disciplinary. Ironically, it is often agricultural or natural scientists looking for the broader picture and seeking support in social science methodology. However, even here one needs to be wary: critical comments have been raised especially in relation to scientific knowledge and the often rather deliberate use of techniques and methods of participation (Cooke and Kothari 2001).

It is hard for scientists to balance the demands of an often still very technocratic system with their own theories and idealistic commitments. Very often development researchers nowadays are trapped in between different mainstreams of doing development research. Buzzwords and paradigms are easily invented and re-invented. It is therefore reassuring that there are many more ways of doing development research, many more debates and discourses than we can possibly name in this paper. We try to address those that seem most relevant to us when it comes to addressing critical global challenges in a global partnership, and most relevant to the ongoing debate within the fragmented Austrian community of development research. The following section will illuminate the traditional and newly emerging forms of development research in Austria.

## **2. Development Research in Austria**

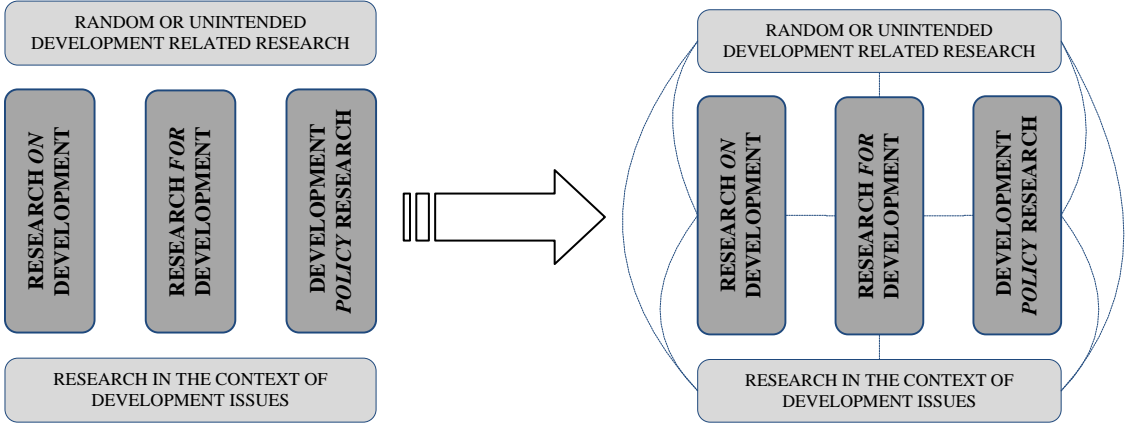
The structures of development research in Austria are in some ways radically different from other European countries, which is partly understandable due to its lack of a 'significant' extra-European colonial history and a rather isolated existence as a small nation bordering the Iron Curtain following the Second World War. In 1988, 22% of the Austrian population were against further development cooperation with 'Third World' countries, making it the highest proportion in Europe at the time (Lichem 1988). The lack of public support for development cooperation did not encourage policy makers to put more emphasis and resources on cooperation with the so called developing countries: recently, in February 2008, the first visit

of an Austrian president to Ethiopia took place, which was ironically commented as being the return visit of Haile Selassies’s visit to Austria in 1954. Naturally, with little public and political support development research did not develop as it did in other countries with a stronger focus on strategic and economic cooperation outside of Europe.

**2.1. Structures of and Approaches to Development Research in Austria**

Generally, there is a vague distinction made between two main groups of actors depending on a given priority to *research* or to *development*. This means that while for some actors, development is not the topic or focus, rather the *aim* of the research, for others development research is *about* research *on* development. We therefore suggest that in Austria, and this may be true for other parts of Europe as well, there are three main pillars and two horizontal fields constituting what is now known as development research (see Fig. 1).

Figure 1: Development Research in Austria. From isolation to connectedness?



The *three pillars* are well known and do not need much explanation. We are more interested in illuminating what they might mean in the Austrian context: **research ON development** is done mainly by social sciences, humanities and economics; it is understood as research *on* development as a social phenomenon. **Research FOR development** is more oriented towards technical, agro- and natural sciences, but with an increasingly strong social science orientation. It is understood as applied research supporting innovation processes in developing countries. **Development policy research** is defined by its purpose and less by its themes: it covers research about/for policy, strategy and practice of development cooperation, and research on development politics.

As *horizontal fields* we consider *research in the context of development issues*, and *random or unintended development-related research*. They are defined horizontally, because they may influence all three pillars of development research, but are not an explicit part of any of them.

In our understanding, **research in the context of development issues** refers to research dealing with issues seen as relevant for development by the community of development researchers, but not necessarily by *all of those* doing the research. E.g. in poverty research, research on state-building and social welfare there are many research groups active in Austria that have no or very little interface with development research. Their findings may be very relevant for development research, but as there is no connection between these two different life-worlds of research groups, they co-exist, but rarely mingle.

We suggest **random or unintended development-related research** to involve research such as tropical biology, when it is taking place in a developing country. We choose to call it *random or unintended development-related research* because it becomes related to the field of development research above all by location. For example a tropical biology research group might build up capacity with regards to a particular plant species that can be marketed by a community due to its commercial pharmaceutical value. It thus contributes to capacity development and improves local livelihoods, even though it had not intended any of this at the outset. We acknowledge however, that many of these researchers are aware of development issues in the countries they are working in, but do not consider it as a focus of their work as such.

We furthermore anticipate that the two horizontal fields, although not considered to be development research at the moment, might become a salient part of a new globalised development research approach moving beyond our traditional understanding of development research as defined in the three main pillars. Moreover, we expect that these two horizontal fields also provide the main entry point for environmental and socio-economic sciences interested in issues of sustainable development into the field of development research: *‘In fact, globalisation and its side effects such as unsustainable exploitation of natural resources, rising inequality in and between nations, growing marginalisation and social disintegration, food and energy crises, diseases and health risks such as the HIV/Aids pandemic or the avian flu – in brief, globalisation has generated challenges that tend to erase geographical and disciplinary boundaries. They are complex and of global relevance by nature. They require answers that single-disciplined and geographically limited scientific approaches are not able to give.’* (Habermann and Langthaler, 2008:143).

## **2.2 Actors on the move?**

The discussions during preparation for and at the workshop on Austrian development research documented in Paulo Freire Zentrum (2007) have clearly shown that there is a process of change in development research in Austria. There are new networks evolving among actors that did not interact previously. In this section we try to illuminate who these actors are, whilst the following sections will focus more on what we consider to be their respective agendas to get involved in dialogue with ‘the others’, meaning those researchers not perceived to belong to their own peer group until then.

Unlike other European countries, Austria does not have established institutes for development studies. There are university programmes, such as the Project International Development at Vienna University, or university based initiatives such as the Research for Development Forum at the University of Natural Resources and Applied Life Sciences (BOKU) Vienna (DEV-FORUM). They will be described in more detail later on.

Study programmes such as international master programmes exist at universities and research institutes. Examples are the International Masters Programme in Mountain Forestry at BOKU, the International Training Programme in Limnology (IPGL) at the Austrian Academy of Sciences, the Masters Programme for Latin American Studies at the Latin American Institute and the Interdisciplinary Programme Global Studies at Graz University. Most of them have viable research components in their activities, but suffer from a lack of visibility of their research agendas. However, there is no Masters programme for Development Studies comparable to those offered in European countries with a stronger tradition in cooperation with countries in Africa, Latin-America and Asia.



Austrian universities traditionally have a very strong political back-up and high visibility. The more regrettable it is that so far they have not made a strong commitment to supporting development research (KKS 2006), and therefore development research has not been able to benefit from this visibility. The term development research can seldom be found as part of the strategic plans of Austrian universities, and one gets the impression that it is generally regarded as an exotic and marginal activity of highly idealistic individuals with a fondness for travelling.

The situation is slightly different at non-university research organisations where international collaboration has a much higher status in general. However, collaborating with developing countries has not been seen as profitable enough and not promising enough with regards to 'excellence', and therefore has been allocated an equally insignificant status.

A dichotomy seems to have developed between what is seen as 'international cooperation' and 'cooperation with developing countries'. While the first puts more emphasis on trade relations, international treaties, cross-cultural communication and a range of global research issues, the latter tends to focus on N-S relations, asymmetries, MDGs and poverty reduction as well as development cooperation and related policies. This paradigm is, however, increasingly challenged by the developments pointed out in the introduction to this paper.

Attached to, but still outside of these structures, are organisations such as the Commission for Development Studies at the Austrian Academy of Sciences (KEF), the Austrian Research Foundation for International Development (ÖFSE) and the Vienna Institute for Development and Cooperation (VIDC). Their mandate is explained in more detail in the next section. While ÖFSE and VIDC receive funds from the Austrian Development Agency (ADA), KEF is funded by the Ministry of Science and Research.

Added to that, there are also some non-institutionalized research-related initiatives such as the Mattersburg Circle for Development Policy at Austrian Universities and the so called KKS (Kontaktkomitee Studienförderung Dritte Welt), a platform of organisations active in educational cooperation and scholarship programmes for developing countries.

Some private businesses take an interest in scientific cooperation with developing countries, as well as NGOs. Especially the latter do not consider the contribution of Austrian research to be particularly relevant (PFZ forthcoming); hence little cooperation is on-going between universities and NGOs on development issues. Consultants and private companies working in research-related areas of development cooperation are increasing. At the same time there is also an increasing tendency of the Austrian Development Cooperation (OEZA), located at the Ministry for European and International Affairs, and by its implementing agency, the Austrian Development Agency (ADA), to contract researchers for consultancy work and short-term contracts.

The main donors for development research projects in Austria are the European Commission, the Austrian Science Fund (FWF), OEZA, the Ministry of Science and Research and the Ministry of Finance. While the first two fund research-oriented projects (the two horizontal fields explained in Fig. 1, and *research on development*), OEZA funds research components in development projects to a minor extent (*research for development*), and *development policy research* to a larger extent, both administered by ADA. OEZA also provides limited funds for field research in the context of its North-South Dialogue scholarship programme administered by the Austrian Exchange Service (OEAD).

University programmes, such as the above described Project International Development, are funded by the Ministry of Science and Research. It also provides funds for the work of KEF, which is mostly but not exclusively defined as *research for development*, and for some other research activities. The Ministry of Finance provides funds for multilateral research cooperation that is understood as *research for development* and is mostly undertaken in cooperation with the Consultative Group for Agricultural Research (CGIAR). This programme is administered by ADA.

The Austrian structures in development research reflect historical developments (see 2.3). Sadly, there appears to be more competition than coherence between the different actors: the structures are changing, but there is no unifying agent amongst the different groups of interest. Issues of power and exclusion become ever more predominant, and there is a high sense of insecurity regarding the future, as governmental institutions have taken a firmer stand in determining the agenda and framing the issues of development research, especially in those institutions that depend on government funding almost entirely. This leaves little room for critical reflection on issues of power and agency, and on the way research has been framed, by whom and to what purpose.

### **2.3 The Development of Development Research**

Schicho and Parnreither (2005) assert that in Austria the academic landscape in development research plays a very marginal role when it comes to funding, as well as on an institutional level, where scientific work on development is rarely found. Why is Austria, despite its otherwise successful academic and economic performance, such a marginal actor when it comes to development research?

It is worth taking a short look at the roots of the three main approaches to development research in Austria described above. *Research for development* and *policy development research* both emerged in the late 1950s and early 1960s in the context of the first development aid interventions which were, at the time, to a large extent carried out by religious organisations and NGOs. Scientific support to these activities was mainly given by individuals in the framework of their respective academic practice. In the 1960s, the first institutes of what in this article is called *development policy research* were founded to, among other activities, support governmental development policy, namely VIDC and ÖFSE.

In light of the growing international recognition of the importance of scientific-technological cooperation with developing countries in the 1970s and 1980s a growing number of Austrian researchers got involved in research projects in developing countries, while at the same time a growing number of researchers from developing countries came to Austria: cooperation and mobility in higher education and science between Austria and developing countries have been supported by different donors since the 1960s, e.g. via scholarship programmes funded by OEZA and civil society organisations. *Research for development* has its roots in this context, as many partnerships and networks between Austrian and developing country researchers have evolved during and after such a scholarship had been given to a scholar from a developing country. The strongest and most visible promoter of *research for development* is the above mentioned DEV-FORUM, founded in 2002, and a number of to varying degrees formalised initiatives at other Austrian universities. Their purpose is mainly to foster and coordinate *research for development* activities.

The Commission for Development Studies at the Austrian Academy of Sciences (KEF) originated in a different context. KEF was founded as the Austrian follow-up measure of the UNCSTD conference in Vienna in 1979. Established as a funding, research and policy advice organisation at the Austrian Academy of Sciences, the multiple roles of KEF have required major reforms since 2004. KEF faces a particular challenge to move away from a strong normative, positivist and technocratic approach, towards a more social-constructivist paradigm emphasising partnership, learning, and support of system approaches. KEF's most important achievements have been a bridging function towards partners in developing countries, and a bridging function between the different actors in Austria that have a claim in the field of development research on a policy level.

*Research on development* only began to emerge in the 1970s at Austrian universities, however, without any institutional anchorage. In the early 1980s the Mattersburg Circle for Development Policy at Austrian Universities was founded. Schicho and Parnreither (2005) describe it as an initiative by university teachers and the student union that has continued to exist until today. They claim that the group failed to achieve many of its objectives due to the inability to overcome disciplinary boundaries, the plurality of theories in research and teaching, and the spatial distance amongst the universities scattered all over Austria. Most of all they blame the failure on the lack of support by the governmental institutions in charge that did not consider development research to be relevant enough to establish an Institute for Development Research that could have acted as a hub for an all-Austrian network on development research (Schicho and Parnreither 2005).

However, later on, units for development research emerged at a few Austrian universities, either as departments of already established disciplines, such as the Department for Research on Politics and Development at the Institute of Sociology at Linz University, or as interdisciplinary units. The latter was the case of the Project International Development at the University of Vienna. Despite remarkable and steady growth of the number of students, efforts to give appropriate institutional anchorage to this project were repeatedly declined by university authorities. Only in 2002 the project was transformed into a regular degree programme, still lacking, however, institutional, financial and scientific capacities (Schicho and Parnreither 2005:34-35).

Today, *research on development* is being taught at several Austrian universities in diverse and to varying degrees institutionalised programmes. A university institute in its own right does not exist to date, unlike in sustainable development and environmental studies that are already highly institutionalised in comparison with development studies: there is for example an Institute of Social Ecology at the University of Klagenfurt offering a Masters programme in Social and Human Ecology; at the University of Graz there is a joint European Masters on Sustainable Development based at the Institute of Systems Sciences, Innovation and Sustainability Research, and BOKU (University of Natural Resources and Applied Life Sciences, Vienna) even defines itself as seeking '*ways of ensuring a sustainable and environmentally sound management of natural resources by allying the competences of the natural, engineering, economic and social sciences*'<sup>4</sup> and offers several degree programmes related to sustainable development issues.

During the last years, a debate on the necessity of transdisciplinarity emerged among the actors of *research on development* as well as in other scientific areas. In the spirit of Paulo Freire, dialogue with wider society is being considered as a decisive precondition for science

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<sup>4</sup> <http://www.boku.ac.at/about.html?&L=1>

being able to contribute to societal development (Novy 2004:13). As a result of this debate, the Paulo Freire Centre for Transdisciplinary Development Research and Education was founded in 2004 as a joint initiative by the Mattersburg Circle and ÖFSE. The Paulo Freire Centre aims, among other things, at the facilitation of a dialogue between science and practice.

In the debate led by the representatives of *research on development*, ‘transdisciplinary research’ is conceived as research going beyond the interdisciplinary dialogue between scientific disciplines towards a dialogue with wider society (Novy 2004:13). In addition, while agreeing with this definition, KEF and actors more related to *research for development* adhere more to a supplementary definition used in sustainable development, compare e.g. Hirsch Hadorn et al (2008).

## **2.4 When Sustainable Development meets Development Research...**

While we cannot elaborate on the historical and institutional background of Austrian research in sustainable development and environmental studies in this paper in detail, we would like to offer some suggestions as to why environmental studies and development research may have found common ground over the last 10-15 years, using mainly the example of the public debate on forest preservation in Austria.

Being traditionally a very strong discipline in Austria, environmental sciences received strong support in the public since the environmental movement emerged in the early 1980s on a larger scale. Back then, a lot of the attention was on forest preservation. In a country with nearly 40% forest cover, and with its main source of national income being tourism, forests play a vital role both in the national economy and in people’s value systems. The anxiousness about losing these forests was worsened due to the impact of air pollution in the 1980s: the threatening images of dying forests in Bohemia spread visions of fear in the general public. Another important event was the legendary and successful struggle for the establishment of a national park in the riverine forests close to Vienna (Nationalpark Donauauen) instead of a hydroelectric power plant.

However, until the 1990s interrelations between environment and development oriented science remained marginal. In this time, environmental sciences became very prominent, partly due to the growing awareness of climate change and a growing environmental movement that became ever more institutionalised. Organisations emerging at this time, that are now also relevant for interlinking with development research, were for example the Eco-Social Forum (Ökosoziales Forum), the Sustainable Europe Research Institute (SERI) and the Institute of Social Ecology at the Faculty for Interdisciplinary Studies (IFF), Klagenfurt University.

In the 1990s, forest protection was a topic uniting at least NGO activists on either side: the preservation of tropical forests in the Amazon and bans on import of tropical hardwoods from South-East Asia created links between actors in the environmental movement and in development. This involved for example GLOBAL2000, an Austrian environmental NGO founded in 1982. While public involvement started out with a ‘*not in my backyard*’ focus, the attention soon shifted to other parts of the world, creating linkages between activists and later on scientists in both development and environmental sciences.

However, on the scientific side, cooperation on a more institutionalised level emerged only in the early years of 2000. There was for example a workshop in 2002 on Austrian

environmental research in cooperation with (sub-)tropical countries organised by the Austrian Net node of the European Tropical Forest Research Network (ETFRN) (ANN-ETFRN 2002), that proved to be groundbreaking: it became very obvious then, that often environmental sciences get involved in '**random or unintended development-related research**'. It felt like a first approximation of making environmental scientists think about the development context of the countries that were 'the object of their research' in a different way beyond their traditional understanding of 'development'. It was certainly an interesting experiment, and the debate started then found continuation in the founding of the Research for Development Forum at the University of Natural Resources and Applied Life Sciences (BOKU) Vienna (DEV-FORUM)<sup>5</sup>, and the Commission for Development Studies (KEF).

A pronounced and visible response to global political changes and a growing awareness for interconnectedness via environmental and socio-economic issues in the early years of the 21<sup>st</sup> century was also the emergence of a number of very active NGOs in the environmental sector, the anti-globalisation movement and a rising consciousness for this global interconnectedness in sustainability science. It is important to note that it was substantially easier for *research for development* to engage with sustainable development, while scientists in other areas did not prioritise it any longer until very recently: only in 2007 a structured dialogue between scientists considering themselves as being part of the *research on development* approach and environmental NGOs and scientists started (Habermann and Langthaler 2008). A topic uniting European environmental, socio-economic research and development research was certainly the debate on agrofuels (Bruckman and Habermann 2008), and this was also the starting point for this interaction between development research and environmental researchers and activists in Austria in 2007.

Looking at Austrian development research with the above described features and the few institutionalised linkages between development research and environmental studies, it remains unsure if development research will be able to respond to the manifold challenges that have emerged in the global development debate. The use of synergies between development research and environmental sciences seems most appropriate in a common approach to sustainable development studies. However, if Austrian development researchers will commit themselves to this step towards transdisciplinarity for the sake of sustainable development rather than remaining within their own 'disciplinary' boundaries still remains an open question.

## **2.5 Commonalities and differences of development research approaches in Austria**

The three approaches as described in 2.1 share a number of commonalities, but even more numerous and substantial are the differences amongst them. All approaches have to work against the backdrop of the specific conditions framing the development debate in Austria. In fact, the development debate is somewhat marginalised in the general public discourse and consequently understanding of and interest in development issues is limited.

A second commonality is the lack of a coherent policy, strategy or programme dealing with development research in Austria. As Zauner and Faschingeder (2004) assert, it holds true for all three approaches that in the course of the last four decades the competent governmental authorities failed to elaborate such an overall concept.

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<sup>5</sup> The DEV-FORUM also emerged at about the same time as a platform of researchers trying to link development and environmental sciences, with a strong focus on food security.

Consequently, a third commonality is to be seen in the decisive role of individual commitment: general progress and particular success stories are not so much the result of institutionally anchored strategies, but depend to a large extent on individual dedication.

A further commonality is the growing influence, though to varying degrees, of international, EU as well as national policy frameworks. Among these, the most influential are certainly international political commitments, such as the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) or the Paris Declaration on Aid Effectiveness. These policy frameworks are generally accompanied by increasingly homogenous discourses and cultures which substantially impact even on those fields of development research that, in principle, would not have to comply<sup>6</sup> with the above mentioned frameworks. In fact, while *development policy research* and *research for development* are principally required to abide by the guidelines drawn from these reference frameworks, also *research on development* is increasingly influenced by a perceived development consensus. Room for dissenting or substantially differing voices, though existing, is noticeably narrowing.

Besides these commonalities, however, development research approaches reflect profoundly different research cultures. As shown by their specific genesis, theoretical conceptions underlying each of the described approaches differ. *Research on development* has its theoretical fundamentals in the international academic discussion on different and divergent currents of development theory as they evolved over the years.

In contrast, *research for development* reverts to the theoretical conceptions in its respective disciplines. Indeed, independent theoretical foundations have been lacking so far and have only recently begun to emerge on the international level, as described in section 1. Many actors however would doubt the necessity of such a distinct theoretical foundation – research for development is seen as ‘*an attitude, not a discipline*’ (PFZ forthcoming).

As for *development policy research*, though mainly rooted in the above mentioned debate on development theory, vicinity to development policy has induced, at least to a certain extent, what Harriss-White (2006) describes as ‘*the proliferation of eclecticism and hyper-empiricism.*’ *Development policy research* hardly grounds its work in theoretical reflection, but rather examines selected policy themes in the given framework of the predominant and rarely questioned development discourse. Indeed, there seems to be a certain theory fatigue.

As a consequence, conceptions of what actually is or should be ‘development’ also differ substantially. This issue is in itself one of the major debates in *research on development* drawing upon the academic discussion from modernisation theory until the rejection of the very notion of development.

*Research for development* disengages from this debate: an in-depth discussion on this question so far has not taken place in Austria. A consensus seems to exist regarding the concepts put forward by the international development discourse based on the UN notion of human development. However, a desire to find ‘citizens’ solutions’ rather than top-down research approaches towards development is equally noticeable.

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<sup>6</sup> After the disintegration of the Soviet Union and the transformation of the former socialist countries into capitalist systems, the discussion on differing development models and ways to achieve them has gradually disappeared. The MDGs, the Paris Declaration on Aid Effectiveness and the general trend to harmonize donor strategies in international development cooperation have further enhanced the emergence of a kind of ‘development consensus’ based on Western societal and developmental patterns, on economic neoliberalism and on the strategies prescribed by an increasingly homogenous international development cooperation.

As for the ‘development’ conception referred to by *development policy research*, the UN notion of human development dominates the discourse. Yet, civil society concerns such as equity, participation and grassroots ownership also influence development conceptions.

Divergent research cultures are obvious in terms of objectives and purposes as well as in the perception that each approach has about the others. Indeed, superficial judgments, if not to say prejudices, prevail.

*Research on development* aims at analysing development as a process and as a social phenomenon and in so doing focuses on structural questions. Its objectives might be described as the (re)politicisation of the Austrian development debate. As *research on development* focuses on basic research, critics tend to compare it to the metaphorical ivory tower. Limited developmental relevance, lack of will to link up with both the policy level and the other approaches to development research are also perceived as shortcomings. Consequently, *research on development* is often considered as an end in itself.

*Research for development* often aims at contributing to the achievement of international development goals such as the MDGs; generally it has a much stronger focus on ‘practical’ demands and works in close collaboration with partners in developing countries. Its activities are often connected to capacity and institution development in the partner countries. Critics claim that *research for development* lacks critical reflection of the dominant policy frameworks. Consequently it is considered to neglect the social and historical context as well as the societal and structural causes of those phenomena it is trying to help overcome. *Research for development* would target symptoms and not causes, it is said.

The purpose of *development policy research* is on the one hand to analyse development policy and development cooperation and to elaborate on important topics. On the other hand, *development policy research* aims at delivering consultancy services for OEZA and NGOs involved in development cooperation. Opinions on *development policy research* in Austria are quite diverse. While donors urge enhanced applicability of research results for their own purposes, researchers often perceive this stance as increasing restrictions on their work. On the other side, criticism is raised regarding *development policy research* uncritically following policy fashions and frameworks while neglecting critical reflection of these. By the same token, *development policy research* is perceived to be donor driven and to neglect research interests of developing countries. Indeed, pressure to increase efficiency and to obtain easily measurable results tend to limit both possibilities and institutional will to establish cooperation with research partners in the South.

Hence, despite several attempts to bridge gaps, establish links and seek synergies, the Austrian development research landscape remains fragmented. Purkarthofer (2007: 223) points out that although there are visible personal and institutional interfaces amongst scientists, practitioners and policy-makers, the respective research cultures hardly intermingle. The lack of an overall and systematic strategy for development research in Austria is reflected in the parallel and almost unconnected co-existence of the three described approaches and the two horizontal ones. Moreover, a misleading comprehension of the theory-praxis-dichotomy attributes the function of theory production to *research on development* while the role of *research for development* is rather seen in practical implementation. This can, understandably, lead to superficial valuations or disrespect of either approach with substantial implications for resources and capacities. Rather than synergies, parallelism or even competition prevails.

### 3. International and European trends and their impact on development research in Austria

Although lacking attention in the international development debate, the global trend to commodify education, science and research heavily impacts upon the basic judicial, institutional and social conditions in which development research evolves. It affects the underlying conception of science and research and their role and function in society. This is best described in terms of substituting the notion of knowledge as a public good by the increasing dominion of economic criteria over science and research.

To name but the most important impacts of this trend in Austria, most tangible is the reorganisation of Austrian universities. Institutional autonomy from the competent ministry has increased the pressure to diversify funding sources and boosted competition for resources above all between departments of the same university. The institutional strengthening of senior faculty at the expense of junior faculty has aggravated precarious working conditions for the latter. Purkarthofer (2007) asserts that international and European trends, above all the Bologna Process and internationalisation of higher education and research, have, under the above described circumstances, augmented pressure on Austrian universities. Ultimately, the overall quality of scientific production, in particular in the humanities and social sciences, has not improved, but rather the contrary, in spite of substantial increases in government spending on R&D funding over the last 10 years.

The trend to commodify science and research has further strengthened a market logic in the very process of knowledge production. This narrows general interest for 'marginalised' issues within the scientific community. While in other European geographical and scientific areas development related research has a very high market value, this is not true for Austria: on a presumed Austrian scientific market, the market value of development related questions is negligible. Marketisation further enhances the notorious publish-or-perish mentality, and aggravates the administrative burden at the expense of scientific work due to the continuous need for fund raising.

Schuurman (2007:57) outlines how the market logic has induced a shift in development studies '*from structural analysis of the mechanics of underdevelopment to studying efficiency of development projects*'. While this shift might be less obvious in Austrian *research on development* in comparison to other European countries, it is still noticeable.

Marketisation is also reflected in the EU education and science policy that aims, as expressed in the EU Lisbon strategy, at becoming '*the most dynamic and competitive knowledge-based economy in the world*' (European Parliament 2000, online publication). This leaves no room for development research that is reflective and discourse-oriented.

A second trend on the international level, but even more so in the EU, is the tendency to link development research closer to the policy level. The European Commission expressed its intention to enhance analytical capacity at European level and to strengthen the linkages with policy making. The overarching objective is to foster the European perspective of development issues (Moreau 2006).

While the European Commission's aspirations may be legitimate, the trend to link development research to the policy level however risks to further strengthen a utilitarian approach in development research. Due to power asymmetries, the underlying concept of



usefulness is quite narrow: what is useful and what isn't is often defined by the respective donors' understanding of 'usefulness' in this context.

In Austria, the utilitarian approach is quite tangible in the field of *development policy research*. In fact, applicability of research topics and results for the purposes of development cooperation are increasingly required (Purkarthofer 2007: 215). In contrast, analytical or even critical stances on development policy and practice are faced with a permanent legitimisation need.

*Research on development* is also affected by the growing utilitarian fashion in terms of steadily decreasing recognition for basic research and social sciences inasmuch as they refuse, at least to some extent, to abide by the dominant development policy discourse.

*Research for development*, on its part, largely tries to comply with the main policy frameworks, at least in those organisations where researchers actively pursue development objectives. Consequently, pressure by the policy community seems to be less acute. The challenge here rather lies in the growing marketisation of research which leads active researchers to foster a utilitarian approach rather than questioning it in order to enhance acceptability in their respective institutions.

The second impact of current EU efforts in development research on Austria refers to centralisation trends within the EU. EU policies might lead to the strengthening of a few well established development research institutions. It seems questionable whether a European dimension of development research is best achieved by linking a selected group of opinion leading institutions. European development research, if it wants to live up to its aspirations of diversity and democracy, cannot do without well anchored development research communities in their respective countries.

#### **4. Concluding Remarks - the Way Forward**

Development research has still not succeeded in overcoming its colonial heritage. Terminology and discourse may have changed, but 'the South' still constitutes the object of Northern research interests. In Austria there is no colonial past comparable to former colonial powers, nevertheless Austrian development research reflects inherited global flaws such as the limited weight of Southern voices in the global science community.

Substantially different research cultures persist in Austrian development research. This implies differing objectives, differing parlance, differing terminology and differing comprehension of basic concepts such as development in itself. While we discussed *research on development*, *research for development* and *development policy research* in more detail in this paper, we have not done so with *research in the context of development issues* and *random or unintended development-related research*. The different actors promoting these all have different aims and functions, including their respective donor organisations. It is much more complex to try to understand what these are, and the scope of our analysis did not permit us to look at them in more detail. However, in light of a growing trend towards a globalised research approach, where development is seen as just one of many themes to address, we anticipate their importance to grow substantially. It is therefore highly recommended for actors in development research to recognise this, and engage in a critical discourse with policy makers to promote a '*slow race to citizens' solutions*' when '*the race to the top in the global economy*' and '*the race to the universal fix*' are at the centre of attention (Leach and Scoones, 2006).

An increasing trend towards a promotion of global research rather than development research will certainly divert more emphasis to the latter two newly emerging fields of development research in Austria<sup>7</sup>. If this also means more attention to research areas, that have no direct relevance for development, but still address global research issues and a global view of sustainable development, there is a chance that a new kind of cooperation between scientists in countries of the South and the North might emerge. Maybe it is even an advantage for scientific cooperation, if it leaves behind some of its historical connotations and discourses of the past? It might even help to overcome the inherited ‘*research by analogy*’ (Olukoshi 2007:24) and current asymmetric research relationships. It would also increase the weight of Southern voices in the global scientific community, and there is in fact urgent need to ‘*engage with the intellectual production of the south*’ (ibid.).

Enhanced research demands of development cooperation resulting from the international development agenda might lead to a substantial transformation of Austrian development research both in its institutional structures as well as in methods and contents. For instance, a new form of *development policy research*, situated between policy consultancy and scientific research, might emerge in Austria.

Regarding the three main fields of development research in Austria (*research on/for development, development policy research*), there are attempts for more dialogue and cooperation. However, picking up only tools and methods to comply with donor requirements will not be of help. For example, participation has often been downgraded as a mere buzzword, and serves as a justification for donors rather than facilitating empowerment: using so called and vaguely defined ‘participatory methods’ as a means of keeping control rather than empowerment has caused a high level of frustration (Mosse 2005).

Is a common vision for development research in Austria at all desirable? Frankly, under the given circumstances such a vision risks being quite narrow rather than inclusive. We cannot see how the different actors with their different history, ideology, perceived aims and objectives, as well as different overall approaches and even understanding of the term ‘development’, may ever agree on such a common vision. Yet, despite some disenchantment brought about by Austrian *realpolitik*, the narrative of Austrian development research reinventing itself retains a high degree of attraction: Austrian development research has to *invent* itself, if it wants to make a meaningful contribution to sustainable development.

This means first and foremost to seek ways of constructive and synergistic cooperation across all three described approaches, despite the above mentioned difficulties. Cross-disciplinary cooperation is particularly needed between social and natural sciences, or in terms of this article, between *research on* and *research for development*.

Furthermore, dialogue between science and society has to be strengthened. And last but not least, there is a need to defend the distance of science from both the policy level and the commoditisation trend.

Austrian development research needs to understand the needs and expectations of the society *funding its work* as well as the needs and expectations of the society *it is working for*: the poor in the developing world. Engaging in dialogue for an improved public understanding of science in development is mandatory, while shopping around in the international development

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<sup>7</sup> These are research in the context of development issues and random or unintended development related research (see section 2.1.)

'buzz' in order to catch up with other, bigger players in development will not bring about any real advancement for those who will hold us accountable for our actions.

Sustainable development is a challenge for rich and poor countries alike. Consequently, the need for a globalised development research approach imposes itself in order to deliver answers to the current global challenges mentioned in the introduction to this paper. The challenges are overwhelming. Austrian development research needs to find a balance between its historical heritage, the changed structures and different actors in the field as well as the challenges of today.

Developing a coherent policy and strategy jointly with partner countries, thinking about accountability and exclusivity, rather than keeping personal or institutional interests upfront, will contribute to a process of transformation across disciplines. Reaching out to those whose research is relevant to find solutions, rather than remaining a closed group of 'development experts', will bring us closer to reaching our common goals. But for this to happen, Austrian researchers, policy makers and donors will have to both *re-think* as well as *reform* their very own ways of thinking and acting – and this might be true for other European countries as well.

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