

Original Research Article

The utility of research conferences in Socio-economic transformation processes in Africa: Perspectives from researchers

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Knowledge and information have emerged among the most important resources for development and socio-economic transformation in the global economy, with the related production and transfer also becoming significant productive forces. Consequently, research conferences have proved to have great potential in enhancing the transfer of such knowledge and information, facilitate the analysis of problems as well as help to develop the necessary expertise. However, there appeared to be limited evidence, if any, regarding the contribution of conferences to socio-economic transformation in Africa and other developing countries. This study considered the value of research conferences from the perspectives, based on experiences, of researchers and conference presenters. The objectives were to determine the utility of conferences to the processes relating to socio-economic transformation as well as identify strategies to enhance such utility. Premised upon a qualitative approach, data for this study were gathered through a survey, observation as well as a review of print and electronic documentation on the benefits and utility of conferences. The survey was conducted through questionnaires, sent via email, to presenters from earlier research conferences hosted by various academic institutions including universities and research councils. Analysis of data showed that the benefits of conferences were not always fully realized in Africa leading to limitations in their utility to the process of socio-economic transformation. Discussion of the findings was based on literature on conferences, development, knowledge management and socio-economic transformation. The study concluded that the way conferences in Africa were organized and run diminished their contribution to the socio-economic process. Strategies for improvement in organizing and holding conferences were suggested.

Keywords: Conference, Information, Knowledge, Policy formulation, Socio-economic transformation

INTRODUCTION

The world is rapidly moving towards knowledge-based socio-economic structures which, in turn, have given rise to new economic, social, political and cultural challenges that need to be addressed through, among other strategies, the acquisition of specific knowledge,

information, competencies and skills (often referred to as “human capital”), research, innovation and technological development (Castells, 2002). Consequently, knowledge production, accumulation, transfer and application have become major factors, at the core of national development

and transformation strategies, for gaining competitive advantages in the global knowledge economy (Santiago et al. 2008; World Bank, 2002). That is, the competitive and comparative advantages of nations are gradually being determined, to a large extent, by the level of accessibility as well as effective use of knowledge and information within their enterprises rather than the traditional sources of advantage comprising natural endowments or low labour costs (Harry, 2013). Nations, therefore, require at least a functional level of national research system, comprising universities, the private sector, public research centres and external funding to meaningfully participate in the global knowledge economy (Castells, 2009).

Socio-economic transformation involves the modernisation of economies, societies as well as institutions through the reconfiguration of the structures of production, distribution and consumption of goods and services (IFPRI, 2008). Such modernisation is aimed at improving the living conditions and productivity levels of stakeholders as well as building a solid foundation for future growth and development (UNECA, 2011). In the same context, Africa remains the least developed region of the world and contains many of the poorest nations whose development approaches have not led to genuine socio-economic transformation (Benedict, 2014 and UNECA, 2011). The study was motivated by the apparent continued failure of transformation programmes in Africa when literature shows existence of great potential for development on the continent. It therefore, sought to investigate the extent to which outcomes from research conferences contributed to policy formulation and review in the context of socio-economic transformation programmes from the perspective of researchers and conference presenters. It also aimed at identifying strategies that could be used to improve the utilization of evidence from research conferences in socio-economic transformation processes as well as contribute to the body of knowledge on research and socioeconomic transformation.

The Research question

According to UNECA (2011), the implications of the emerging knowledge-based economic structures regarding research and development in the process of economic growth and socio-economic transformation seem to have had a significant impact on the magnitude of development challenges in Africa. Such an observation points to issues regarding the utility of the means used to access to knowledge and information including research conferences. The study, therefore, sought to address the question: "Are the outcomes of research conferences being utilized to contribute towards socio-economic processes in Africa?"

Review of related literature

In the context of development and socio-economic transformation, the transfer of evidence, for the related development and transformation processes, through research conferences is recognized as one of the most important resources (CHET, 2011). Such evidence includes research findings, experiential knowledge, values, beliefs, and other ways of understanding that researchers, policymakers, and service providers draw upon in their practice and decision making (CUP, 2006).

A typical framework structure of a research conference would include one or more presentations of work and/or ideas about a given topic in the form of lectures, slide shows or films, workshops, panel discussions, and/or interactive experiences. Posters or graphic or multimedia exhibits that participants can view independently are also included in most conferences. Such conferences demonstrate great potential for achieving social and economic development and transformation as they facilitate the analysis of problems as well as help to develop the necessary expertise through a broad pact between researchers and socioeconomic actors involved in crafting development models and strategies (Ibid). They were traditionally organised as a mix of workshops, lectures, and presentations as primarily knowledge sharing forums for researchers to present and discuss their work. However, they have become a major source of analysis and information while increasingly presenting opportunities for networking as well as support for the formation or expansion of knowledge-sharing communities within areas of shared interest among researchers, policymakers, businesspeople and economists (CUP, 2006). In this context, knowledge sharing has consequently been redefined as a process of exchanging skills, experience as well as understanding among researchers, policymakers, and service providers (Ibid). Furthermore, conferences can serve to refocus energy, provide a forum for solving some of the problems that have come to light or provide opportunities to advance knowledge or practical application in the field thus facilitating the expansion and improvement of the related work processes (CHET, 2011).

The research process should therefore ensure adequate understanding of the target audience in terms of the problems they encounter, their preferences as well as their level of understanding and style of thinking. A possible strategy for achieving this goal is to ensure substantial consultation with key stakeholders throughout the research process. Sustained, ongoing interaction between researchers and potential users of research evidence has great potential for increasing the likelihood of application of research evidence in practice and decision making (CUP, 2006). Early involvement of stakeholders is likely to improve the relevance and applicability of the related research questions as well as

encourage trust and commitment among the partners as it facilitates the determination of the type of knowledge needed and identification of the relevant research questions. Additionally, a sense of ownership of the research results among potential users can be created while also enhancing the level of trust in the research process. Subsequently, such involvement has the potential to encourage attendance by related professionals who would consider the related research evidence for policy making processes and practice (Ibid).

Similarly, researchers are likely to expand their knowledge regarding the related population from policymakers and implementers who also have the potential to ultimately promote accessibility to the required resources for research. Furthermore, such collaboration may illuminate enhanced approaches to problems, introduce more variables for consideration and improvement of the research design that lead to more valuable findings (Ibid).

Organisations often enhance their effectiveness through ensuring that knowledge-sharing approaches assimilate both the evidence from research and professional experience in the body of evidence (CHET, 2011). There is also significant investment of time and resources to enhance effective knowledge sharing among all stakeholders including researchers, policymakers and implementers. In the same context, the utilization of evidence has the potential to boost confidence as well as investment in research and thus improving its utility. (Ibid).

According to literature, Asian countries have developed significantly through concerted efforts in research and development as well as crafting and revising the relevant policies to achieve specific goals for transformation. Such efforts include investments in research and development within tertiary and research institutions and production factories (Monimah, 2013).

Limitations of research conferences

There are several reasons that often create difficulties in moving research findings into practice and policy as discussed in the following paragraphs. The first and most prominent factor is that research evidence is only one source of information among others, including professional experience and audit findings (CUP, 2006). However, researchers often tend to value research as “best” evidence available to stakeholders. Also, such evidence may conflict with the cultures, values, interests, socio-political climate and backgrounds of policymakers and implementers (as influenced by their training, goals, and priorities) leading to its rejection (Ibid). Similarly, many researchers do not regard knowledge sharing as part of their responsibilities and, therefore, often perceive that they lack the required skills to communicate their research findings to non-academics (Chet, 2011). The

shortcomings often lead to reduced likelihood of integrating the evidence into policy and decision making. Nevertheless, experience shows that knowledge sharing is and should be an integral part of the research process with appropriate resources budgeted for such activities.

The presentation of research evidence often leads to reduction in its value primarily owing to its inherent limitations which may make it difficult to incorporate into policy decisions. Such limitations include the use of samples and also the lack of clear conclusions due to the caution with which generalisations of findings are made. In addition, experience shows that researchers rarely cater for the different needs of potential non-academic audiences for their research thus resulting in research evidence being perceived as inaccessible or difficult to understand (CHET, 2011). Similarly, academics often classify conference proceedings as grey literature, with a lower status than publications, if they are not readily available through peer-reviewed channels while researchers tend to value research as “best” evidence (CUP, 2006). Consequently, such contradiction often forms part of the difficulty in moving research findings into practice and policy and in moving practice and policy knowledge into research (Ibid).

Utilisation of research findings in socio-economic transformation processes

According to literature, there exists varying sizes of research-practice gaps in all sectors of an economy showing the difference between what is known from research and what is actually practiced (CUP, 2006). Such gaps are created by differences in training, goals, and priorities among researchers, policymakers, and implementers and their sizes are determined by the level of knowledge uptake from research evidence with wide gaps being characteristic in most sectors (Ibid). Socio-economic sectors often attempt to address such shortcoming through the active promotion of knowledge sharing, the development of a shared culture or common set of beliefs and values that support and embrace evidence-based practice. One strategy for such is collaboration and the seeking of common ground regarding the approach to knowledge-sharing activities.

Efforts by researchers to advance the likelihood of incorporation into policy include attempting to understand the nature of competing sources of information, decision-making structures within organisations as well as the prevailing social values. It can be argued that such efforts compel the inclusion of knowledge sharing as an integral part of the research process and findings clearly communicated to stakeholders while also recognizing that research is only one of the many types of evidence considered in practice and decision-making.

Policymakers, mostly those in government, often have to urgently sort through large amounts of information, including research evidence, to isolate key knowledge which may limit its chances of selection. Also, their positions tend to be term-limited and thus unable to accommodate the adoption of research evidence. In the same context, implementers of socio-economic transformation processes and also the leading users of knowledge are often faced with limited availability of time and resources to participate in conferences. In addition, usually lack the necessary power to modify practices even in cases where they fully appreciate the need for change.

Equally, they may perceive research evidence to be inaccessible or difficult to understand and consequently reject it in favour of professional experience. Enhanced collaboration and consultation among all key stakeholders can help to address such limitations. That is, tertiary and research institutions as well as policy makers and implementers need to work in synergy to enhance the commercialisation of knowledge derived from research evidence. Enhanced collaboration and consultation among all key stakeholders can help to address such limitations. Long-term interaction among stakeholders throughout the research and planning processes can facilitate both increase in the level of understanding and relevance of the research as well as opportunities for knowledge-sharing (Lomas, 2000).

Furthermore, collaboration helps to enhance the packaging and applicability of the research for decision making through a perceived sense of ownership of the results and thus enhance the use of the findings in practice and decision making. In addition, more perspectives solving problem can also be introduced in the processes.

METHODOLOGY

The study used the qualitative research paradigm with a combination of a survey, observation as well as a review of documentation strategies for the collection of data. The observations were personal experiences of the researcher, over a period of three years while presenting papers at six international research conferences hosted by various institutions including tertiary and research institutions. Observation forms, comprising observational categories, to record the process were completed with narrative comments added immediately after each observation. The forms were refined and adjusted as necessary during the observations to enhance the reliability of data. The strategy allowed relatively easy access to data whose accuracy was reasonably assured as the elements of the study behaved naturally. The survey was conducted through one hundred questionnaires sent by email, to randomly selected presenters from the above-mentioned conferences and, therefore, had interacted with the researcher personally. Thirty-five respondents agreed

filled out and returned the questionnaires. The researcher reviewed documents that included hard copy and electronic reports, newsletters and other publications for gathering secondary data. Data were analysed for content and the related discussion was based on the research question and literature.

FINDINGS

Contribution of individual research evidence to final conference outcome

From both observation and responses from the survey, none of the presenters had any experience where their research findings or recommendations contributed to the outcome or conclusion of the conferences although the sections were ordinarily included in the research conference proceedings. During the conference plenary sessions, feedback provided by rapporteurs was confined to contents of the keynote speeches and it was only such feedback that was then summarised as conclusions of the conference proceedings.

Adoption of conclusions for purposes of formulating socio-economic policies and practices

As a result of the above-mentioned lack of or limited contribution to research outcomes, none of the presentations from the author or survey participants were adopted for contribution to the formulation of policy. One reason cited for this non-adoption was that the conference papers were not subsequently published and made available to policy makers. Comments included, "Typical of the African society where brilliant findings are obtained, recommendations made but never implemented in real life situations."

Similarly, the majority of presenters surveyed indicated that they were yet to find a conference that asks participants to produce policy briefs. Such experiences gave an indication that most conference organisers did not intend to submit the conference discussions to the relevant authorities for consideration in the processes of policy formulation. Consequently, the general feeling was that research findings were neither valued nor adequately rewarded as contributing to the objectives of the conference and subsequently the process of socio-economic transformation as envisaged.

Literature shows that the chances of research evidence being used to influence policy formulation significantly depends on how the presentation is evaluated by the target audience with regards to the extent to which the presentation relates to their needs as well as the appropriateness of the language of delivery (Nelsen, 2003). Lomas (2000) adds that a common shortcoming is

that researchers often fail to accommodate the different needs of potential non-academic audiences for their research. Accordingly, the limited or no-adoption of research evidence may point to the quality of academic research which tends to be mostly at the elementary level such that the findings lack neither proven technical practicability nor market acceptability (Nelsen, 2003). That is, investment in the development of such evidence would entail taking significant levels of risk.

Ensuring that themes discussed at conferences are informed by societal issues and have the potential to add value to the process of socio-economic transformation would significantly play a role in addressing such shortcoming. In general, tertiary institutions, research institutes and industrial organisations need to closely work in synergy including collaboration in funding the research.

Similarly, inviting enthusiastic policy makers and other responsible leaders of a transformational nature to the conference also has the potential to enhance the contribution of the related research to the processes of socio-economic transformation. Such individuals are most likely to attend with learning and improvement as their primary agenda and would also have an opportunity to obtain clarification of specific issues, when necessary, directly from the researchers and other primary stakeholders. Also, a combination of listening and reading the same information can help to reinforce the points being put across.

In addition, sending a summary of the findings, including persuasive elements to justify possible consideration for investment in the implementation of the recommendations, to relevant offices, after the conference, can help to further increase awareness of the existence of the knowledge. Above all, researchers need to understand the competing sources of information in relation to how their findings may be translated, the decision-making structures within which decision-makers work as well as the current social values to enhance the usefulness of findings as well as enhance their chances of being incorporated.

Other experiences from participating in research conference

According to the majority of respondents, the only tangible benefit derived from the conferences was networking with other researchers and getting feedback from them as there was no feedback, from the conference organizers, regarding the quality of papers presented including their potential for publication. Moreover, when requested, it took long periods of time to obtain the feedback.

Furthermore, the time allotted for individual presentations and ensuing discussion was generally very limited mainly due to large numbers of presenters that had to be accommodated. As a result, presentations were

often hurried with presenters instructed to be very brief and sometimes to only present the “news emanating from the research” (findings) without referring to the purpose, objectives, literature review or methodology which are all key areas in research. Similarly, debate and assessment of the presentation could not be accommodated or was extremely limited.

Consequently, there was no room for feedback or suggestions for improvement of the research paper and thus negating chances for both value addition and development of the research process. The presenters expressed concern regarding such practice which they found rather taxing when considering the significant time they spent reviewing related literature and narrating the methodology which, in the end, appeared to hold no value. Such practice, which compromised the quality of evidence presented was contrary to research evaluation where the criteria includes the demonstration of literature on what is known to avoid presentation of material that is already contained in literature.

In addition, the study identified a significant number of presentations that were difficult to follow primarily because the presenters did not follow the prescribed presentation format. For example, whole documents were projected and read instead of bullet points or the number of slides projected significantly exceeded the prescribed limit. As a result, participants lost concentration and / or there was limited understanding and appreciation of research evidence presented. According to literature, the level of presentations should be appropriate for the audience. That is, presentations should be planned conversations that are appropriately paced for understanding by the audience rather than the reading of papers. In the same context, presenters need to ensure that the evidence made available is compelling enough to the audience with the use of written, clear, logical, organized and straightforward language highly recommended. This ensures that the listeners can follow the line of reasoning and thus enhance communication.

Value addition of conferences to the process of socio-economic transformation

Ninety percent of the presenters surveyed were of the opinion that academic conferences were not adding any value to the process of socio-economic transformation. This was because none of them had witnessed the implementation of recommendations from research papers at the conferences they had attended or followed. A major reason cited for this shortcoming was that policy makers and other responsible authorities often did not attend such conferences while other stakeholders including government, academics, researchers and the public only attended as occasional guests. In addition, they were of the opinion that individuals who formulate and implement

policies have different mindsets from academics. As a result, they tend to concentrate on protecting their interests rather than socio-economic transformation and this either limited or even negated value addition, to the related processes, by academic conferences. The finding points to insufficient collaboration among stakeholders which should lead to buy-in, enthusiasm with and ownership of the research process. Evidence from literature shows that such attributes can encourage sponsorship as well as meaningful and fruitful participation at the related conferences.

Similarly, the respondents expressed concern about some of the papers, accepted for presentation at conferences, when they were totally disconnected to the conference themes relating to socio-economic issues and therefore added no value to development processes and livelihoods. According to literature, a quality of research project deals with an important issue in the field of study otherwise it becomes unaccepted for presentation.

Socio-economic transformation can be enhanced when related actions that include practices and decision making are based on an integrated body of evidence derived, in part, from the conferences thus also increasing the utility of conferences. In the same context, research findings often compete with other sources of persuasion and their uptake depends on their compatibility with interests or ideology of key stakeholders. Therefore, researchers should consistently recognize that research evidence is hardly ever the only type of evidence considered in practice and decision-making. As suggested by CUP (2006), stakeholders need to appreciate information and knowledge sharing as ongoing, interactive processes, that can include the identification of smaller-scale outcomes such as relevance and inspiration of key points to target audience, rather than expect one conference to change practices overnight.

CONCLUSION

Research evidence from conferences was not ordinarily considered and applied in practice even though it was deemed to be essential for informing socio-economic transformation processes. In the same context, there was a strong indication of limited effort and commitment from key stakeholders particularly researchers and organizers in ensuring the utility of such evidence.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Strategies to enhance the utility of research conferences, including close and continual collaboration, focus and determination among key stakeholders who include

policy-makers, researchers, implementers and end-users should be considered. The related stakeholders also need to work towards making the practice of knowledge and information sharing an integral part of daily functions to facilitate the routine implementation of recommendations for socio-economic transformation based on research evidence. In the same context, researchers may be invited to identify committees or issues that they would be interested in working on in for future conferences.

During the conference, research findings should be communicated in relevant and accessible ways to key stakeholders using plain language whenever possible and humour, energy, and style when appropriate. That is, the presentation of research findings should be in ways that are compelling to the audience so as to capture the imaginations of listeners as well as appeal to their emotions. Equally, the transparent and sincere evaluation of research conferences by participants can also enhance their efficacy.

Taking into consideration the limitations of any research, that includes the issue of time constraint as well as the need to de-limit the area of research and thus compel the generalization of findings with caution, the study opens up a number of possibilities for future research. It is, therefore, recommended that future research be conducted from the perspectives of other stakeholders to determine the utility of conferences in the processes of socio-economic transformation. Such stakeholders can include conference organisers, policy makers, implementers and end-users.

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