

# Assessing Alternative Pathways to Maximising the Impact of Development Research

James Georgalakis



# Summary

---

This section combines learning from work undertaken by the Impact Initiative over the past six years, supporting over 200 research projects to achieve impact. Building on a series of learning events held in 2020, a number of common issues are identified across three discreet pathways to impact. These approaches to research engagement involved participating in global advocacy, engaging communities in national policy formulation, and participating in international policy fora. The common challenges encountered across these relate to inclusivity and equity, capacity and resources, and producing actionable learning for decision makers. There are also important differences between these pathways to impact. Powerful actors can dominate global coalitions, governments may set the agenda in international policy spaces, and marginalised groups may be excluded from national policy dialogue. Based on the direct experiences of researchers, civil society organisations, and policy actors operating in these spaces, we make a series of recommendations for overcoming these challenges. We hope that this learning can inform approaches to brokering research evidence across multiple projects, helping to maximise their impact.

## 2.1 Introduction

---

The purpose of this section is to set out some of the key challenges faced by researchers who are attempting to contribute to societal impact and successful strategies for overcoming these. This learning is firmly located in relation to pathways to impact that focus research engagement on particular policy spaces or groups of potential beneficiaries. The Impact Initiative team, based at the Institute of Development Studies (IDS) and the Research for Equitable Access and Learning (REAL) Centre at the University of Cambridge, have been in a unique position to learn about diverse approaches to engaging research with non-academic audiences and achieving impact. Over the course of the past six years we have facilitated multiple events with researchers, policy actors, practitioners and donors, to capture this learning and published 24 impact case studies across two programmes funded by the UK's Economic and

Social Research Council (ESRC) and the Foreign, Commonwealth & Development Office (FCDO): the Joint Fund for Poverty Alleviation Research and the Raising Learning Outcomes in Education Systems Research Programme. We revisit some of the frameworks we have developed with our partners on definitions of impact and effective research policy partnerships and consider how these relate to the pathways taken to engage research beyond academia. We explore some of the challenges and opportunities relating to: (1) engaging research in global advocacy movements; (2) engaging communities in national policy formulation; and (3) informing international policy processes with evidence. We set out actionable learning for practitioners and researchers in development that has important implications for the design and implementation of programme-level knowledge-brokering services.

## 2.2 Contributions to learning on pathways to impact

The concept of pathways to impact treats research engagement as a process rather than an activity (Boaz, Fitzpatrick and Shaw 2009; Reed, Bryce and Machen 2018). Similarly to the related practitioner-led field of policy advocacy, pathways focus on theories of change, which determine both anticipated outcomes and the route to their achievement within a broader concept of how change is believed to happen. In international development some of these process models are grounded in traditions of action research that seek participants' own empowerment and changes to the system itself as the primary purpose (Clark and Apgar 2019). This includes changes in the capability of evidence producers, intermediaries, and users to mobilise knowledge for development (Punton 2016). Other models and concepts of research impact are far more concerned with influencing instrumental policy changes. This emphasis on engagement with decision makers and practitioners is frequently driven by donors' desire to support evidence-informed decision making and reduce policy uncertainty. Fransman (2018) sees configurations of research engagement focused on change processes as fundamentally different from more linear and mechanistic knowledge translation or science communication strategies.

While there is a considerable literature on the conceptual and theoretical underpinnings of different approaches to achieving research impact, comparative studies of different pathways are less common. However, for many practitioners, a key question is whether there are particular benefits and challenges relating to specific pathways. As Farley-Ripple, Oliver and Boaz put it: 'This community, perhaps more than any other, needs to base its work on the best evidence of what works (in supporting the use of evidence) for whom and in what circumstances' (2020: 8).

**What is most striking about this study of pathways to impact is both the multifaceted nature of pathways in development research and the emphasis on how research is produced rather than how it is used.**

The Impact Initiative's contribution to learning in this area includes an outcome-mapping study conducted with research projects belonging to the ESRC-FCDO Joint Fund for Poverty Alleviation Research (Clark and Goodier 2019). We use here the terms outcome and impact interchangeably: both refer to changes that can be fully or partially attributed to research processes and learning.

What is most striking about this study of pathways to impact is both the multifaceted nature of pathways in development research and the emphasis on how research is produced rather than how it is used. Researchers' preference for particular research methods, such as participatory action research, are interlinked with the desired outcomes of their work, such as policy influence or community empowerment. Meanwhile, it is rare for any project to place all its eggs in one basket and focus on a single pathway or change process. It is therefore sometimes unclear how envisaged outcomes relate to the choice of pathway. Nonetheless, the choices made between engagement with different spaces, whether communities, national policy, or international fora, must be driven by underlying assumptions around how change happens, but these are rarely made explicit (Clark and Goodier 2019).

Also relevant to the wider literature on research impact is the Impact Initiative's case study analysis of ESRC-FCDO projects around how they worked in partnership with organisations outside academia in order to achieve impact (Georgalakis and Rose 2019). This study identifies diverse pathways to impact that included direct engagement in national policymaking, regional and international policy advice, and the mobilisation of excluded communities in informing policy and practice. Across all these examples, the structure and effectiveness of inter-sector partnerships was found to be of paramount importance. These partnerships brought together academics, civil society organisations, government bureaucrats and decision makers. Researchers' ability to leverage awareness of their work was found to be dependent on shared agendas with these partners, despite significant institutional differences. The case studies emphasised the central importance of sustained interactivity between key stakeholders and an adaptive approach to engaging with policy (Georgalakis and Rose 2019). In the next sub-section we explore these issues further by taking a deep dive into the experiences of some of the projects we directly supported between 2015 and 2020 to engage specific groups of knowledge intermediaries and potential research users.

## 2.3 Comparative analysis of three pathways to impact: global advocacy, engaging communities, and connecting research with international policy

---

Over the course of the programme we had often discussed with donors and grantholders how a programme-level knowledge broker (the Impact Initiative) could add the most value: by working nationally, by engaging in international policy spaces, or by supporting local engagement? Or whether we should focus on particular types of impact, such as community-level empowerment, national policy change, or awareness-raising in international fora. Subsequently, we set out here the learning arising from a range of different pathways and consider the advantages and disadvantages of each.<sup>1</sup> They were selected for further investigation based on their representation of distinctly different types or levels of engagement. The three pathways to impact reviewed are as follows:

### 2.3.1 Engagement with global advocacy movements (child poverty)

The Impact Initiative collaborated with the Global Coalition Against Child Poverty (GCACP) to locate research evidence as central to its approach to advocating for change and the achievement of the Sustainable Development Goals. In 2016, following dialogue between the Impact Initiative and leading members of GCACP (UNICEF and Save the Children), international non-governmental organisation (INGO) campaigners, ESRC-FCDO grantholders, and other academics came together to explore common goals. This fed directly into the joint planning of a pan-African conference that brought together members of this broad alliance with academics and policy actors and donors. The conference was highly policy-orientated and incorporated participatory sessions that were led by the Impact Initiative on evidence-informed decision making and a panel debate on research to policy processes. The event facilitated valuable interactions between researchers and senior policymakers, and GCACP's agenda and its use of evidence was influenced significantly (Roelen and Shephard 2020).

David Stewart (Co-Chair GCACP, UNICEF) stated:

*What it means is that we're talking with researchers all the time about everything we do; it adjusts what*

*we focus on and what we talk about. The Coalition's individual members are highly influenced, I think, by the research they're hearing about.*

(Roelen and Shephard 2020: 2)

### 2.3.2 Engaging marginalised communities in national policy formulation (Ethiopia youth policy)

The Impact Initiative supported a group of ESRC-FCDO researchers and practitioners to organise an engagement between young people and the Ethiopian government. Youth Uncertainty Rights (YOUR) World Research had set out to generate new knowledge about how marginalised young people are affected by insecurity and uncertainty, with a particular focus on Ethiopia and Nepal. The team organised a special National Youth Seminar on uncertainty, violence, poverty, and rights, held in Addis Ababa in March 2019. Around 100 people participated, including 50 young people who shared their experiences of seeking ways out of poverty with government officials and senior decision makers. Officials from the Ministry of Women, Children and Youth attending the event affirmed the importance of listening to young people's priorities and said that the research discussed at the seminar would contribute to the re-design of the national youth policy (Johnson, Shephard and West 2021). Matiyas Assefa Chefa, Director General for Youth Participation in the Ministry of Women, Children and Youth, said: 'We strongly believe that the outcome of this research will help a lot, especially in the policy design process of the National Youth Policy' (Johnson *et al.* 2021).

### 2.3.3 Engaging with global policy processes (disability and education)

The Impact Initiative's long-standing work on disability and inclusive education came to a climax in 2018 with the direct involvement of ESRC-FCDO grantholders in the Global Disability Summit hosted by the governments of the UK and Kenya along with the

International Disability Alliance. An Impact Initiative-facilitated event at the REAL Centre, University of Cambridge, in late April 2018 provided the opportunity for researchers to engage directly with FCDO, INGOs and multilateral officials to inform preparation for the Summit that was due to take place just three months later. The workshop was successful in creating an opportunity for multiple stakeholder groups to discuss common issues from different perspectives around inclusive education. The 42 participants (including seven ESRC-FCDO grant holders, along with key policy

and civil society actors across a range of organisations) developed a Statement of Action on Inclusive Education, which emphasised the importance of better evidence and data to inform policy and practice. The collaboration also resulted in engagement with the framing of a new FCDO, Norwegian Agency for Development Cooperation (Norad), and World Bank Inclusive Education Initiative, which was launched at the Global Disability Summit with an emphasis on the importance of better evidence and data to inform policy and practice (Singal 2020).

## 2.4 Key learning for researchers, knowledge brokers, and policy actors

---

### 2.4.1 Overcoming the barriers to connecting research with its potential users

Across these three pathways there are overlapping concepts around the barriers to connecting research with potential users. These range from pragmatic issues around the availability of relevant data and low research capacity in key fields, to more sociocultural and political factors. Those working at an international policy level, on the lead up to the Global Disability Summit, felt strongly that all too often advocacy and political movements relied too much on rhetoric and not enough on evidence. However, they also reflected that part of the challenge was that evidence of a problem, such as disability and education, was not sufficient to mobilise adequate political will to tackle it. For those working with communities in Ethiopia and seeking to advance their interests in national policy, a lack of data or the capacity to generate them was not nearly as big a problem as a lack of value being placed on data. For many, including those working with young people on global advocacy, this seems to relate to the politics of knowledge and the active exclusion of the lived experiences of marginalised groups. Even those marginalised constituencies, or the organisations that seek to represent them, may not adequately value research data. Therefore, although more technical barriers to evidence use, such as overly academic language or lack of available data, are commonly cited, the more systemic and political barriers to evidence use are generally felt more keenly, irrespective of the pathways to impact pursued.

Approaches to overcoming these systemic and political barriers also heavily overlapped across the three case

studies, despite the differences in their approach to research engagement. Researchers and policy actors directly involved in the three initiatives all emphasised the importance of good research communications, talking about making research concise, short, and accessible. Recommended approaches include the use of multimedia and short briefings and encouraging researchers to develop simple messages. These approaches were particularly endorsed by some of the policy actors and knowledge intermediaries, such as INGOs and multilaterals. Their message seemed to be that researchers themselves needed to address their own shortcomings in communications to improve evidence use. However, all three groups also picked up on the perceived challenges around inclusive research and policy processes. They emphasised the benefits and challenges of bringing together diverse groups of researchers and policy actors, as well as community perspectives to create a different kind of dialogue. This is less about better one-way communication and more to do with a better conversation. Such a networked approach also appears to make identifying multiple entry points and connecting research with potential users easier. For example, researchers engaging with the GCACP were simultaneously connected to powerful knowledge intermediaries in INGOs such as Save the Children and to national policymakers in the countries where they were conducting research. Similarly, when the Impact Initiative got researchers involved in the United Nations Commission on the Status of Women (UNCSD) they were able to leverage awareness of their findings with both national policymakers and a wider community of international advocates.

“**The area that stimulated the greatest consensus across the international policy, national policy, and global advocacy pathways was the value of longer-term or ongoing relationships.**”

However, the area that stimulated the greatest consensus across the international policy, national policy, and global advocacy pathways was the value of longer-term or ongoing relationships. YOUR World Research highlighted the importance of its partnership with the local NGO in Ethiopia, CHADET, and its long-established relationships with local-level policymakers that made the engagement between young people and government officials possible. Meanwhile, researchers engaged with the GCACP over several years, gradually built the case for research being integral to their campaign. There is broad consensus in the literature on evidence use and among knowledge-brokering practitioners around the value of building research engagement work into the research programme from the outset (Cairney, Oliver and Wellstead 2016; Cummings *et al.* 2019; Datta 2018; Mayne *et al.* 2018). All this chimes closely with the Impact Initiative’s analysis of research policy partnerships and the value of sustained interactivity (Georgalakis and Rose 2019), which has been endorsed by donors including UKRI and FCDO (Georgalakis 2020).

Finally, there was some agreement around the need for evidence to offer solutions. For those working with young people in Ethiopia, there was a concern that views from marginalised groups could be perceived by policy elites as quite threatening. They emphasised the need to demonstrate the added value of the lived experience in policymaking processes, rather than assuming this was widely accepted. Likewise, some working on the global disability agenda argued that evidence must support coherent policy options or even ‘charismatic and pragmatic solutions’ (Singal 2020).

This brings us right back to one of the central challenges in supporting evidence use. Rigorous, inclusive evidence does not always provide the simple or politically viable answers that global advocates, international policy actors, or national governments seek. This is not solely

a communication or framing problem; it relates to a deeper set of issues around the design of research and the anticipated outcomes. Take, for example, how the current Covid-19 crisis is creating acute tension between the demand to base public health interventions on evidence and the political realities of making difficult decisions around public health measures.

## 2.4.2 The power of the collective when brokering research across multiple projects and partners

There was clear consensus on the power of the collective and the value of larger, more diverse bodies of evidence. Traditional, more linear or instrumental approaches have historically anticipated the impact of ground-breaking studies. However, across all three pathways there was some sense of the value of wider bodies of knowledge, the requirement to promote new ways of understanding problems, and the benefit of multiple perspectives. For those involved in GCACP this meso-synthesis of research is seen as far more likely to support sustainable change in policy and practice. Multiple research investments across geographies and topics are regarded as providing a more rigorous and ultimately relevant evidence base. For researchers, the value is largely in the interaction itself, given that it provides opportunities for mutual learning and accessing wider networks of evidence producers and users. It demonstrates how they may be part of some momentum to which their evidence is contributing and allows them to share in impact processes that may otherwise have been beyond their reach (see Section 3 in this report).

Researchers seeking to engage the lived experiences of children and youth in policy placed greater emphasis on the value of multiple research projects embodying the principles of inclusive equitable research. They talked about the ability of research partnerships spanning civil society, academia, and policy being better placed to produce creative and realistic solutions to complex policy challenges. These benefits of cross-project collaboration were something the Impact Initiative was acutely aware of from its inception. We worked on the basis that the traditional idea of the superstar researcher and the impact of their inquiry was of limited value in development research where multiple perspectives are key for transformative change (Georgalakis 2016). This combination of a critical mass of evidence that can shift dominant paradigms, more comprehensive and inclusive perspectives, and the establishment of

wider networks and relationships makes a compelling case for collaboration across projects around pathways to impact. A good example of this is the way in which multiple ESRC-FCDO projects actively influenced the research agenda of GCACP in a way that no single project could have possibly claimed credit for. From a knowledge brokerage perspective this collectivised approach also enables programme-level learning that might have otherwise been missed. The Impact Initiative, for example, was able to apply a gender lens to the whole portfolio that it supported, which resulted in the identification of gender-based learning that spanned geographies and sectors (Impact Initiative 2019).

However, working across multiple projects in pursuit of impact is not without its risks and challenges. A widely held challenge is that multiple projects, despite sharing some methodological and thematic similarities, may not always add up to more than the sum of their parts. In other words, they may not cohere around an identifiable policy frame or problem. Geographic diversity, the range of research questions, and the focus on particular contexts may make it difficult to identify what they have to offer policymakers. This relates to the challenge identified earlier, around research evidence not in itself providing compelling narratives that support particular changes of direction in policy and practice. Furthermore, a group of projects cannot claim to be speaking on behalf of the wider literature, and there will inevitably be evidence gaps. This was the case for the small groups of projects we worked with on the production and dissemination of synthesis products on issues ranging from women and conflict, disability and education to pension poverty (see Section 5 in this report). Another risk cited by all three groups was the dynamics of collaborative research uptake initiatives. Just because researchers and their partners come together around engagement with global movements or international and national policy processes, does not mean they are equal or share identical agendas. This echoes the findings of the research policy partnerships study undertaken by the Impact Initiative. Mutual agendas are in fact bounded by different institutional priorities and accountabilities (Georgalakis and Rose 2019). Larger institutions and universities may intentionally or unintentionally dominate cross-project collaborations by having easier access to policy elites. The demand for their research may be greater owing to perceived credibility, and researchers from high-income countries may benefit disproportionately from otherwise diverse partnerships. These issues relate to the broader

agenda around equitable research partnerships (Fransman and Newman 2019). For those working with GCACP there was particular concern around the politics of consortiums in which all actors seek to leave their mark.

Linked to this is the complexity of agreeing key messages and research highlights and their policy relevance across a diverse group of projects. There are considerable transaction costs involved in producing briefings and other research communications outputs and planning events and other interactions. Sometimes these initiatives can also make effective audience identification and dissemination difficult. Furthermore, some participants were concerned that the desire to join up research can lead to a loss of nuance and that policymakers may fail to understand the diversity of experiences represented in the body of evidence. For example, researchers collaborating around the Global Disability Summit benefited from broadening their engagement beyond a focus on education and disability. The inclusion of other projects focused more broadly on social inclusion made their offer more relevant to the Summit's broad agenda but at the cost of a very focused set of messages.

### 2.4.3 The power dimensions and causal assumptions underpinning pathways to impact

So far, we have seen that the learning arising from these three examples of seeking to engage research with research users heavily overlap. Issues relating to inclusivity and equity, capacity and resources, and producing actionable, relevant learning for decision makers all apply. However, these initiatives did have starkly different objectives and visions of how change can happen. Practitioners seeking learning that relates to these specific strategies need to consider power and causality. Each of these pathways represents an active choice to pursue a particular kind of research engagement in a particular context. This choice carries with it a set of assumptions, even where these were not explicitly identified. These assumptions have to be teased out from the narrative and subsequent discussions.

For those involved in collaborating with the GCACP, the underlying assumption seemed to be that global advocacy movements provide a valuable opportunity to leverage evidence for transformative change nationally and internationally (Roelen and Shephard 2020). The global advocates are perceived as crucial knowledge intermediaries whose own agendas

and understanding can be influenced. This implies that researchers see themselves as working on the periphery of policy processes and seek to influence the influencers. The goal is not to engage directly in policy but to strengthen or improve the evidence-informed advocacy of others. This strategy also places great value on global processes versus more grounded engagement with national or local structures. Their work certainly did seem to enjoy some success in this regard. Researchers became embedded in the GCACP, joining it at its inception and continuing to engage. Their success in persuading the GCACP to convene a major event framed around evidence and research was regarded as a form of impact. This is a systems-level intervention of sorts, focused on engaging with a network of actors working on a broad area of policy (child poverty) with multiple forms of evidence. The long-term benefits of building relationships include changes to the ways in which influential actors produce and use evidence.

This is subtly different from engagement with the UK and Kenya's hosting of the Global Disability Summit. Here we see deliberate activities to engage with a specific policy window that relates to bilateral government collaboration around international policy advocacy. These opportunities are rare, given that research timetables are often poorly matched to policy opportunities, which are unpredictable and largely shaped by others. The researchers were themselves organised into a loose coalition of collaborators, but they remained semi-insiders when it came to those they sought to influence. Through close engagement with the co-hosts, and thanks to the prior preparation of a Statement for Action, they successfully helped shape attention to inclusive education at the Summit. It also made it possible to successfully mobilise academics to participate in the event. This was a crucial development, given the way in which high-level development policy initiatives frequently focus on policy and civil society participation and mostly exclude academia. This relates to a wider set of issues around perceptions that academics are less focused on live policy discourse. Kingdon, among others, observes that epistemic communities, although periodically in great demand, are generally less connected to policy networks than advocates and campaigners (Kingdon 1984). As in the engagement with the GCACP, they were seeking to influence the influencers in as much as FCDO regarded the summit as part of its own global agenda setting. This activity also built the capacity of this group to engage in these issues, improved relationships with key policy

Through close engagement with the co-hosts, and thanks to the prior preparation of a Statement for Action, [researchers] successfully helped shape attention to inclusive education at the Summit. It also made it possible to successfully mobilise academics to participate in the event. This was a crucial development, given the way in which high-level development policy initiatives frequently focus on policy and civil society participation and mostly exclude academia.

actors, and provided the foundation for further policy engagement in this area, including a series of UK parliamentary events.

Those seeking to engage youth with Ethiopian policy had a more specific focus on a particular policy outcome at the national level. Through action research and participatory methods, they were successful in influencing government thinking around its new children and youth policy. Their pathway was grounded in an understanding of national context and local relationships with policy actors and civil society. Their work did result in shifts in perception among crucial actors in the Ministry of Women, Children and Youth. Ministry officials reported that their understanding of the lived experiences of marginalised youth was significantly improved and helped shape the subsequent drafting of their new policy. A further benefit of working directly with marginalised groups and national government was that it was a Southern-led, inclusive process that provided the opportunity for research participants to engage directly in the research uptake activities.

The risk of partnerships being dominated by powerful actors, which has been briefly covered in sub-section 2.4.2, was felt most keenly by those engaging in global advocacy. Compared to the big



INGOs with large institutional commitments in place, the research projects were mostly represented by individual academics. Their capacity to continuously engage with the coalition was limited. However, the area that relates much more to this case study than the others is around the perceived risk of researchers engaging in advocacy. This has been the source of some debate, and in the past some research donors have taken a fairly hostile view to the idea that academia can be more than an honest broker (Pittore *et al.* 2016). The argument is that researchers are neutral and non-political and that signing up to campaigns or supporting advocacy movements undermines their credibility. In Development Studies this has been widely challenged given the emphasis on social justice and equity. Nonetheless, we need to acknowledge that for some research communities, particularly outside of development, the notion of joining global advocacy coalitions and actively seeking to shape their agenda will be challenging. There is also the question of whether engagement in global forums is too far removed from where the action really is at the local and regional level. This brings us right back to the underlying assumptions that researchers, donors, and policy actors all make about how change happens and the role of evidence.

Engaging with government-hosted policy events carries its own set of challenges, which relate to power and authority. Much has been written about the difficulties of powerful actors setting the agenda and their ‘bounded rationality’, which limits their ability to engage with evidence that challenges their world view (Simon 1972; Cairney 2016). A decision has to be made on the degree to which these policy windows provide genuine opportunities to bring the voices of the marginalised into policy discourse and shape new understanding and evidence use. Policy networks do frequently seek to engage epistemic communities on issues such as climate change mitigation, infectious disease response or education policy reform. Although some research suggests this may be a reflection of a genuine coming together of agendas, critics worry that we tend to focus on examples where knowledge and evidence was pre-aligned with existing policy

directions (Löblová 2018; Dunlop 2017). Either way, it is important to consider the resource implications and the degree to which participation and representation may be able to shift the policy agenda. The likelihood of evidenced-informed instrumental policy change may be relatively low, but there can be opportunities to build awareness of a body of knowledge and strengthen relationships and networks. As an example, the collective engagement of grantholders in the lead up to the Global Disability Summit influenced the agenda of the Summit from the perspective of the focus on inclusive education. Alternatively, researchers and their partners can create their own opportunities, as in the case of both the GCACP and the engagement with Ethiopian policy actors. These attempts to shape agendas require longer-term commitment and solid partnerships spanning disciplines and sectors. Another example from the ESRC-FCDO-funded research portfolio is the successful attempt by an all-African research team to build the demand for knowledge from marginalised pastoralists despite initial hostility from the Ethiopian government (Mulugeta *et al.* 2019). They did not wait to be invited into this space but actively worked to shape it despite a challenging political environment.

The challenges and risks of engaging marginalised communities with national policy primarily related to issues of inclusivity and equity. Those involved in the engagement with Ethiopia’s formulation of a new national youth policy were concerned with ensuring that children and youth were not used in a tokenistic way. Furthermore, they highlighted the risk that this is not a homogeneous group (as sometimes imagined by policy actors) and vulnerable groups within wider communities, such as girls, people with disabilities, and refugees, might be excluded. This pathway also leaves researchers and their partners at the mercy of policy processes entirely outside their control. They cannot set the policy formulation timetable and will inevitably rely on the parts of government that want to engage with them. However, there is a deeper political issue around whether these government processes or policies represent the best pathway for instrumental policy change. What if genuine opportunities for the government to improve the lives of young people sit within the remit of a different ministry or the anticipated policy is never implemented? These risks are only increased in politically volatile contexts. Nonetheless, for social scientists committed to pathways that engage the lived experiences of marginalised groups in policy, a process that empowers communities may be just as important as any specific change in policy direction.

■ ■  
**These attempts to shape agendas require longer-term commitment and solid partnerships spanning disciplines and sectors.** ■ ■

## 2.5 Conclusions and recommendations

---

The choice of pathway or engagement strategy is largely driven by the way researchers and their partners in civil society, government, and communities understand how change happens. However, there are common areas that, irrespective of any real differences in intended outcomes, require particular attention. These include the need for evidence to provide actionable learning and connect with policy discourse and to be communicated in ways that are accessible to non-experts. Perhaps even more important is a networked approach that builds relationships over time, ensuring that research engagement is more of a conversation than a one-way communication. Wider bodies of knowledge and diverse perspectives were found to be crucial by both evidence users and intermediaries. This is perhaps the most important lesson for the design of knowledge brokerage programmes.

Our analysis recommends that researchers, and knowledge brokers supporting them, focus on some specific actions that can maximise the impact of research across different pathways:

- Knowledge brokers should focus on multiple studies relevant to a specific policy dilemma to generate new understandings among a community of researchers and research users to encourage better use of evidence. Identify projects that cohere around particular issues, even if they are geographically and methodologically diverse, and facilitate collective

engagement with policy and practice.

- Those seeking to exploit policy windows nationally and internationally need to balance the opportunity for high-level engagement with attempting to influence the policy frames of powerful actors. This can be achieved through an inclusive iterative planning process that identifies mutual objectives, considers power dynamics, and sustains continuous interaction between research and policy partners.
- Those focused on engaging global movements need to ensure they are committed to seeking to influence the influencers over the longer term, rather than engaging directly with decision makers on specific issues. Establish with your partners whether you share a similar understanding of how change happens and what success looks like and be prepared to play the long game.
- Engaging community perspectives in policy processes provides great opportunities for the empowerment of the marginalised. Consider the degree to which the process may be more impactful than any specific policy outcome and how you can overcome the barriers in your context to inclusivity and equity.

By being mindful of these recommendations we hope researchers, donors, and knowledge brokers can articulate and deliver more effective plans for supporting better lives through evidence-informed policy and practice.

## References

---

Boaz, A.; Fitzpatrick, S. and Shaw, B. (2009) 'Assessing the Impact of Research on Policy: A Literature Review', *Science and Public Policy* 36.4: 255–270

Cairney, P. (2016) *The Politics of Evidence-Based Policy Making*, London: Springer

Cairney, P.; Oliver, K. and Wellstead, A. (2016) 'To Bridge the Divide between Evidence and Policy: Reduce Ambiguity as Much as Uncertainty', *Public Administration Review* 76.3: 399–402, DOI: 10.1111/puar.12555 (accessed 19 November 2020)

Clark, L. and Apgar, J.M. (2019) *Unpacking the Impact of International Development: Resource Guide 1. Introduction to Theory of Change*, Brighton: Institute of Development Studies, University of Edinburgh and CDI (accessed 19 November 2020)

Clark, L. and Goodier, S. (2019) *The Delta of Impact: Mapping a Meta-Impact Pathway to Uncover Six Stepping Stones of Research Impact*, IDS Working Paper: Expert Analysis from the Impact Initiative, Brighton: Institute of Development Studies and the Impact Initiative (accessed 28 November 2020)

Cummings, S.; Kiwanuka, S.; Gillman, H. and Regeer, B. (2019) 'The Future of Knowledge Brokering: Perspectives from a Generational Framework of Knowledge Management for International Development', *Information Development* 35.5, DOI: 10.1177/0266666918800174 (accessed 25 November 2020)

Datta, A. (2018) *Strengthening Research Systems: Concepts, Actions and Actors*, K4D Helpdesk Report, Brighton: Institute of Development Studies

- Dunlop, C.A. (2017) 'The Irony of Epistemic Learning: Epistemic Communities, Policy Learning and the Case of Europe's Hormones Saga', *Policy and Society* 36.2: 215–232
- Farley-Ripple, E.N.; Oliver, K. and Boaz, A. (2020) 'Mapping the Community: Use of Research Evidence in Policy and Practice', *Humanities and Social Sciences Communications* 7.1: 83, DOI: 10.1057/s41599-020-00571-2 (accessed 25 November 2020)
- Fransman, J. (2018) 'Charting a Course to an Emerging Field of "Research Engagement Studies": A Conceptual Meta-Synthesis', *Research for All* 2.2: 185–229
- Fransman, J. and Newman, K. (2019) 'Rethinking Research Partnerships: Evidence and the Politics of Participation in Academic–INGO Research Partnerships for International Development', *Journal of International Development* 31.7: 523–544, DOI: org/10.1002/jid.3417 (accessed 9 December 2020)
- Georgalakis, J. (2020) *The Power of Partnerships: How to Maximise the Impact of Research for Development*, IDS Digital Essay, Brighton: Institute of Development Studies (accessed 20 October 2020)
- Georgalakis, J. (2016) 'Networks of academics help turn research into action', *The Guardian*, 5 April (accessed 20 October 2020)
- Georgalakis, J. and Rose, P. (2019) 'Introduction: Identifying the Qualities of Research–Policy Partnerships in International Development: A New Analytical Framework', *IDS Bulletin* 50.1: 1–20, DOI: 10.19088/1968-2019.103 (accessed 30 November 2020)
- Impact Initiative (ed.) (2019) *Rethinking Impact: Applying the Gender Lens*, Brighton: Institute of Development Studies (accessed 20 October 2020)
- Johnson, V.; Shephard K. and West, A. (2021) *Impact Lessons: Engaging Marginalised Communities in National Policy Formation*, Working Paper: Expert Analysis from the Impact Initiative, Brighton: Institute of Development Studies and the Impact Initiative
- Kingdon, J.W. (1984) *Agendas, Alternatives and Public Policies*, Boston: Little, Brown
- Löblová, O. (2018) 'When Epistemic Communities Fail: Exploring the Mechanism of Policy Influence', *Policy Studies Journal* 46.1: 160–189
- Mayne, R. et al. (2018) 'Using Evidence to Influence Policy: Oxfam's Experience', *Palgrave Communications* 4.1: 122, DOI: 10.1057/s41599-018-0176-7 (accessed 25 November 2020)
- Mulugeta, M.F.; Gebresenbet, F.; Tariku, Y. and Nettir, E. (2019) 'Fundamental Challenges in Academic–Government Partnership in Conflict Research in the Pastoral Lowlands of Ethiopia', *IDS Bulletin* 50.1, DOI: 10.19088/1968-2019.108 (accessed 28 November 2020)
- Pittore, K.; te Lintelo, D.J.; Georgalakis, J. and Mikindo, T. (2016) 'Choosing between Research Rigour or Support for Advocacy Movements, a False Dichotomy?', *IDS Bulletin* 47.6: 101–118, DOI: 10.19088/1968-2016.202 (accessed 25 November 2020)
- Punton, M. (2016) *How Can Capacity Development Promote Evidence-Informed Policy Making?: Literature Review for the Building Capacity to Use Research Evidence (BCURE) Programme*, Brighton and Hove: Itad (accessed 25 November 2020)
- Reed, M.S.; Bryce, R. and Machen, R. (2018) 'Pathways to Policy Impact: A New Approach for Planning and Evidencing Research Impact', *Evidence & Policy: A Journal of Research, Debate and Practice* 14.3: 431–458, DOI: 10.1332/174426418X15326967547242 (accessed 25 November 2020)
- Roelen, K. and Shephard, K. (2020) *Impact Lessons: Engaging Research with Global Movements*, Working Paper: Expert Analysis from the Impact Initiative, Brighton: Institute of Development Studies and the Impact Initiative, (accessed 26 November 2020)
- Simon, H.A. (1972) 'Theories of Bounded Rationality', *Decision and Organization* 1.1: 161–176
- Singal, N. (2020) *Working in Partnership with Multiple Stakeholders on Global Policy Processes: Disability and Inclusive Education*, Working Paper: Expert Analysis from the Impact Initiative, Cambridge: REAL Centre, University of Cambridge and the Impact Initiative (accessed 26 November 2020)

## Endnotes

---

\* This section was written by James Georgalakis, Director of Communications and Impact at the Institute of Development Studies (IDS), and Co-Director of the ESRC-FCDO Impact Initiative for International Development Research. Further editorial support was provided by Poppy Bardwell, Senior Project Support Officer (IDS) and Emma Greengrass, Editorial Coordinator (IDS).

† Illustration on page 16 © Jorge Martin 2021

1 Webinars focused on each of the three discreet pathways were held between April and September 2020. Each workshop was tailored to address issues relating to

the specific pathway being scrutinised. They were also designed to address in equal measure questions around: (1) The barriers to engaging research with potential users; (2) The added value of working across multiple research projects and partners; (3) The benefits and risks of the specific pathway.

All content is available under the Open Government Licence v.3.0, except where otherwise stated.

© Institute of Development Studies, 2021  
DOI: 10.35648/20.500.12413/11781/ii361