

# Who benefits from "KNOWLEDGE FOR DEVELOPMENT"?

By Simon McGrath

**K**nowledge is like light. Weightless and intangible, it can easily travel the world, enlightening the lives of people everywhere. Yet, billions of people still live – unnecessarily – in the darkness of poverty.

In 1998, the World Bank made "Knowledge for Development" the theme of its annual flagship World Development Report. The Bank's serious interest in this issue had begun, however, in 1996 with the keynote address of the Bank's new President, James Wolfensohn, to the joint meeting of the Bank and the International Monetary Fund (IMF).

Since then, there has been a remarkable growth in interest in knowledge-based aid within development co-operation agencies. Most agencies have launched projects that seek to make their work better grounded in the knowledge they already possess within their organisations and to explore more effective ways of acquiring external knowledge related to their work. At the same time, there has also been a growth in emphasis on disseminating this knowledge more effectively, to other agencies; to their own civil societies; to their partners in the South; and to the billions of poor people who are the stated beneficiaries of the whole intertwined aid and development project.

Equally, there has been a revisiting of old notions that the poor are poor in large part because of their lack of appropriate knowledge. To the old account expressed in many colonial and missionary texts is added the new dimensions of globalisation (as the force shaping the knowledge needed) and information and communications technologies (ICTs) – as an important new set of tools in the dissemination of this knowledge. At its most extreme, this account appears to have a simplistic view that better knowledge makes for better policies and that better policies lead to better lives.

Knowledge for development is increasingly seen as a partial answer to the challenges posed by globalisation, ICTs and the knowledge economy. Projects that are explicitly grounded in the organisational knowledge of donor agencies have now gained currency. But will this paradigmatic shift to knowledge improve aid delivery as it promises to?

In a recent book, *Knowledge for Development* (Zed and HSRC Press, 2004), Kenneth King and I examined the knowledge policies and practices of four agencies: the World Bank, the British Department for International Development, the Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency and the Japan International Co-operation Agency.

The focus on knowledge has meant that donor interests include capitalising on external knowledge and disseminating their

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own knowledge to other stakeholders. Some agencies are also increasingly recognising the need to support indigenous knowledge and build capacity within knowledge systems of developing countries.

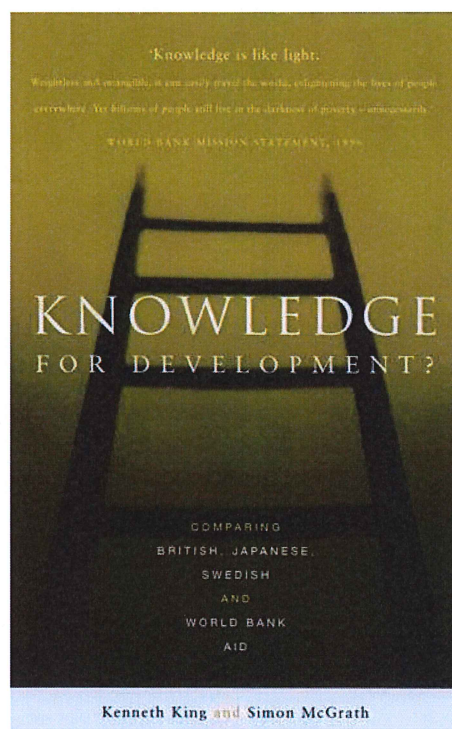
After nearly eight years of this new trend, however, the evidence for the benefits of agencies' knowledge trend is very weak. The internal benefits to agencies have been limited. Evaluations have been unable to show a clear picture of the effectiveness of knowledge-based aid in terms of its impact on everyday practices of the agencies.

In spite of the hopes of major proponents within agencies, the new approach has not radically transformed the bureaucratic and conservative way in which agencies operate. Orthodoxy continues to be valued over enquiry. Moreover, in agencies such as the UK Department for International Development (Dfid) and the World Bank, spin and news management are increasing.

There are some good examples of agencies encouraging better global sharing of knowledge that is intended to promote development (for example, the support of several agencies for the Southern African Poverty Research Network). These are the exception rather than the norm, however, as knowledge practices in agencies have been more likely to encourage the dissemination of knowledge that is ideologically in line with agencies' own positions and which comes from trusted sources – typically in the North.

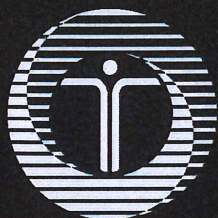
Above all else, it remains difficult to see what knowledge-based aid has done, and is likely to do, to improve the lives of the supposed ultimate beneficiaries: those living in poverty. •

*Dr Simon McGrath is Director, Research Programme on Human Resources Development at the HSRC. The book, Knowledge for Development: Comparing British, Japanese, Swedish and World Bank Aid is published by HSRC Press and Zed.*





# HSRC review

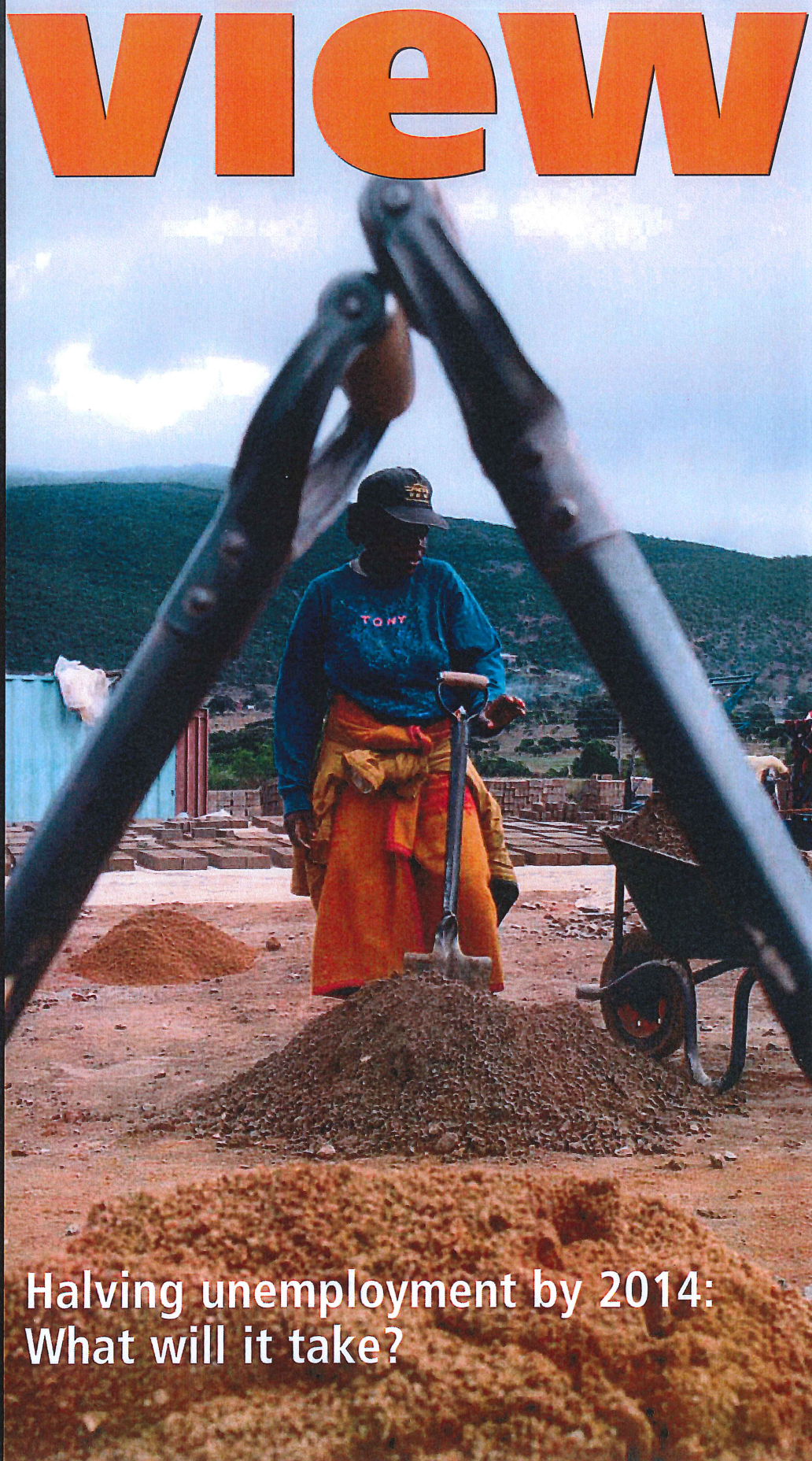


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Halving unemployment by 2014:  
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