The nature of knowledge concerning the ‘urban’ in the South

Paul Jenkins & Harry Smith
Centre for Environment & Human Settlements
Edinburgh, SCOTLAND
H.C.Smith@sbe.hw.ac.uk, P.Jenkins@hw.ac.uk

This paper will examine three critical issues facing our perception, approach and action vis-à-vis relevant knowledge for the ‘urban’ in the South within the NAERUS domain: what form of epistemological paradigm is appropriate; what is the nature of the knowledge that we aspire to; and how can we act on this in practice within the existing context(s)?

Concerning epistemologies, it argues for a social constructivist approach to understanding, with a proactive stance – that is, accepting that knowledge is essentially socially produced and thus the nature of relevant knowledge and its validation needs to be proactively engaged with. This means being aware of who relevant stakeholders are for the definition and production of appropriate knowledge and its validation. By so doing the Northern academic (essentially the domain which NAERUS actors work within) need to challenge the academic paradigms which dominate the validation of knowledge currently and open these to other forms of definition of what is relevant and how it can be validated – while still working within the domain of Northern academia and policy. This is likely to lead to a more praxis-led research, but one clearly contextualized.

Such an epistemological stance requires stepping back from the existing paradigms of urban development research which have been dominated by Northern intellectuals and re-assessing the focus – i.e. what are seen as ‘problems’ to be addressed. In this the authors argue for a less normative approach than dominates the majority of ‘development’ research, but one which also avoids the relative passivity of some other approaches. The focus thus needs to bring together understanding of longer term processes of urban change and critiques of ‘developmentalism’ and embedded Western/Northern conceptualization of the good ‘urban’ – and avoid short term normative research. Such research will probably be inductive as opposed to deductive and cross the disciplinary as well as theory/practice boundaries which Northern academia erects.

Finally, this inevitably leads to a contextually situated partnership approach to knowledge development, which will not sit easily within the parameters of current urban development research vis-à-vis the intellectual and (especially) organizational structures which underpin current approaches. How can proactive partnerships not only develop but get access to resources and have a wider impact (e.g. through publication) when these are so one-sidedly based in the North and accepted Northern discourse – including the academic peer-review and funding constraints?