
Sustainable Development Programme

Producing knowledge for the design of effective policies to promote sustainable development

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Executive summary

The British Academy's *Sustainable Development Programme* funds world-class research aimed at addressing the UN's 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and advancing the UK's Aid Strategy. This brief discusses the wealth of methodological and disciplinary approaches used by the programme's projects to study sustainable development. It posits that quantitative methods are suitable for comparison across geographic regions and over time, while qualitative methods enable a more in-depth understanding of context-specific human experiences. Mixed methods combine the best of both approaches, but require broadly trained research teams. The brief furthermore argues that interdisciplinary approaches are essential to exploring the full scope of the social, economic and environmental dimensions of sustainable development. Choosing the right methodological approach is crucial for ensuring that research can effectively inform development policies.

Introduction

The British Academy's 2016 *Sustainable Development Programme* funds world-class research aimed at addressing the UN's 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and advancing the UK's Aid Strategy. The [16 interdisciplinary research projects](#) funded by this programme provide important evidence geared towards informing policies and interventions aimed at improving people's lives in developing countries, by reducing poverty and advancing socio-economic development. The programme has thus far supported research projects in three core areas: *Sustainable Governance*, *Sustainable Growth* and *Sustainable Human Development*. This brief sets out the diversity of methods that these projects have used to capture the complexity of sustainable development.

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Development is often measured in terms of numbers or indices. The UN's Agenda for Sustainable Development is reviewed through a set of global indicators which was adopted by the General Assembly on 6 July 2017. This is complemented by indicators developed by Member States at regional and national level. These indicators refer primarily to numbers and percentages, and measure proportions, average of income and the prevalence of certain phenomena.ⁱ Reliable data is crucial for adequate decision-making on development matters. The UN has, therefore, pledged to intensify its efforts towards strengthening statistical capacities in developing countries.

While statistics are important, are quantitatively-oriented approaches really able to establish a complete picture of development? A wider array of methods is needed to show and understand the economic, social and environmental dimensions of sustainable development, as well as the ways in which development is experienced by different people. The UNDP has developed one of the world's best-known global indices: the Human Development Index (HDI). Yet, while the index measures the key dimensions of human development (e.g. a long and healthy life, being knowledgeable and having a decent standard of living), the UNDP itself recognises that the HDI simplifies and captures only a part of what human development entails, without reflecting inequalities, poverty, human security or empowerment.ⁱⁱ

The projects funded by the British Academy's 2016 *Sustainable Development Programme* have used a range of different methodological approaches for studying the SDGs, which offer insights into different ways of achieving a more complete picture of the main challenges in the sustainable development field. This brief discusses the different advantages of various methods, and how their combination can contribute towards building the knowledge needed to design more effective policies to promote sustainable development.

Quantitative approaches to measuring sustainable development

Two projects funded by the 2016 *Sustainable Development Programme* demonstrate the benefits of more traditional quantitative approaches to measuring development. These approaches have proved well-suited to understanding the big picture in terms of sustainable development as it currently stands. Using large-scale data sets over a long time can help to trace global trends. This is often not possible in smaller-scale projects which tend to be more limited in terms of the time period covered and the location where the research takes place.

The project [Syrian Refugees in Jordan: the Challenge of Sustainable Development](#) applied statistical analyses to the national-level Jordan Labour Market Panel Survey (JLMPS) dataset. In 2016 this set contained data on a nationally representative sample of 31,753 individuals, corresponding to 6,841 households. Since the first round of surveys was conducted in 2010, before the arrival of Syrian refugees in Jordan, the JLMPS provided a unique opportunity to assess the impact of the refugee influx on Jordan's labour market. The project studied these impacts both for the host population and for other migrants in Jordan. Moreover, since the dataset included rich information on other demographic characteristics as well, the project was able to investigate the

Quantitative methods can provide robust data on the success of development policies and possible solutions to overcome remaining challenges. Successful strategies in one country can provide lessons for other countries facing similar problems.

impacts of Syrian refugees on housing, education and gender in Jordan. The project demonstrated that the presence of Syrian refugees produced no significant changes in employment rates among Jordanians. Other migrants did experience impacts, because of increased competition for jobs in the informal sector.ⁱⁱⁱ

Another project, [Welfare Dependence and Poverty Traps: Evaluating the Contribution of Health Shocks and Health Policy Using Administrative Data](#), similarly used large data sets to analyse the relation between universal health coverage and trends in poverty reduction in Brazil. The project utilised large volumes of data from multiple government administrative systems, containing social assistance receipt data. It also used many healthcare databases, including death and birth records, hospital admissions and medical procedures. In this way, the project was able to analyse important under-researched questions about the causal relationship between health and poverty. The large datasets used for the analysis provided some important insights into the relationship between Brazil's universal health coverage through the Family Health Programme and poverty reduction, especially for women. Data analysis showed that the opening of public health clinics was causally associated with increases in employment and income among informal sector workers who did not have employer insurance coverage. This suggested that poor health acts as a significant barrier to poorer women's employment – both because their own health may inhibit their work capacity and because they are care-givers for family members in poor health. In addition, the study found positive impacts of public health clinic openings on the earnings of women working in the formal sector, suggesting that public health coverage increases productivity. The increases in income in both groups are, for some families, large enough to enable them to come off welfare. These are important trends that can help improve policy by using health coverage to reduce poverty in – and beyond – Brazil.

These examples show how quantitative methods can be crucial for showing the achievements made by development policies, as well as the challenges ahead and possible solutions to overcome them. Robust data on successful strategies in a certain country can provide invaluable lessons for other countries that face similar problems. Less present in quantitative research, however, are the nuances which allow us to understand how people from different backgrounds in diverse locations experience the development issues at stake. This more contextualised and experiential perspective on development is represented by a different set of projects covered by the British Academy's 2016 *Sustainable Development Programme*.

Qualitative, bottom-up and participatory approaches to measuring the SDGs

Development policies are often based on generic guides or frameworks, which tend to be designed in capital cities or UN offices. These guides do not necessarily respond to local contexts and specifically to the experiences of those most marginalised, whose stories are not always heard. The UN's 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development calls for a review process that is open, inclusive, participatory and transparent for all people and that supports reporting by all relevant stakeholders. How can this be achieved? Two of the projects funded by the 2016 *Sustainable Development Programme* offer concrete strategies to ensure that research on development can better take into consideration local contexts and knowledge.

The project [SafeSeas \(An Analysis of Maritime Security Capacity Building in the Western Indian Ocean\)](#) draws on praxiographic and action research methods to study lessons from maritime security governance and capacity-building in the Western Indian Ocean. Drawing on a close collaboration with a diverse set of ocean practitioners, the project identified how

development in the maritime sector is much more productive if it is organised through a bottom-up process in which receiving countries are in the lead and effectively manage and coordinate their donors, drawing on their own strategies and investment plans. Maritime issues, such as smuggling, piracy or the development of fisheries, vary substantially across countries, which have different priorities and challenges. This means that lessons learnt in one context require careful translation and adjustment before they can be applied to other contexts. [SafeSeas](#) shows that mastering maritime security requires reflexivity. This is the capacity to constantly reflect on the lessons learnt in terms of failure and success, and to adapt capacity-building programming and toolkits accordingly. Furthermore, maritime security governance and capacity-building activities need to integrate the knowledge of local stakeholders, including state institutions but also other users of the sea, ranging from the fishing and tourism industries to coastal communities. Building on local institutions and strengths promises to make policies more sustainable.^{iv}

Another project, [Building Sustainable Inclusion: From Intersecting Inequalities to Accountable Relationships](#), shows that building on 'local' knowledge is not as straightforward as it sounds. Local knowledge should first be uncovered. Unfortunately, the experiences of certain local communities are not always taken into account. Religious, social, economic and gender norms often leave some groups excluded from development policies, or efforts to understand and measure their impact. For example, the Denotified and Nomadic Tribes in India with whom the project worked, are a highly stigmatised and diverse group, whose members experience exclusion from government statistics. As a result, government and development policies fail to respond to their needs. The project has employed innovative participatory and creative methods to learn about the experiences and stories of such marginalised groups in India, Uganda, South Africa, Egypt and Ghana.

More context-specific and adaptive approaches, building on local experiences and knowledge, will create more sustainable development policies that respond better to local challenges.

Participatory methods help to create safe spaces in which people can freely share and analyse their stories. This is a precondition for designing policies that respond to people's particular experiences. As a next step, this knowledge can be communicated to policy-makers through creative approaches such as digital storytelling, community drama, social media campaigns and community radio. This creates more powerful and inclusive ways for people to hold their governments accountable, to make sure that 'no one is left behind' in the sustainable development agenda. Furthermore, participatory approaches offer a way to shift the power dynamics in research on development and the review of the SDGs, which is often done by international experts. Participatory methods provide people in marginalised communities with the tools to express their own complex reality and needs, and to open up pathways to more accountable relationships with their own governments.^v

The best of both: using mixed methods to research the SDGs

Both qualitative and quantitative methods have specific advantages for explaining and understanding development. In order to obtain comprehensive perspectives on the complexities of development, enabling both the identification of trends and causal relations as well as the analysis of more local and in-depth dynamics and experiences, several projects in the British Academy's

2016 *Sustainable Development Programme* take a mixed methods approach, combining qualitative and quantitative methods.

The project **Equitable Resilience in Local Institutions** analysed how equitable resilience can be secured through local institutions. It used a range of different methods to study the experiences of six local community-based organisations in two different social-ecological contexts in Bangladesh. First, surveys were conducted in which households ranked their perceived level of resilience to different hypothetical disaster risks. This quantitative method informed the next phase, in which focus groups were held among lower and higher resilience household members. Participants in these focus groups mapped the ecological and social networks, actors, stakeholders and actions which can be used to improve resilience. This mapping informed a phase of in-depth semi-structured interviews among representatives of the same households to better understand the actors and drivers of resilience. A final phase consisted of semi-structured interviews with NGOs and other organisations to identify barriers or challenges to equity faced in these villages.^{vi} The combination of household and participatory surveys, social network analysis, systems mapping, focus group discussions and interviews allowed the project to study inter- and intra-community resilience differences in Bangladesh, with attention to participants' subjective experiences. This led to a series of policy and practice recommendations. For example, the project identified the risk of NGOs being dedicated mainly to microfinance, which can create dependency on NGO support while doing little to make people more resilient in the long run. It suggested that more structural efforts to increase resilience should instead focus on education and guaranteeing the right to information.

Islands of Integrity: Understanding the Politics of Corruption Reduction

developed a 'positive outlier approach' which combines quantitative and qualitative methods to identify and study surprising cases of corruption reduction. Several studies in the past have sought to examine how it is that positive developmental change happens in challenging governance environments. However, most of these studies have chosen cases based on whether they have a reputation for performing well, which risks overlooking unlikely or little-known practices. In contrast, the approach developed in this project sought to identify both types of cases: those that have a reputation for reducing corruption, and those where corruption reduction has flown under the radar. In the first stage of the project, statistics were used to identify *potential* positive outliers, using data from Transparency International's Global Corruption Barometer. Positive outliers were considered as the sectors within a country where a reduction in bribery had occurred, while stagnation or an increase in bribery was predicted. A second stage consisted of vetting these potential positive outliers, both quantitatively by comparing the results with Afrobarometer data, and qualitatively by consulting experts familiar with the country sector, including academics, development practitioners, and government employees, officials in foreign aid agencies and NGO officers. A third and final research stage consisted of in-depth qualitative fieldwork in the selected countries. Interviews were held with researchers, relevant government representatives, journalists, and especially practitioners, who are often best placed to explain changes to bribery-related behaviours within the sectors examined.^{vii} In this way, the project combined statistical methods to improve case selection, with qualitative methods to understand the nuanced and context-specific factors explaining surprising success in corruption reduction.

Mixed methods approaches enable both the identification of trends and causal relations and the in-depth analysis of local dynamics and experiences. This helps the design of more effective policies which consider the impacts on beneficiaries.

Instead of resorting to already existing databases, another project, **The Governance and Implementation of the SDG 13 on Climate Change**, expanded and enhanced its own

database – ‘Climate Change Laws of the World’. The project saw the achievement of global coverage of all climate change laws and policies in the world, as well as the addition of qualitative data about climate change institutions and governance structures in 100 countries. This data helped identify global trends in climate legislation and policymaking, evidencing an enormous increase in climate laws from 1997 to date. Apart from cross-regional differences, the database also distinguishes between laws passed by legislative branches, such as parliaments and national assemblies (44%), and executive policies passed by governments (56%). The database furthermore differentiates between laws aimed at mitigating climate change, adapting to it or doing both, identifying a global gap in legislative activity on adaptation legislation. It highlights differences based on regional and socio-economic characteristics: least developed countries are responsible for only 23% of the legislation included in the database, with fewer laws on average per country. The climate laws of least developed countries, moreover, tend to focus more on adaptation than on mitigation, compared to the G20 which represent over 60% of legislation. Another facet of the database is that it includes cases of litigation on climate change. This allows for understanding changing litigation strategies, goals and actors, as well as tracking the success of cases.^{viii} The database thus provides an important tool for policy-makers who want to create climate frameworks or strengthen existing ones, as well as climate activists planning to start climate change litigation or lobby for climate legislation.

The project [Asset Transfers or Cash Transfers: The Design of Anti-Poverty Transfers to the Ultra-Poor](#) also combined quantitative and qualitative methods. It used the case of Pakistan to study whether a social protection programme providing cash transfers could lead to better outcomes than in-kind transfers. The project used a large-scale randomised control trial to compare the more traditional “Targeting the Ultrapoor” (TUP) programme, which combines a one-off large-scale asset transfer (typically livestock) with complementary training, with a modified design where beneficiaries have the choice of cash instead of assets. This large-scale quantitative analysis identified that in all cases, assets had become central to the household’s labour market activities. The households had either retained the assets, or they had used the received cash transfers to buy similar assets. These findings, which provide important insights in terms of poverty alleviation, were complemented by qualitative research, mainly consisting of community-level discussions. This qualitative approach uncovered important gendered dynamics of the programme, as well as more nuanced perspectives on how men and women experience poverty. This way, the project provided both statistical findings on the success of the TUP programme in terms of poverty alleviation, and new insights on subjective experiences and socio-economic and gendered dynamics. For policy-makers, such an approach is important in that it helps the design of policies that achieve the desired reduction in poverty, while making sure that these policies do not reinforce local and gendered inequalities.

Capturing complexity: interdisciplinary approaches

A single disciplinary perspective is often not sufficient to capture the complexity of the challenges involved in promoting sustainable development. The connection between the economic, social and environmental dimensions of sustainable development seems to call for a comprehensive approach that crosses disciplinary boundaries. This idea is taken

A comprehensive, interdisciplinary approach can capture the complex connections between the economic, social and environmental dimensions of sustainable development.

to heart by most of the projects funded by the British Academy's 2016 *Sustainable Development Programme*.

For example, the project **Sustainable Energy Access in Mozambique: Socio-Political Factors in Conflict-Laden Urban Areas** not only looks at the spatial differentiation of energy access levels in Maputo but also analyses the political economy of energy and the everyday practices of energy provision. The project uses a variety of methods including historical research, economic analysis, ethnography, workshops with experts and policy-makers, and surveys. In this way, the project discovers the socio-economic and political conditions that shape energy access in Mozambique.

Another project, **Land2coast (Integrating Policies on Land Use Changes and Coastal Zone Management to Deliver Food Security and Environmental Conservation)**, works with a team of social and natural scientists to explore how to integrate the governance of maritime, coastal and inland resources, which have historically been managed by separate policy institutions and researched by different academic disciplines. Through the use of mixed (qualitative and quantitative) methods, including conducting interviews with key policy actors, household surveys, focus groups and stakeholder workshops, and by referencing local ecological records and monitoring certain coastal habitats, the project has revealed institutional barriers to effective, integrated governance, and has gone on to identify ways of bridging these governance gaps. Rapidly growing tourism affects the health of coral reefs and seagrass, damaging water quality and threatening food security, livelihoods and sustainable economic growth. Inland development activities can further exacerbate the vulnerability of coastal social-ecological systems. The project identified a set of ways in which development can reinforce ecological integrity and improve food security in both inland and coastal communities, illustrating the important benefits derived from connecting the environmental, social and economic aspects of development. These include making better use of local knowledge, and drawing on the local communities, business interest associations and environmental groups for partnerships to implement co-management and monitoring arrangements.

By using a range of different disciplinary approaches, research and policy can explore and build on the connections between cultural and archaeological heritage, migration, environmental protection and economic development.

Another example of a highly interdisciplinary project is **Living Amid the Ruins: Archaeological Sites as Hubs of Sustainable Development for Local Communities in Southwest Turkey**. This project builds on insights from the fields of archaeology, social anthropology, botany and tourism. The archaeological work on ancient heritage sites in the Pisidia region is accompanied by anthropological research consisting of ethnographic methods and interviews with community members, in order to understand their expectations about the socio-economic benefits of the archaeological heritage they live close to. The project also employed

a photography team and drone to film this spectacular region, while a botanist helped create a guidebook to accompany the hiking trail which was developed as part of the project, building on the previous work of the British Institute at Ankara (BIAA). Finally, an expert in economic development through archaeology is designing strategies for using this heritage as a resource for local development. Building hubs of development based on archaeological sites can ultimately help to reverse the trend of rural-urban migration in this region, and protect the sites and the surrounding landscapes from mining and other environmentally damaging projects. This multi-faceted research project has thus almost become a development project in itself, enabling significant lessons to be learnt for the UK research impact agenda.

Another project, **Creative Kampongs: Mobilising Informal Enterprise and Innovation for Economic Development in Indonesia**, brings together experts and methods from development studies, economics and human geography to study the dynamics of informal businesses and their contribution to economic growth. Interviews and focus group discussions served to identify significant industry clusters in three cities (Bandung, Solo and Semarang). In addition, interviews with national government bodies and ministries, and questionnaire surveys of individual businesses in selected industries have enabled the project to reveal some of the limits of official, central government creative city policies in Indonesia, pushing the boundaries of understandings of innovation and creativity.

Conclusion

This brief has set out the wealth of methodological and disciplinary approaches available for studying sustainable development, a complex and multi-faceted phenomenon. Which method is best placed eventually depends on the specific problems and questions studied in each particular research project. This brief has outlined some of the benefits and limitations of different methods, and ways of combining methods and disciplinary approaches to overcome these. It has made clear that studying development clearly goes beyond the use of pre-established indices, and instead requires flexible, innovative and interdisciplinary approaches to provide a nuanced understanding of the existing challenges. Only in this way can the resulting policies build on lessons learned across countries over time, while at the same time responding adequately to context-specific challenges and local human needs.

For more information about the 2016 Sustainable Development Programme, visit <https://www.thebritishacademy.ac.uk/programmes/sustainable-development-2016> or email gcrf@thebritishacademy.ac.uk

ⁱ United Nations, Resolution adopted by the General Assembly on 6 July 2017: Work of the Statistical Commission pertaining to the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. A/RES/71/313.

ⁱⁱ UNDP, 'Human Development Index (HDI)'. <http://hdr.undp.org/en/content/human-development-index-hdi>. Last accessed on 14 March 2018.

ⁱⁱⁱ Fallah, B., Krafft, C. and Wahba, J. (2018), 'The Impact of Refugees on Employment and Wages in Jordan'. ERF Working Paper 1189, ERF; El-Mallakh, N. and Wahba, J. (2018), 'Syrian Refugees and the Migration Dynamics of Jordanians: Moving in or moving out?'. ERF Working Paper 1191, ERF.

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^v Participate (2017), 'Using Knowledge from the Margins to Meet the SDGs: The Real Data Revolution', Policy Briefing 03; Participate (2017), 'Participatory Accountability for the SDGs: Beyond Social Accountability, Policy Briefing 04;

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^{viii} Nachmany, M., Fankhauser, S., Setzer, J. and Averchenkova, A. (2017), 'Global Trends in Climate Change Legislation and Litigation' and Nachmany, M., Fankhauser, S., Setzer, J. and Averchenkova, A. (2017), 'Policy Brief. Global Trends in Climate Change Legislation and Litigation: 2017 Snapshot'.