

An Approach to Synthesising Research Around Policy Agendas

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Summary

This section explores the Impact Initiative's approach to identifying research projects that combine to provide coherent messages for decision makers. Specifically, it looks at a series of outputs called Research for Policy and Practice (R4PP) papers that have enabled grantholders to respond to live policy issues. It sets out what the Impact Initiative was trying to achieve and the advantages of this approach over both lengthier systematic reviews and summaries of single studies. It answers the question: How did this meso-synthesis of evidence, combined with policy events, manage to promote diverse perspectives and provide compelling narratives for decision makers? We believe this approach could be adapted for other programme-level knowledge-brokering functions that seek to maximise the impact of research.

4.1 Introduction

The Impact Initiative supports a diverse portfolio of research encompassing over 200 projects funded by the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC) and the Foreign, Commonwealth & Development Office (FCDO) (formerly the Department for International Development – DFID) on issues ranging from secure livelihoods, disability, inequality in education, health system reform, climate adaptation, and much more. The projects are spread across the world in 79 countries, and globally, each with its own socio-political and economic context. A key objective of the Impact Initiative has been to work across this wide-ranging portfolio and bring together bodies of evidence that present clear messages that can be readily actioned by global decision makers facing particular challenges.

One of the clear advantages of playing a distinct knowledge-brokering role across ESRC-FCDO Strategic Partnership-funded research is that the Impact Initiative team have had a unique overview of both the Joint Fund for Poverty Alleviation (Joint Fund) and the Raising Learning Outcomes in Education Systems Research Programme (RLO) portfolio, allowing us to look at the depth and breadth of research and identify cross-cutting issues. This has been important not only to meet the Impact Initiative's goal of strengthening the international profile of the two programmes as centres of excellence for research on development, but also to enable groups of grantholders to collectively exploit influencing and engagement opportunities. We have ensured the

portfolio adds up to more than the sum of its parts by identifying critical bodies of knowledge that cohere around specific policy problems and enabling linkages between research projects and relevant policy communities.

In practice this has led to the Joint Fund portfolio supporting outputs and events that have covered the multidimensional aspects of poverty and include issues such as health system reform, secure livelihoods, economic strategies and social protection, gender in everyday lives, and childhood and youth. By working together, researchers, whose inquiries span geographies, methodologies, and topics, have built understanding of how poor and marginalised people navigate and negotiate their futures and have influenced policy contexts and broader transformational changes in societies.

Meanwhile, the RLO research programme has filled critical evidence gaps on the questions of how education systems can work better to overcome the global learning crisis and raise learning outcomes at scale in developing countries. Research has focused on three core themes: effective teaching, challenging contexts, and accountability mechanisms. Evidence emerging from 30 projects focused in 24 countries enabled through the RLO research programme and from 172 projects focused in 77 countries (and globally) from the Joint Fund aligns with policy-relevant topics; for example: how to step up targeted support to marginalised groups such as children with disabilities and hard-to-reach girls; system reform

that delivers results in the classroom and makes education systems more accountable, effective, and inclusive; and good-quality teaching (Impact Initiative 2018a; Impact Initiative 2019b).

A key approach to identifying research projects that combine to provide coherent messages for decision makers has been to produce a series of outputs called Research for Policy and Practice papers (R4PPs) that have enabled grantholders to respond to live policy issues. They have been designed to help bridge the academic and policy discourses around priority themes identified for both programmes, and to forge closer connections between individual grantholders and allow them to collectively frame their research and knowledge in ways that maximise opportunities for research uptake.

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4.2 Research for Policy and Practice papers

R4PPs bring together between two and four research projects in each publication that speak to a particular area of policy discourse. These synthesis papers draw on evidence in such a way as to present key messages tailored to the needs of decision makers thinking about what should happen next. They articulate critical issues in the field of development, providing clear insights and direct implications for policy and practice.

To develop this series, we have mapped evidence and mined the portfolio of both programmes, identifying topics and concepts that relate to live policy discourse – responding to both global debates and relatively niche policy issues alike. Synthesising research in this way unites different types of knowledge and breaks down barriers between different disciplines and policy or technical areas and provides policymakers and practitioners with concrete recommendations. They bring together a diverse set of researchers – encouraging collaboration, mutual learning, and interaction – building connections between grantholders and non-academic audiences far more effectively than if individual research projects were profiled on their own. They showcase findings beyond individual grants to meet policy interest and demand, and they also demonstrate strong cross-programme dialogue learning between researchers. To date, we have produced 12 R4PPs,

which profile 33 projects from across both Joint Fund and RLO portfolios.

There were significant benefits of combining regions, disciplines, and topics around one central policy dilemma. Academics can be pigeonholed into their specialist area, and policy actors can be very focused on a particular concept of what the problem is and what kind of evidence might offer the solution. Our synthesis of projects allowed exploration of new angles perhaps not anticipated. For example, we have successfully worked to increase the recognition that poverty is multidimensional in nature and must consider not only material dimensions (low income and consumption, a lack of assets or services) but also social phenomena (shame, stigma, exclusion, and violence).

By slicing through the portfolio, grantholders working on subjects as diverse as health, transport, and education were brought together. Many researchers commented on how this helped them to build new connections and present different aspects of their work to new audiences. Speaking on the benefits of the process when writing the R4PP on urban community resilience (Impact Initiative 2019c), for example, Professor Neil Adger from the University of Exeter commented:

We are using the short material in this summary as a basis for a longer summary for policymakers that we will be distributing directly to them in

Bangladesh and in face-to-face meetings. So, the process has been useful for us to think through our structure and audience

(Adger pers. comm. March 2019).¹

We were also able to identify key messages that cut across the subset of projects. R4PPs showcased research projects that were sometimes geographically dispersed but able to offer messages that could be applied to different contexts; whereas others combined research from one country but drew together rich and diverse regional perspectives. Commenting on the utility of the R4PP on water security (Impact Initiative 2019d), Dr Nick Hepworth, Founder and Executive Director of Water Witness International, illustrated this point when he wrote:

The selection of... research explores the realities facing people for whom water insecurity is a daily threat. Experiences of managing reservoirs in Burkina Faso identifies the challenges and conflicts facing user groups. Meanwhile, in Ethiopia, a study of pastoralists looks at the inter-relationships between emotional wellbeing and water access. This small snapshot provides useful insights for what is needed to tackle the global water crisis.

(Impact Initiative 2019d: 1)

Events such as the Power of Partnership: Research to Alleviate Poverty conference,² which brought together over 100 participants to look at how the evidence coheres around key policy issues and the role of partnerships in achieving impact, also helped us to create spaces where researchers were able to identify synergies and collaborate. By facilitating in-depth discussions with the research teams they were able to better understand the nuances of critical issues and co-develop messages; many of these discussions have resulted in R4PPs and joint work around policy engagement events.

One researcher who attended the Power of Partnership event went on to collaborate on the R4PP on water security. Speaking after the event, Marlene Elias from Bioversity International said, ‘the really excellent part of this meeting was having my ideas challenged from multiple perspectives’ (Elias pers. comm. August 2019³).

A crucial component of the success of the R4PP series has been that they have all been written in accessible formats and in language that is as non-specialist as possible. Introductions to the papers were framed by high-profile policy actors and practitioners with

relevant experience who were invited to give a clear oversight of the topic and position the research within the broader development debate. This helped give credence to the papers and also provided additional entry points to key networks for dissemination. In choosing the authors for the foreword we were mindful to approach people who were credible thinkers in the chosen area but not always an academic. This has led to a diverse range of voices including: a leader of a UK political party – Mandu Reid, Women’s Equality Party; policy actors, such as Trine Cecilie Riis-Hansen, Head of Advocacy and Policy, PLAN International Norway; NGO leaders, such as Dr Nick Hepworth, Founder and Executive Director of Water Witness; and global intermediaries and global advocates, such as Dr Rita Bissoonauth, Head of Diplomatic Mission, African Union/International Centre for Girls’ and Women’s Education in Africa (Impact Initiative 2019e; Impact Initiative 2017; Impact Initiative 2019d; Impact Initiative 2019a).

In framing the papers in this way we have been sure to situate the content in line with live issues that concern policy actors, and we have also been able to use the authors’ networks and spheres of influence to disseminate the findings.

Resources such as the R4PPs are highly valued by grantholders as they provide them with both a model to write about impact and a space to showcase their own work. Co-written with grantholders, the editorial process has enhanced their involvement in writing for non-academic audiences, resulting in building their skills around research to impact. The synthesis process has increased research relevance and amplified researcher voices, including those of Southern partners, meaning that they have been useful for both audiences and researchers alike (we provide some anecdotal evidence below).

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4.3 Engaging policy communities with bodies of evidence

Research synthesis and compilations of evidence are vital tools for engagement and can influence policy and practice. There are a number of examples from across the Impact Initiative's work that demonstrate how we met demand in a certain policy area or supported collaboration activities that led to strengthened relationships and contributed to mutual learning (Corbett 2016; Nelson 2016). By mapping emerging topics as well as considering relevant policy themes, R4PPs speak to topical issues and can be framed in a way that taps into the prevailing policy discourse. This has included R4PPs focused on subjects as diverse as disability and education, women and work, community planning and urban resilience, gender and education, and accountability relationships between schools, community and government in India.⁴

In 2017, recognising that disability was high on the global development policy agenda and that donors were increasingly highlighting the importance of reaching people with disabilities, we undertook the mapping of key players in the field of disability and education. By undertaking in-depth interviews with those who were funding and using research evidence and were also involved in delivering country-level programmes, we were able to scope demand for evidence on disability and education by global stakeholders. As such, it helped us gain a better understanding of how existing research evidence is used, what can be done to make evidence more easily accessible to non-academic research users, and the gaps in evidence that these users would find useful for their work. This work laid a foundation for the R4PP on disability and education (Impact Initiative 2017) as well as subsequent activities that saw the Initiative's long-standing work on disability and inclusive education culminating in 2018 with direct involvement of ESRC-FCDO grantholders in the Global Disability Summit in 2018. A visible presence at the Summit provided the opportunity to showcase the R4PP, which, drawing on four RLO grants spanning ten countries, provided evidence on what governments must consider in order to ensure that children with disabilities benefit from

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quality education without discrimination or exclusion (Impact Initiative 2017). It was distributed to key individuals such as Alice Allbright, CEO of the Global Partnership for Education, and Kevin Watkins, CEO of Save the Children.

The R4PPs also demonstrated their relevance in the longer term. For example, the R4PP on disability and education was used and referenced at the Global Education All-Party Parliamentary Group (APPG) on Quality Inclusive Education for Children with Disabilities in July 2019⁵ – a year on from the Global Disability Summit. Southern-based grantholders were encouraged to attend the meeting at which the R4PP was referred to as well as distributed. Drawing on the evidence showcased in the R4PP, panellists highlighted what governments must consider in order to ensure that children with disabilities benefit from quality education without discrimination or exclusion.

We utilised our relationship with the APPG again to exploit engagement opportunities, for example, the R4PP on gender and education (Impact Initiative 2019a). The APPG Global Education event 'Heralding

the Decade of Leaving No Girl Behind⁶ (supported by the Global Partnership for Education, the Impact Initiative and RESULTS UK) met in the UK House of Commons to share progress and discuss what still needs to be done in order to move beyond the numbers of girls in school towards gender equality (Impact Initiative 2020a). Moderator Professor Pauline Rose (Co-Director of the Impact Initiative) used the R4PP to highlight the importance of education policy being informed by evidence. Highlighting the work of the Impact Initiative, she reminded the attendees that it is essential that evidence informs policy, recognising the R4PP profiled research on adapting measurements of gender equality and work looking at post-school prospects and aspirations for girls in remote areas.

The R4PP on quality teaching (Impact Initiative 2018b) was timed to link in to FCDO's 2018 Education Policy *Get Children Learning* (DFID 2018), which called for a united effort by global and national leaders to address the learning crisis and ensure poor and marginalised children are not left behind. Recognising that a number of projects were aligned with the priorities

of the policy, we brought together three projects that reflected FCDO's focus on investing in good teaching practices. The R4PP drew on evidence across four projects in three continents highlighting: innovative teacher training and recruitment approaches that are improving learning outcomes in Honduras; a classroom observation tool that has improved teaching in Uganda; how professional learning communities can improve teaching quality in China; and the way that transforming teaching quality through active learning is having an impact in Ethiopia. The output was shared at an FCDO advisers event, with one Education Adviser reporting how useful they found the R4PPs and highlighting that the R4PP on quality teaching had been particularly useful for colleagues in the government as there was nothing of that kind on the topic that brought strands of research together. The R4PP was also promoted at an APPG on Global Education event on 27 November 2018 in the House of Commons, which examined the question: Is there a global teacher crisis and, if so, what can be done about it?⁷ Working alongside one of the contributing Principal Investigators (PIs), the R4PP was translated into Spanish to maximise audience reach regionally – in this case, Honduras (Impact Initiative 2020c).

The R4PP on education accountability relationships (Impact Initiative 2020b), which focuses on accountability relationships and processes between schools, communities, and government within India's education system, was born out of successful cohort building and regional policy engagement. It draws on three of the grants and follows a series of activities that took place between May and December 2019 in which the Impact Initiative worked together with grantholders across ten RLO projects for a series of activities and outputs that focused on raising learning outcomes for children facing different forms of disadvantage in diverse contexts in India. These activities were based on a successful pitch by participants from SCAFFOLD (Stakeholder Convergence for Focus on Learner Disadvantage) at the annual RLO workshop in January 2019, where grantholders were invited to come together and create a plan for policy engagement supported by the Impact Initiative.

The R4PPs have allowed us to contribute to broader discussions and dialogues that may not have been possible for an individual project alone. Many of the testimonies from grantholders and stakeholders bear testament to this. For example, after sharing cross-cutting research on gender and education at the

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APPG Global Education event ‘Heralding the Decade of Leaving No Girl Behind’⁶, attending British Council Country Director based in Dar es Salaam, Tanzania, Catherine Sinclair Jones commented:

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(Sinclair-Jones pers.comm. February 2020)⁸

Speaking on the experience of constructing the R4PP on urban community resilience (Impact Initiative 2019c), co-author and researcher Richard Giulianotti (Professor of Sociology, School of Sport, Exercise and Health Sciences, Loughborough University, UK) said, ‘It brought together different scholars in the same field under a common theme, and it helped us to start discussing possible collaborations’ (Giulianotti pers. comm. February 2019).⁹ The resulting R4PP also drew on the networks of the participating authors and went on to be disseminated at diverse events that were attended by the different researchers involved. One set of researchers shared copies at a high-level urban planning event in Dhaka in 2019,¹⁰ while another researcher and co-author shared it with a large group of Southern researchers attending a Development Frontiers symposium, on The Role of Youth, Sport and Cultural Interventions, in 2018.¹¹

Beyond events, the Initiative’s communication team has designed for each R4PP targeted dissemination plans that aim to reach key audiences such as country-level practitioners, international non-governmental organisations (INGOs) and funders. Where we have needed to, we have also translated R4PPs into languages relevant for the context – for example, into Spanish (Impact Initiative 2020c; Impact Initiative 2020d) – and to reach as wide an audience as possible.

Our overarching objective being to stimulate demand for research evidence and to forge closer relationships between researchers and research users, plans have included targeted mailing to grantholder networks, social media, and visibility in relevant media outlets. For example, an op-ed

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article by grantholder Nidhi Singal was published by Devex considering what governments must do to ensure children with disabilities benefit from quality education without discrimination (Singal and Baboo 2018). This research was also highlighted in a blog on the Washington Group on Disability Statistics website (Singal 2019). Both media engagement activities pointed to the R4PP on disability and education (Impact Initiative 2017) as key evidence that promotes inclusive education for children with disabilities.

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Plans to engage target audiences with R4PPs were not exempt from challenges both on national and global scales. For example, the global pandemic of 2020 meant that the programme had to search for adaptive approaches for disseminating and engaging potential users of R4PPs. Many external engagement events were either cancelled or moved online, with demand shifting to a focus on Covid-19-relevant social science research. This required the Impact Initiative to prioritise other products that met demand, such as a Working Paper on the effects of education research impact in the context of Covid-19 (Rose, Tofaris and Baxter 2020) and an *IDS Bulletin* special issue that promotes the framework for research policy partnerships (Georgalakis and Rose 2019) and was referenced in a digital essay as useful for understanding Covid-19 science partnerships (Georgalakis 2020).

4.4 Supporting synthesis across the portfolio

One of the benefits of the Impact Initiative being a long-term knowledge-brokerage programme has been that we have been able to test and support different approaches to synthesis. The R4PP format was developed after many informal and formal conversations with grantholders. This constant dialogue and open communication provided a framework to bring about creative methods of engagement.

For example, following a successful creative pitching process that we dubbed the ‘Dragons’ Den’ after the popular television show (also known as *Shark Tank*) where we swapped business entrepreneurs for social scientists, and business tycoons for donors and policy actors, we supported a number of activities led by RLO grants based in India (Shephard 2019). Activities included a workshop (to which seven India-focused RLO grants inputted) at which grantholders met to share research findings, build networks, and identify common themes and synergies. This meeting led to the production of a Policy Brief (drawing together key evidence and policy relevant findings from seven RLO grants) that was shared at a national dissemination and networking event in Delhi in December 2019 (De *et al.* 2019). The dissemination

of the Policy Brief (produced in English and Hindi) at this networking meant that RLO evidence was communicated to a range of stakeholders and explored pathways to improving learning outcomes in different Indian contexts.

Other attempts to summarise the learning and synergies from across the research portfolio have included the Impact Initiative’s *Key Issues Guide on Inequalities in Access to Health Services*, launched at the Fourth Global Symposium on Health Systems Research in 2016; it was based predominantly on 63 ESRC-FCDO (formerly ESRC-DFID) grants but also cited other studies (Murphy 2016). The resulting reports were valuable pieces of knowledge and rich sources of information that we hope will also be of interest to a broad range of audiences for a long time to come.

Likewise, *The Social Realities of Knowledge for Development* (Georgalakis *et al.* 2017) brought together diverse viewpoints from grantholders, donors, practitioners and other researchers and provided an analysis of the critical challenges faced by organisations and individuals involved in evidence-informed development through a diverse set of case studies and think pieces.

4.5 Conclusions

The Impact Initiative has successfully combined evidence from across selected research projects that are linked by their collective emphasis on a particular policy dilemma. Unlike much broader systematic reviews, these outputs were shaped by the research available in the ESRC-FCDO portfolio. These succinct, focused and accessible products responded to policy actors’ demand for relevant evidence and wider bodies of knowledge. They have been accessed over 11,000 times. We received feedback from policy actors in relevant fields on how useful they found them. An inherent part of their utility was their combination of perspectives and geographies. According to Colin Bangay, former Senior Education Adviser at DFID, rarely are the challenges being faced unique, so ‘how they have been addressed in other countries... will be of interest... The value of

inter- and intra-country comparison should not be under-estimated’ (Bangay 2019).

Our approach to research synthesis demonstrates a collaborative approach to knowledge brokerage that strategically links communication outputs with events and opportunities to present diverse sets of research to policymakers. By convening events, publishing synthesis products, and supporting grantholders to be better connected, we have raised awareness of the value of Joint Fund and RLO research, repositioned many grantholders to be better placed to engage with non-academic audiences, and brought INGOs, donors, development agencies, the media, academia, and policy actors together around critical bodies of knowledge and learning. The value of the meso-synthesis of projects from a diverse portfolio of research also goes beyond dissemination and engagement. It allows

for the building of relationships and provides the space for mutual learning. Developing a common understanding of a given problem can help to develop

a shared agenda for evidence-informed change and can help to cement relations between policy advisers, practitioners, and researchers (Georgalakis 2020).

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Endnotes

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† Direct quotes included throughout this paper are sourced from surveys and interview recordings – these are included with kind permission from the individuals concerned.

†† Illustration on page 43 © Jorge Martin 2021

- 1 Response from Neil Adger to Impact Initiative survey submitted March 2019
- 2 [The Power of Partnership: Research to Alleviate Poverty](#) conference took place in New Delhi, India from 3 to 5 December 2018. The event focused on the ESRC-FCDO Joint Fund for Poverty Alleviation Research and explored how evidence coheres around key policy issues and the role of partnerships in achieving impact.
- 3 Interview with Marlene Elias, August 2019
- 4 The Impact Initiative has produced the following series of ESRC-FCDO Research for Policy and Practice (R4PP) papers – this collection of papers can be accessed at: <https://theimpactinitiative.net/resources/>

Disability and Education provides evidence on what governments must consider in order to ensure that children with disabilities benefit from quality education without discrimination or exclusion.

Education Accountability Relationships Between Schools, Communities, and Government in India explores accountability relationships, how they function, and with what effect on learning outcomes, in both the short and long term.

Enseñanza de Calidad: Spanish translation of Quality Teaching

Género y educación: Spanish translation of Gender and Education

Gender and Education presents strategies that can help to eliminate gender inequalities in education and approaches to how gender equality in and through education can be measured.

Pensioner Poverty shows that in many settings, universal cash transfers and social pension programmes are providing much-needed financial support to older people.

Quality Teaching highlights innovative teacher training and recruitment approaches that are improving learning outcomes.

Urban Community Resilience interrogates what makes cities inclusive, safe, resilient and sustainable in times when migration and urbanisation processes are intensifying globally.

Water Security: research into the realities facing people for whom water insecurity is a daily threat

Women and Conflict examines social norms, economic empowerment, and women's political participation in fragile and conflict-affected states.

Women's Life Choices identifies critical elements to address if women's and girls' lives are to change for the better.

Women, Work and Social Protection explores the need for holistic social protection measures that move beyond a framing of poverty alleviation as primarily being about access to the traditional labour market and cash transfers to include measures that empower women and support them in juggling household and caring responsibilities for children and other family members.

- 5 APPG on Global Education, '[Quality Inclusive Education for Children with Disabilities](#)', took place on 9 July 2019.
- 6 APPG on Global Education, '[Marking International Day for Education: Heralding the Decade for Leaving No Girl Behind](#)', took place on 22 January 2020,
- 7 APPG on Global Education met to discuss the [global teacher crisis](#) on 27 November 2018.
- 8 Email correspondence with Catherine Sinclair-Jones dated 17 February 2020
- 9 Impact Initiative interview with Richard Giulianotti, Professor of Sociology, School of Sport, Exercise and Health Sciences, Loughborough University, UK, February 2019
- 10 Hosted as part of the [Safe And Sustainable Cities: Human Security, Migration and Wellbeing project](#), led by University of Exeter
- 11 Hosted as part of the [New Development Frontiers? The Role of Youth, Sport and Cultural Interventions](#) project, led by Loughborough University

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