Researching to deliver appropriate international development

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Victoria is a PhD student investigating the sustainability of slum upgrading approaches through stakeholder perception. She has recently returned from fieldwork in the massive low income settlement of Kibera, in Nairobi, Kenya. There she was researching examples of completed water and sanitation infrastructure upgrading implemented through alternative delivery models.

Victoria is based at the Centre for Sustainable Development, Cambridge University Engineering Department and is the Built Environment Fellow of the Royal Commission for the Exhibition of 1851. She has worked in India on urban development and sanitation projects in Pune with the NGO Shelter Associates, and in Ladakh for her masters (MPhil in Engineering for Sustainable Development) research dissertation on the implementation of building technologies in poor communities for which she was awarded the Royal Academy of Engineering Panasonic Trust Fellowship and Gold Medal in 2008. As a student, she has worked with UN-HABITAT in Nairobi, UN-DESA in New York, Arup Associates, Sir Robert McAlpine building contractors and Hoare Lea Building Services Engineers. Victoria graduated from Nottingham University in 2004 with a MEng in Architecture and Environmental Design. Victoria has been involved with EWB-UK as the former Professional Network Coordinator and as the Project Manager responsible for initiating the first Shelter Associates EWB placement.

Victoria will be speaking about her research activities to date and will draw upon her experiences from Kenya and India:

Too many international development projects are unsuccessful due to the difficulty in the practical implementation of theoretical development solutions. Appropriateness for the local context, the neglect of managing project handover and planning for ongoing project maintenance are areas where mistakes often happen.

She will be highlighting the valuable position that many researchers hold and the beneficial opportunity they have to critically investigate the true delivery and impact of development intervention in developing contexts from an impartial and independent standpoint.

For practice to better apply theory and for theory to be more appropriate for practice, dialogue between researchers and practitioners must be improved. There needs to be a new class of practitioners who are open to new ideas for development implementation and prepared to accept constructive criticism of their projects to improve the way they practice.

Many of EWB-UKs researching members may become the future of the engineering development industry. Such researchers should be encouraged to build an awareness of appropriate and sustainable development planning and implementation.

Victoria will be drawing from her experiences to present examples of the disconnections that can occur between theory and practice in the hope that this can provoke ideas to identify ways to improve links and communication between the two.