

Cover image

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FOREWORD

Knowledge and evidence for policy and practice matters in any context. But critical scrutiny of this process is particularly important in development contexts, where knowledge is often produced or brokered by external actors. This useful collection illustrates the varied and complex pathways through which research, knowledge or evidence may (or may not) be taken up by policymakers and practitioners. Drawing on examples of research into policy/practice relationships, from context-specific action research, to engaging with embedded, national policy institutions and global processes, the central message is that social relations rather than the ‘technical’ aspects of evidence are key to influence or uptake.

Such an argument should not surprise many in the large community of knowledge producers, brokers and users operating at the research–policy interface. Shifts in ideas about research for development have seen externally imposed models and theory-based policy prescriptions replaced by processes of participation and co-production, with a greater focus on local knowledge and engaging key stakeholders. Paradoxically, however, greater acknowledgement of the social process involved in translating evidence into practice seems now to be accompanied by a loss of social content in the very knowledge that is recognised as evidence. What constitutes good evidence is increasingly defined by a particular set of claims to scientific rigour; methodological advances have moved the field towards clinical-style trials and experimental methods, making claims to value-free objectivity at the expense of attention to messy, contested, complex social realities.

This tension plays out within many development organisations as demonstrated in this collection with its valuable insights from the likes of ESRC DFID funded research projects, MSF, Oxfam, Practical Action, the Overseas Development Institute, the African Population and Health Research Centre and Makerere University. A welcome commitment to rigorous evidence and data as a basis for programming is increasingly demonstrated by operational agencies such as UNICEF, and as shown in the chapter by Wessells *et al.* (this collection), this can have impressive results when the right actors are aligned. The risk, however, is that a relatively narrow or instrumental view of evidence of ‘what works’ for programming and for delivering results within a defined time frame is prioritised over other forms of knowledge, including research with less immediate application but which may nonetheless be relevant for framing and guiding policy choices, or to support scaling up, transferability and institutionalisation of interventions. All are of course necessary and complementary, but may compete for resources and space in the discourse. Currently the evidence-based, data-driven and results focus has the upper hand.

Research institutes within larger agencies, such as UNICEF's Innocenti Research Centre, can play an important role in countering the tendency towards this instrumental view of evidence. They demonstrate the challenge of the 'embedded' institution as raised by Sen *et al.* (this collection), attempting to balance a degree of autonomy and independence of research with the needs and demands of the organisation. Their 'embedded autonomy' is key to keeping alive the critical challenge function of research; bringing in fresh ideas and innovation, exposing blind spots and biases, or moderating pendulum swings in ideas and ideologies that may be driven by internal or external changes. Such centres are few and under threat – whether from tighter budgets or through the erosion of their autonomy – but their position within a trusted agency with country-level presence means that they can play a critical role in the eco-system of trusted development knowledge actors.

Within such large operational agencies, as in government bureaucracies, the skills and capacities needed to use research and knowledge effectively, to move from data-driven and evidence-based decision-making to using evidence to inform choices, are often limited. Investment in such research and policy analysis capacities – particularly within national institutions in the global South – is a critical element for creating an effective knowledge-policy interface but has been largely neglected by donors. This shift would recognise that evidence is only one among many inputs to decision-making; that policymakers need to make informed choices and act even when evidence is imperfect; and that co-production is not always possible with the actors who can take change forward. Brokers will rarely be neutral, but will bring a particular stance and allegiance, while policymakers will also invite research and evidence around particular positions. In particular, as illustrated in many of the following chapters, relationships of trust create the conditions in which evidence can inform and influence.

This publication is a timely contribution to the growing critique of the evidence- and results-based discourse of recent years, reminding us of how and by whom knowledge is constructed as evidence and used to frame and influence particular positions. In this respect, while challenging the narrative of neutral evidence that drives policy and practice, it points to how this construction of knowledge is in itself part of the process of social change.

Sarah Cook

Director, UNICEF Innocenti Research Centre, Florence



LESSONS FROM A DECADE'S SOCIAL SCIENCE RESEARCH ON DEVELOPMENT

THE IMPACT INITIATIVE

For International Development Research

The Impact Initiative for international development research, which co-funded this publication and commissioned several of the articles, aims to increase the uptake and impact of research from two research programmes jointly funded by the UK's Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC) and Department for International Development (DFID): the Joint Fund for Poverty Alleviation Research and the Raising Learning Outcomes in Education Systems Research Programme.

The ESRC–DFID Joint Fund for Poverty Alleviation

In 2005, DFID and the ESRC formed a strategic partnership to provide a joint funding scheme for international development research. The scheme has significantly enhanced the quality and impact of social science research, addressing the key international development goal of reducing poverty amongst the poorest countries and peoples of the world. In the past ten years the scheme has funded almost 150 research projects, held in 65 organisations.

The ESRC-DFID Raising Learning Outcomes in Education Systems programme

This programme is generating world-class, cutting-edge social science research that addresses key questions on learning outcomes within education systems in developing countries. The aim is to provide policymakers and practitioners with concrete ideas on how to improve learning, and understanding of how these will translate to their specific contexts and institutions. The 2014 call focused on 'Teacher Effectiveness' and the 2015 call focused on 'Challenging Contexts' – where education systems face particular challenges.

To explore the research and its policy and practice implications, or for more information about the Impact Initiative for international development research, go to: www.theimpactinitiative.net



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01

INTRODUCTION:

The social realities of knowledge
for development

James Georgalakis, Nasreen Jessani, Rose Oronje and Ben Ramalingam

ABSTRACT

This edited collection of peer-reviewed papers explores critical challenges faced by organisations and individuals involved in evidence-informed development through a diverse set of case studies and think-pieces. In this chapter we briefly set out the foundations of the trend in evidence-informed decision-making and reflect on a fast-changing development knowledge landscape. The dominant themes emerging from the contributions provide the structure for this chapter, including: building networks and partnerships; contextualisation of knowledge and power dynamics; and modes of knowledge brokerage. An analysis of these themes, and the respective roles of researchers, non-governmental organisations, large programmes and policy actors, suggests that a common thread running throughout is the importance of social relationships. We find that the social and interactive realities of mobilising knowledge comprise several layers: (i) individual and collective capacities, (ii) individual relationships, (iii) networks and group dynamics, and (iv) cultural norms and politics, which are all key to understanding how to make evidence really matter.

KEYWORDS

knowledge brokering, research communications, knowledge mobilisation, evidence into policy, evidence-informed decision-making, knowledge management, research uptake, research impact, complexity, development research, network analysis.

1. EVIDENCE-INFORMED DECISION-MAKING IN A POST-TRUTH WORLD

Given the current concerns around post-truth politics and fake news it is worth reminding ourselves that the trend for evidence-informed development expanded considerably over the past three decades. It emerged in the 1990s in health as an outgrowth of evidence-based medical practice and can now be found in virtually every area of development policy and practice. It has been the subject of a plethora of books, reports, case studies, journals, campaigns, networks, organisations, training programmes, frameworks, principles and methods. There are many different related disciplines, to evidence into policy, knowledge mobilisation, research uptake, impact evaluation, knowledge management and organisational learning. Despite all of this work, however, progress in how well evidence informs development policy and practice is at best uneven, and some commentators are suggesting it may become increasingly challenging (Economist 2016). As initiatives such as the RAPID (Research and Policy in Development) programme¹ have repeatedly found, evidence is necessary but seldom sufficient – and the most important factor in progressive change is political context. This is a familiar story, and reinforces the point made by the likes of Carol Weiss (1979) that the use of research in the sphere of public policy is an extraordinarily complex phenomenon and is only one part of a complicated process that also uses experience, political insight, pressure, social technologies and judgement. In international development, as with other spheres of public policy, decisions are likely to be pragmatic and shaped by their political and institutional circumstances rather than rational and determined exclusively by research. While it has been easy to share significant successes through impact awards and case studies, it has proved much harder to institutionalise any learning from these. Put simply, the development sector has continued to struggle to repeat the trick of turning research into action.

This challenge is playing out in a rapidly shifting development landscape, which has implications for how knowledge is thought about, accessed and used. Flows of information are becoming increasingly fragmented and unpredictable, with a larger and more diverse group of actors influencing policy and public debates. Digital technologies are fundamentally altering access to a vast reservoir of evidence and data, making the challenge less one of collecting evidence than one of selecting it. Researchers, practitioners, donors and policy actors (and their institutions) are competing with many different kinds of stakeholders, often with conflicting interests and agendas. Paradoxically, this growing complexity is placing ever-greater pressure on scientists and development agencies to ‘have the answer’ and to respond more effectively to policy agendas in ways that demonstrate their tangible impact. Donors too are a key driver of this discourse as demonstrated by the Economic and Social Research Council’s (ESRC) head of international development, Craig Bardsley, in Chapter 12 of this collection. There is clearly a great need and energy spanning academics and practitioners on the lessons to be learned from turning evidence into practice within such a complex setting.

The seed for this publication was planted at the Research Uptake Symposium and Training Exchange – ResUp MeetUp – funded by the UK Department for International Development (DFID) that took place in Nairobi in February 2015.² It was there that practitioners came together to break down and explore some of the challenges and successes that they have grappled with over the last decade. Later that year, the ESRC and DFID-funded Impact Initiative for international development research³ was launched to support grantees from the ten-year-old Joint Fund for Poverty Alleviation and the newer Raising Learning Outcomes in Education Systems programme, to collaborate and share knowledge to achieve impact. During a conference in South Africa where learning was shared between ESRC DFID research grant-holders it quickly became apparent that there were valuable stories to be shared and which needed to be better understood by a wide constituency of research to policy actors (Impact Initiative 2016). This collection, which has been co-funded by the ESRC DFID Partnership and IDS, is not an attempt to provide generalisable tools. Such efforts tend to focus on the process of evidence-informed policy as a largely technical and technocratic issue. Instead, we hope that it can in some small way contribute to new frameworks for understanding and navigating these complex spaces.

The reader will note the sheer diversity of viewpoints in this volume, from the knowledge management methodology that has been pioneered and evolved by Practical Action, to the programme-level support for maximising research impact of the Evidence and Policy Group to the research uptake approaches of ESRC DFID Joint Fund grant-holders. It reflects the multidisciplinary nature of the editorial team who are themselves a mixture of Southern and Northern located practitioners and academics. Despite this breadth of viewpoints, or perhaps because of it, some common themes do emerge. These are all in one way or another related to the roles and capacities of knowledge brokers⁴ as social actors. Far from being restricted to the perspective of academic producers or co-producers of knowledge, these case studies and think-pieces provide a broader analysis of what makes an effective broker in complex knowledge ecosystems. Concepts around the diverse roles of academics are already well served by the literature. Researchers acting as mediators between different groups, advocates and catalysts for social change has been observed particularly in programmes focused on citizenship and accountability (Benequista and Wheeler 2012). However, the case studies in this collection remind us that scholars do not have the monopoly on the generation and sharing of development knowledge. The key areas that emerge relate to networks and partnerships, contextualisation of knowledge, and modes of brokerage. In this chapter we explore each in turn.

What becomes clear as we do so is that there is a deeper set of layers to the social realities of knowledge for development. These social factors are: (i) The capacity of individuals and organisations in terms of knowledge and skills to engage in policy processes; (ii) Individual relationships that facilitate influence and knowledge brokerage; (iii) Networked relationships and group dynamics that connect up the supply of knowledge with the demand for it; and (iv) Social and political context, culture and norms.

2. RESEARCH PARTNERSHIP AND NETWORKS

Understanding the connections, or lack of them, between research knowledge and policy and practice is key to understanding how to make evidence matter. The links are deeply opaque at the best of times and rooted in power (Lukes 1974) – visible, hidden and invisible (Gaventa 2006). Gita Sen *et al.*, in their example of the Fostering Knowledge Implementation Links Project (FKILP) describes the central importance of the ‘policy continuum’ in bringing together health researchers with mid-level health programme managers in Karnataka, India (Chapter 3). The success of this project resided on a deliberate attempt to ‘move beyond a unidirectional approach to knowledge transfer and uptake’. FKILP attempted to break down what they termed ‘impermeable barriers’ between researchers and policymakers. These barriers were largely overcome by creating new networks that included in their membership key individuals.

Meanwhile, in their analysis of ESRC DFID funded research in Kenya and South Africa on tackling gender inequalities in education and poverty reduction strategies, Amy North *et al.*, identify a neglected ‘middle space’ (Chapter 4). Low-ranking bureaucrats, school governing bodies and non-governmental organisation (NGO) workers were a neglected group between beneficiaries and national government when it came to the implementation of the Millennium Development Goals. The process for addressing this research-to-policy gap involved the well-established use of action research (Oswald 2016), which facilitated the co-production of knowledge with key stakeholder groups. The research team increasingly distinguished between ‘impact with’ whereby two-way dialogues and engaged scholarship directly led to changes in understanding and practice and ‘impact for/on’ associated with the more supply-driven passive and unilateral forms of knowledge translation which they observed can sometimes indirectly shift attitudes. The key difference in both Sen’s and North’s networked approach to engaged research to a more top-down research uptake strategy is above all else a focus on building key individual relationships. This individualised approach is not immediately obvious if one looks only at the big formal networks themselves. It represents a distinct layer of the social life of knowledge exchange, a concept we will return to later.

Co-production of research is also a major area of learning for Pamela Juma *et al.*, in their case study on the design and implementation of community health strategy in Kenya (Chapter 6). Locally generated evidence was successfully contextualised and incorporated into the resulting strategy primarily due to engagement of key decision-makers and managers as co-investigators in the study from the very beginning. Similar to the previous examples, this is a personal affair driven by individual champions. However, perhaps because of this, one of the biggest challenges faced was the relative lack of knowledge and skills of programme-level decision-makers to undertake research-to-policy activities such as synthesising knowledge and contextualising evidence. These intermediaries had a crucial role to play, but in many cases the human resources required were absent. This links to another

layer of social reality – the importance of individual capacity, both in terms of research methods training as well as knowledge brokerage capability.

When Sen *et al.* write about weak channels of communication, poor research communications skills are not the primary concern. It has been widely understood for some time now that research uptake is a process and not an event that hinges on the dissemination of a product (Lomas 1997). It is weaknesses in trust, relationships and networks that are emphasised by Sen as the key barriers to success. This somewhat contradicts much of the impact guidance from donors (DFID 2016), which seems to place the greatest importance on research communications. Meanwhile, Rhona Mijumbi-Deve *et al.* identified trust levels, perceived credibility and the ability of policymakers to engage meaningfully as key concerns when establishing a knowledge translation platform for community health policy in Uganda (Chapter 10). In a very different context Toby Milner sets out lessons from Practical Action's knowledge management work and looks at deeper personal and organisational cultural and capacity issues that relate to NGO-based activists struggling to adapt to the slower more reflective process of knowledge exchange and learning (Chapter 7). Again the key issue here seems to be individual capacity to behave as an effective actor in this largely social process.

3. THE CONTEXTUALISATION OF RESEARCH AND KNOWLEDGE

The process of contextualisation of knowledge is well served by the literature on this subject (Nutley, Walter and Davies 2007) and in a dizzying array of tool kits and guides. What is most striking about the treatment of this subject in this collection is that in almost all of the case studies contextualising knowledge hinges on the navigation of power dynamics that affect the demand for research evidence. In describing his project's significance success in influencing national policy in Sierra Leone to support vulnerable children, ESRC DFID grant-holder Mike Wessells argues that action research methodology would have been inadequate without the pivotal role played by UNICEF (Wessells *et al.* Chapter 5). What he describes is a process that incorporates both a networked approach to social relations and the very individualised dimension of a key personal relationship. It was the research team's close working relationship with one particular UNICEF staff member that enabled them to navigate the tricky domestic political territory. This is contextualisation built on personal relationships and not on generic stakeholder mapping exercises conducted in workshops. Or as Wessells puts it: 'researchers who want to have a significant impact on policy should identify and cultivate a positive relationship with a well-positioned person who can serve as both a power broker and a trusted adviser'.

Similarly, while navigating the challenges of being a group of 'outsiders' investigating inequalities in health systems, North *et al.* were able to conduct far more engaging interviews with individuals they had built personal relationships with. We see again and again this more individual relations layer

of knowledge production and sharing intertwined with the group dynamics of the networked layer. Hence, Milner describes Practical Action's knowledge sharing approach in Nepal, which constitutes sending social mobilisers into community resource centres to meet regularly with the same group of locals to identify specific challenges they face. Having established these personal relationships and earned their trust they then serve as intermediaries linking local citizens with local officials such as water and sanitation officers to further explore their concerns.

However, getting the balance right between the focus on individual relationships and the more formal networked approach is not straightforward. Oxfam's Duncan Green, author of *How Change Happens* (Green 2016), in his think-piece about the value of NGO and academic partnerships, warns against too much emphasis on engagement with a very small number of key individuals (Chapter 2). He points out that whole systems have to be tackled, sometimes making it necessary to build relationships with dozens of officials, advisers and gatekeepers to influence a minister to take a position on just one policy recommendation. Whether one places more emphasis on key individuals or on larger groups and networks, these are all still social interactions.

In contrast to these more socially orientated approaches to supporting evidence-informed policy processes, another issue that emerged is the use of information and communications technologies (ICTs) to mobilise knowledge, or at least make it more accessible (Gregson, Brownlee, Playforth and Bimbe 2015). It will come as no surprise that Practical Action values highly open knowledge approaches, free sharing of data and digital knowledge curation as in the case of the Quinea project in Peru. Sen on FKILP and Mijumbi-Deve in Uganda also emphasise the value in using repositories and establishing digital infrastructure for institutional and programmatic knowledge sharing. However, the technology is also dependent on human resource capacity, and many of our cases reiterate the relative lack of investment in knowledge sharing and policy analysis skills. This is the capacity of individuals reasserting itself as a key social factor in the open sharing of knowledge, which is frequently framed as a wholly technical issue.

4. | MODES OF BROKERING KNOWLEDGE

Given the overarching emphasis on brokerage running throughout this collection it is worth briefly setting out the manifestations of this activity. Brokering as a concept is covered in wide-ranging literature (Ward, House and Hamer 2009) and there is no space here to get too lost in the various conceptual frameworks and definitions. What stands out from our case studies are three distinguishable modes of delivery of research to policy and practice intermediary behaviour: (1) Direct brokering, (2) Indirect brokering and convening, and (3) Embedded knowledge gateways.

Direct brokering of evidence and learning is frequently referred to but framed in very different ways by different actors. For NGOs such as Practical Action

it is absolutely clear that this is seen as part of an advocacy process. They are proud of their evidence-based approach to advocacy, which, it is claimed, delivers instrumental impacts on policy and practice. In contrast, academics are reticent to use such language and frequently argue that what they do is different (Datta 2012).

Despite this tension between brokering as policy advocacy and as a more benign form of knowledge exchange, the distinction can be subject to debate (Pittore, te Lintelo, Georgalakis and Mikindo 2017). It is significant that few of our authors seem to try to persuade us that research production and mobilisation is value free. Wessells, for example, seems to demonstrate a research rigour not born out of neutrality in its analysis but out of a connectivity to political context. When it comes to an area such as child protection, or any other complex social development issue, there will often be a set of values driving those who produce and commission research particularly when spending significant time in the field (Coffey 1999). Therefore, while Wessells is keen to reiterate that direct lobbying was not his team's role, he does describe a process built on relationships where he was very directly involved in the brokering process. Likewise, those research networks involved in developing a community-based health-care strategy in Kenya are directly involved in a policy formulation process along with the politicians and sector decision-makers. Juma *et al.* even emphasise the importance of researchers exploiting policy windows in moving forward this process. These again are processes driven by social (and political) realities that include the capacity of individuals, culture and norms around the role of researchers and the values they hold and the wider networks to which they and knowledge intermediaries belong.

When it comes to understandings around the role of knowledge intermediaries it is not just concerns around scholars as advocates that drives decisions around channels of communication. As Sen and Venis point out, the choice of the direct broker is a key strategic decision. Sen writes about the choice of the Indian Institute of Management Bangalore (IIMB) as the key knowledge broker for the academic and policy communities involved with the project. She argues that the IIMB's academic reputation and perceived credibility supported its legitimacy. In a very different context Sarah Venis *et al.* describe the challenges of Médecins Sans Frontières/Doctors Without Borders around bridging the medical research and academic work supposedly feeding into their programmes with local innovation (Chapter 8). There was no obvious means of channelling or brokering new knowledge between these groups, and vital new understandings such as correct storage of insulin simply did not get translated into new practice on the ground. In the end, brokerage was institutionalised through new scientific days that brought researchers and innovators together in a safe space for mutual learning. These are the organisational cultural contexts and social norms that shape knowledge systems.

Danielle Doughman *et al.* highlight another form of direct brokerage that involved providing technical assistance to decision-makers through synthesis and distilling of long technical documents into short and easy to understand formats (Chapter 11). They argue that 'it was not enough to include the Africa

constituencies in the decision-making structures of the Global Fund, because without technical support these constituencies were unable to effectively contribute to the Fund's decisions and programmes'. The case study describes how technical support contributed to strengthening the voice of African constituencies in Global Fund decision-making processes and increased the interest of the African constituencies in using evidence in making their positions and other contributions to the global decision-making processes.

Indirect brokerage has also been covered in a number of the cases studies. One of the most notable examples comes from the Evidence and Policy Group (EPG)⁵ based at the Overseas Development Institute tasked with promoting ESRC DFID growth research (Chapter 9). Louise Shaxson sets out the different styles of brokerage her team deliver including: information intermediary, knowledge translator, knowledge broker and innovation broker (Fisher 2011). It is this last category, she argues, that has been most successful. Due to the sheer diversity of the research they support it has proven more productive to focus on facilitation and capacity building. This is about supporting new behaviours and skills and convening networks and events in order to improve connectivity and support mutual learning. She goes as far as to say that you must 'facilitate not interpolate'. Whether one sees 'innovation brokering' as entirely distinct from direct brokering, the emphasis is still on relationships. In the case of EPG, this means building and maintaining relationships between the researchers and between key EPG staff and DFID and ESRC as well as between research producers, intermediaries and users. Again we need to recognise that there are two distinct layers here: one focused on formal and informal networks, and another on individual relationships.

The final mode of brokering that is presented across a number of our chapters is the 'embedded gateway' (Green and Milner, this collection). Green argues that universities in particular have historically underinvested in specialist knowledge brokers or given them low status and insecure contracts and a lack of career pathways. This certainly sounds a familiar story to those of us who have been trying to nurture these capacities in research-based organisations over the past few years. However, dedicated demand-driven brokerage services do exist at both the institutional and programmatic level. This includes knowledge services such as the Governance and Social Development Resource Centre⁶ and other help-desk and learning programmes designed to support development agencies' use of evidence. Institutional-level knowledge brokerage is also explored by Mijumbi-Deve, whose primary concern is a chronic underinvestment in knowledge translation services in low- or middle-income countries. However, even these institutional-level knowledge services have a strong social element. The analysis of REACH PI clearly identifies the value of non-technical services such as building trust between key stakeholders, supporting evidence-use behaviours and building relationships that allow for the commitment to evidence-based policy to steadily grow. This is collective capacity to build and maintain social networks that support institutional-level commitments to evidence use.

5.1 CONCLUSION

If there is one key message that you take away from this collection we hope it will be that research to policy processes are largely social. Technical capacities matter, of course, but not nearly as much as the social factors. The case for the primary importance of networks and partnerships and critical bodies of knowledge has been made many times (Georgalakis 2016). The concept of researchers as social actors is also well established, especially in the field of research communications (Benequista and Wheeler 2012) and more broadly (Nutley, Walter and Davies 2009). Furthermore, while individual research projects may sometimes, in the longer term and in indirect ways, impact on the lives of people in low- and middle-income countries, most medium- to long-term impacts arise from long-term bodies of knowledge mobilised by research-to-policy collaborations such as in the case of the award-winning Ebola Response Anthropology Platform.⁷ The case studies and personal perspectives in this collection provide a window into the research-to-policy nexus, which suggests that the impact of evidence on development policy and practice is a social and interactive process built on personal relationships and social networks. The mobilisation of research-based knowledge hinges on multifaceted blends of individual and organisational capacity to engage, key individual relationships, group dynamics, culture, politics and social norms.

It would require social network analysis in most cases to really understand research-to-policy processes and how things actually get done. In organisational knowledge management in the private and public sectors the significance of informal social networks has long been recognised (Allen, James and Gamlen 2007), and in development it has been well documented (Jessani, Boulay and Bennett 2014). Despite this social reality we do not organise or fund our institutions, whether university faculties, NGOs or consultancies, to nurture this social use of science. Academics often move on taking their contacts with them. INGOs flip-flop between policy and programme priorities (Green, Chapter 2) and donors struggle to fund cross-sector collaborations (Bardsley, Chapter 12). This is a huge contrast to the private sector: lobbying firms send a junior staffer to every meeting with the key client to ensure continuity; the hedge fund invests heavily in developing key relationships; and the supermarket buyer carefully establishes close personal relationships with suppliers. These examples may sound incongruous with the development sector but in the health sector at least there are examples of strategies for utilising relationships to leverage the evidence-to-policy interface.

We hope that this collection provides a useful springboard from which to validate these concepts with existing methodologies and literature before exploring new methods for navigating complexity and the social realities of evidence. An understanding of knowledge systems as fundamentally social has profound implications for the current predominance of technical approaches to evidence-informed development. Unless we can be more cognisant of these social realities when designing and implementing programmes, we will never escape the general feeling of frustration shared by donors, researchers and practitioners that repeating the trick of turning evidence into action is so hard.

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ENDNOTES

- 1 Research and Policy in Development (RAPID) based at the Overseas Development Institute (ODI) works at the interface between knowledge, policy and practice. It seeks to improve the integration of local knowledge and research-based evidence into policy-making. www.odi.org/sites/odi.org.uk/files/about_research_and_policy_in_development_-_brochure_0.pdf.
- 2 The ResUp MeetUp community was designed to help research uptake and communication professionals keep up-to-date with this rapidly evolving field. ResUp convened a two-day Symposium to explore emerging issues to develop a deeper understanding of the concept of 'research uptake'. This was followed by a two-day Training Exchange. www.resupmeetup.net.
- 3 The Impact Initiative for International Development Research is a four year programme (2015–19) that aims to increase the uptake and impact of research from two research programmes jointly funded by the UK's ESRC and DFID: the Joint Fund for Poverty Alleviation Research and the Raising Learning Outcomes in Education Systems Research Programme. The Initiative is led by a partnership between the University of Cambridge's Research for Equitable Access and Learning Centre (REAL) and the Institute of Development Studies (IDS) at the University of Sussex. www.theimpactinitiative.net.
- 4 'A knowledge broker is an intermediary (an organization or a person), that aims to develop relationships and networks with, among, and between producers and users of knowledge by providing linkages, knowledge sources, and in some cases knowledge itself, (e.g. technical know-how, market insights, research evidence) to organizations in its network. While the exact role and function of knowledge brokers are conceptualized and operationalized differently in various sectors and settings, a key feature appears to be the facilitation of knowledge exchange or sharing between and among various stakeholders, including researchers, practitioners, and policy makers' (Wikipedia, accessed 24 January 2017).
- 5 Evidence and Policy Group (2011–16) of the DFID ESRC Growth Research Programme, supports academics to improve the impact of their work. <http://degrp.squarespace.com>.
- 6 GSDRC has provided knowledge services on demand and online since 2005. A specialist research team supports a range of international development agencies, synthesising the latest evidence and expert thinking to inform policy and practice. Clients have included: DFID, the Australian Government, the European Union, the OECD, the World Bank, and UNDP. www.gsdr.org.
- 7 The Ebola Response Anthropology Platform (ERAP) and the related Ebola: lessons for development initiatives led by Professor Melissa Leach at the Institute of Development Studies (IDS) won the prestigious Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC) Outstanding International Impact Prize for their rapid and effective response during the epidemic. www.esrc.ac.uk/news-events-and-publications/news/news-items/ebola-crisis-team-wins-award-for-lifesaving-advice.





02

THE NGO-ACADEMIA INTERFACE:

Realising the shared potential*

Duncan Green



ABSTRACT

The case for partnership between international non-governmental organisations (INGOs) and academia for advancing development knowledge is strong and well-rehearsed. INGOs bring presence on the ground – through their own operations or long-term local partnerships – and communication and advocacy skills (which are not always academics' strong point). Academia contributes research skills and credibility, and a long-term reflective lens and systemic perspective that the more frenetic forms of operational work and activism often lack. In practice, however, such partnerships have proven remarkably difficult, partly because, if anything, INGOs and academia are too complementary – there is so little overlap between their respective worlds that it is often difficult to find ways to work together. This think-piece begins by outlining how each of the two camps thinks about and applies research before discussing some of the obstacles to cooperation. It concludes with suggestions for how to overcome such obstacles, setting out ideas for consideration by NGOs, academics and funders.

KEYWORDS

evidence, partnership, international development, non-governmental-organisation, international charity, INGO, research partnership, policy engagement.

BIOGRAPHY

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1. DIVIDED BY A COMMON LANGUAGE? HOW DO INGOs AND ACADEMICS SEE RESEARCH?

Whether you are an international non-governmental organisation (INGO) or an academic, research is more than simply the design of studies, the gathering of data or the writing up and dissemination of results. It is also about a wide range of associated activities – synthesising knowledge, bridging different audiences, co-creating and renewing ideas, forging new networks and relationships, building convincing stories and meanings, and creating and holding the space for public policy debate.

But there are also considerable differences. Even the word ‘research’ means different things to NGOs and academics. What NGOs do is often better viewed as evidence-based narrative than as primary research. Two-handed academics (‘on the one hand; on the other’) get frustrated with one-handed (‘finger wagging’) activists and vice versa. This easily tips over into mutual disrespect and finger pointing (if the metaphor isn’t getting over-stretched).

INGOs are seldom interested in knowledge for its own sake, but as a vehicle to improve the impact of their programmes and advocacy in three broad areas: tactical research (reactive to broader events and policy agendas); formative research (setting new agendas and directions); and evaluative research (monitoring and evaluation, learning lessons).

But INGOs have a mixed record in such research: at its best it is rooted in real life, the experiences of partners and communities. From my own experience, Oxfam’s work with IDS on the impact of the global financial crisis (Green, King and Miller-Dawkins 2010) or food prices (Scott-Villiers, Chisholm, Wanjiku Kelbert and Hossain 2016) stands out. INGOs have been pioneers on participatory methods; the research packs a punch both in content and in the ability of INGO media teams to make a media splash that gets it noticed. And they have a global constituency and reach that many academic researchers can only dream of.

However, INGO research is often stronger on qualitative methods than quantitative. While some of the monitoring and evaluation work in some organisations is cutting edge, other areas are sometimes a little slapdash in their methodology. Weak systems of peer review (and some confusion over what constitutes a ‘peer’) undermine credibility, while research suffers from short INGO attention spans, with few examples of research building up over years.

2. HOW DO ACADEMICS SEE RESEARCH?

Academics are often torn between idealism and pragmatism, juggling what they would like research to be with the daily pressures and incentives of university and research institutional set-up and incentives. Most academic researchers, at least in the social sciences, are interested in development issues and are very concerned that their research should engage with the public and make a difference. Building up a store of usable dynamic knowledge is a vital asset for any society – a genuine public good. However, funding for research is increasingly competitive, pressuring many researchers to adopt consultancy-style approaches to their work and risking a focus on the urgent over the important, and on donor interests and priorities over actual knowledge needs.

Academics tend to be interested in research as something to be done carefully and well, and in line with wider disciplinary debates and traditions. The reality of research is about chipping away at a coal face – it's important, but between breakthroughs it can be mundane, and you often do not know what you are going to find, or when. Few of the discoveries that have transformed development have been planned and intentional.

But academic incentives, increasingly influenced by research funding schemes such as the UK's Research Excellence Framework, require and reward evidence of 'impact' upon the world. Many academics are encouraged by such pressures to improve relevance and engagement, even if they object to overly simplistic ideas of 'impact'. The challenge is to be able to marry such pressures with the approach to furthering knowledge in an open-ended and exploratory way.

These differences in how research is understood are not superficial. They have their origins in the different organisational, professional and cultural systems that underpin the work of INGOs and academics. We can see these differences manifested in incentives, timescales, priorities and capacities (see Box 1).

THE OBSTACLES TO COLLABORATION

Impact versus publication. While funding incentives push academics towards collaboration with INGOs and other actors able to deliver the elusive ‘impact’, other disciplinary and career pressures appear to push in the opposite direction. The rather closed nature of academia’s epistemic communities, buttressed by shared and often exclusive language and common assumptions, deters would-be collaborators, while the pressure to publish in peer-reviewed journals and acquire a reputation within a given discipline shifts incentives away from collaboration with ‘outsiders’.

Urgency versus wait and see. INGOs’ focus is urgent, immediate and often in response to events. They prefer moving quickly and loudly – reaching as many people as possible, and influencing them – without necessarily having time for slower forms of academic engagement. Academics work to a different rhythm, both in terms of the issues and in the way they respond to them. When Oxfam won some research funding with the Institute of Development Studies to explore food price volatility (Scott-Villiers *et al.* 2016), it was top of our advocacy agenda, but food prices calmed down, the campaigns spotlight moved on, and the resulting research, though interesting, struggled to stay connected to Oxfam’s evolving agenda.

For small NGOs, whether national or international, research support is absent when it is most needed – during the design and implementation of projects. Instead, researchers often only show up when the organisation has developed some ‘good practice’ and then only to document the outcomes.

Status quo versus originality. INGOs do need good research to tell them what is going well or badly, what they need to do more of, less of etc. But also (and increasingly) they need targeted research to help prove to donors that they are value for money. This often means validating the status quo. Researchers on the other hand may be looking to find a new angle, move a debate on and make a name for themselves among their peers. These agendas can occasionally be complementary, but in practice often lead to tension, with INGOs experiencing researchers as unhealthily preoccupied with ‘taking down’ success stories and attacking aid agencies’ performance and legitimacy, often on the flimsiest of evidence (Green 2012).

Thinking versus talking. Research is very underfunded in INGOs and is distributed across organisations. In Oxfam GB, the policy research team behind its high-profile research papers on inequality for Davos (see, for example, Oxfam 2016), and other impressive work, has eight staff. By contrast, the Oxfam Head of Research, Irene Guijt, has calculated that, countries belonging to the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development are now home to 5.5 million full-time academics.² There are lots of smart researchers working elsewhere within Oxfam – on programme monitoring, evaluation, learning, or doing research as part of their advocacy roles – but even then, by one calculation, across the whole of Oxfam International research staff come to just 7 per cent of communications staff (a cynic might therefore say we prize talking 14 times more than thinking). Hardly surprising, then, that it is really hard for INGOs to engage with academics, even if it’s just to organise meetings to share ideas and explore common interests.

3. HOW DO INGOS AND ACADEMICS INFLUENCE POLICY AND PRACTICE?

The avowed purpose of much research activity by both academics and INGOs is to influence decision-making by policymakers and practitioners. But the evidence for effectiveness of these efforts is remarkably thin, in terms of both the supply of influential research and the demand for it. As INASP has found:

There is a shortage of evidence on policy makers' actual capacity to use research evidence and there is even less evidence on effective strategies to build policy makers' capacity. Furthermore, many presentations highlighted the insidious effect of corruption on use of evidence in policy making processes. Research-evidence is often used opportunistically to back up pre-existing political decisions/opinions (confirmation bias) (Newman, Capillo, Famurewa, Nath and Siyanbola 2013).

The evidence that does exist is not always encouraging. According to a report by the Carnegie UK Trust:

Evidence from university research was the most trusted (always or usually trusted by 68% of respondents), but one of the least-used sources of evidence (frequently used by only 35% of respondents). Instead, evidence tended to be gleaned from the internet and the media, even though these sources were much less trusted. Third-sector organisations' research (and especially that of think tanks) was less trusted than university research, but their outputs were more likely to be read than those from academia (Shucksmith 2016).

Public officials value individual contacts and reputations – 'experts' who can advise, rather than documents to plough through in search of useful tidbits. As one former civil servant comments:

we rarely used academic work, mainly because (1) we were not aware of it, (2) turgid writing (that is very off-putting to people who are under severe time pressure), or (3) the failure of the research to take into account real world issues like political constraints, budgets, etc so that any conclusions lacked credibility or usefulness (Robin Ford, comment on blog, Green 2016a).

Some universities are taking steps to close this academic–policymaker divide by involving policymakers in the governance of research institutes and programmes (e.g. in honorary positions, or on advisory boards and reference groups). There is also growing interest among policymakers for using academics as a source of active learning. In the Philippines, for example, two of the main universities have set up executive courses for the new (and often younger) members of parliament (MPs) to learn from experienced scholars. These are MPs that may have had little experience in politics and policymaking, and the courses prepare them for their new role.

When the courses started, the new MPs were reluctant to participate or did not want the media to know, as they feared participating in the courses would be seen as an admission of ignorance. With time, however, these courses have become almost fashionable, with new MPs eagerly publicising their award certificates as a statement of accomplishment.

4. THE IMPLICATIONS OF SYSTEMS THINKING

Some of the problems that arise in the academic–INGO interface stem from overly linear approaches to what is in effect an ideas and knowledge ecosystem. In such contexts, systems thinking can help identify bottlenecks and suggest possible ways forward.

4.1 Getting beyond supply and demand to convening and brokering

Supply-driven is the norm in development research – ‘experts’ churning out policy papers, briefings, books, blogs etc. Being truly demand-driven is hard even to imagine – an NGO or university department submitting themselves to a public poll on what should be researched? But increasingly in areas such as governance or value chains, we try and move beyond both supply and demand to a convening/brokering role, bringing together different ‘unusual suspects’ – what would that look like in research? Action research, with an agenda that emerges from an interaction between communities and researchers? Natural science seems further ahead on this point: when the Dutch National Research Agenda ran a nationwide citizen survey of research questions they wanted science to look at, 12,000 questions were submitted and clustered into 140 questions, under seven or eight themes. To the organisers’ surprise, many citizens asked quite deep questions.³

Most studies identify a need for ‘knowledge brokers’ not only to bridge the gap between the realms of science and policy, but also to synthesise and transform evidence into an effective and usable form for policy and practice, through a process akin to alchemy. An essential feature of knowledge brokers is that they understand the cultures of both worlds. Often, this role is performed by third-sector organisations of various types (from lobbyists to thinktanks to respected research funders). Some academics can transcend this divide. A few universities employ specialist knowledge brokers, but their long-term effectiveness is often constrained by low status, insecure contracts and lack of career pathways. Whoever plays this crucial intermediary role, it appears that it is currently under-resourced within and beyond the university system. In the development sector, the nearest thing to an embedded gateway is the Governance and Social Development Resource Centre (GSDRC),⁴ run by Birmingham University and IDS and largely funded by the Department for International Development. It conducts literature and evidence reviews on a range of topics, drawing evidence from both academic literature and non-academic institutions.

4.2 Critical junctures

Anyone involved in advocacy knows that the openness of policymakers to new ideas is episodic, and linked to things such as changes of administration, scandals, crises and failures, known in the political science literature as critical junctures. Currently, thinktanks are reasonably good at responding to the windows of opportunity presented by such moments, updating and repackaging previous research for newly attentive policymakers or providing rapid informed commentary (see, e.g. on Brexit, Collin and Juden 2016; ODI 2016). In contrast, universities are often much more sluggish, trapped by the long cycle of research and dissemination, and with few incentives to drop or adapt existing work to respond to new opportunities. What would need to change in terms of incentives or leadership to make universities as agile as thinktanks?

4.3 Precedents: history and positive deviance

The development community spends little time thinking about what has already worked, either historically or today. Research could really help fill in historical gaps, whether on campaigns (Green 2015a) or redistribution (Green 2015b). It also makes little use of ‘positive deviance’ approaches, which identify positive outliers: where good things are already happening in the system, for example identifying and studying villages with lower than average rates of maternal mortality and then trying to find out why.⁵

4.4 Feedback, adaptation and course correction

In systems, initial interventions are likely to have to be tweaked or totally overhauled in light of feedback from experience or events. Yet both academics and INGOs still portray their research papers as tablets of stone – the last word on any given topic. Digital technology allows us to make them all ‘living documents’, subject to periodic revision. At the very least, publishing drafts of all papers for comments both improves quality and builds bridges between researchers, practitioners and policymakers, as the author has discovered on numerous occasions.

4.5 Engage with whole systems not just individuals

Reflecting on Oxfam’s Make Trade Fair campaign in the early 2000s, Muthoni Muriu concluded:

you need to engage different policy makers, on different aspects of the same policy, sometimes in different geographies, to create the sort of critical mass that will drive conversation and hopefully decisions in the desired direction. One or two ‘validation’ workshops or conference won’t do it. Our experience... was that we needed to speak with technocrats in the Ministries of Agriculture, Trade, Planning and Foreign affairs, relevant embassy trade advisers (and ambassadors) in Brussels and Geneva; trusted policy institutions; random academics working for CIDA/SIDA/DFID etc who had connections with said ministries; equally random World Bank/IMF/EU commission folks in-country; friendly journalists etc etc... to get the Minister of Trade to take a position on one policy recommendation! (Comment on blog, Green 2013).

5. WHAT TO DO?

Based on all of the above, a number of ideas emerge for consideration by academics, INGOs and funders of research.

5.1 Suggestions for academics

Comments on the blogposts that formed the basis for this article provided a wealth of practical advice to academics on how to work more productively with INGOs. These include the following:

- Create research ideas and proposals collaboratively. This means talking to each other early on, rather than academics looking for NGOs to help their dissemination, or NGOs commissioning academics to undertake policy-based evidence making.
- Don't just criticise and point to gaps – understand the reasons for them (gaps in both NGO programmes and their research capacity) and propose solutions. Work to recognise practitioners' strengths and knowledge.
- Make research relevant to real people in communities. This means proper discussions and dialogue at design, research and analysis stages, disseminated drafts and discussing findings locally on publication.
- Set up reflection spaces in universities where NGO practitioners can go to take time out for days, weeks or months, and can be supported to reflect on and write up their experiences, network with others and gain new insights on their work.
- Catalyse more exchange of personnel in both directions. Universities could replicate the author's 'Professor in Practice' position at the London School of Economics and Political Science,⁶ while INGOs could appoint honorary fellows, who could help guide their thinking in return for access to their work.

5.2 Suggestions for INGOs

In addition to collaborating in the ways discussed above, INGOs could encourage cooperation by:

- Being open about their knowledge base, especially the large amount of data collected while monitoring and evaluating their projects. Oxfam now makes its impact evaluation survey data free to download (Lombardini 2016).
- Finding cost-effective ways of cooperating through long-term but loose networks maintained over time, which can be activated when necessary (e.g. in response to events or new priorities). This is less time intensive than establishing dense and time-consuming networks that often peter out for lack of resources.
- Setting up arm's length collaborative watchdogs on particular institutions or issues with a research function, that maintains a network of academics and activists, as well as maintaining institutional knowledge. Good examples are the Bretton Woods⁷ Project or Control Arms.⁸

- Building bridges at all levels of the knowledge ‘food chain’: INGOs need to go beyond the academic big names and conference attractions to build links with early career researchers. For example, Transparency International has set up a programme called Campus for Transparency that match-makes a Transparency International chapter or staff member who has a specific research need with a university MA programme or student who would then deliver this specific research product as part of their study requirement. PhD students can be involved along similar lines, provided the issues identified are sufficiently core to the INGOs’ work that they will not be made redundant by shifting priorities before the thesis is even written!

5.3 Suggestions for funders

By insisting on evidence of impact, and supporting partnerships and consortia involving both researchers and practitioners, governments and aid donor funders already contribute significantly to bridging the academic–INGO divide. But they could do more, including the following:

- Innovative financing – for example, offering 50/50 funding, half for programmes on the ground and half for research. At the moment donors seem to fund one or the other (research with a few links to practitioners, or programmes with a bit of money for monitoring, evaluation and learning), which misses a chance to foster deeper links.
- They could also fund intermediary organisations with a mandate to build bridges between the two worlds. According to the Carnegie UK report:

Numerous studies reveal that people and small businesses outside universities find them impenetrable institutions. A member of the public or a community or voluntary organisation seeking a relevant point of contact in a university to discuss their research-related query often encounters a huge, incomprehensible organisation whose website is structured according to supply-side logic (faculties, departments, degree programmes) rather than according to demand considerations or user needs.

(Shucksmith 2016: 33).

6.1 CONCLUSION

INGOs and academics working on development share many aims and values in pursuing goals of human progress and justice. However, because of a number of differences described here, their interactions often add up to less, not more, than the sum of the parts. Overcoming the obstacles to more productive collaboration requires both a change of mindset and new thinking and approaches to the roles and structures of both academic and practitioner institutions. Research funders and aid donors play an important role in nudging both sides towards more effective engagement, but could do more. The prize on offer is significant – nothing less than a step change in the knowledge and effectiveness of the aid and development sector.

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ENDNOTES

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03

TRANSLATING HEALTH RESEARCH TO POLICY:

Breaking through the
impermeability barrier*

Gita Sen, Altaf Virani, Aditi Iyer,
Bhavya Reddy and S. Selvakumar

ABSTRACT

This chapter analyses an experience of addressing the often impermeable barriers between health research and policymaking in India. Typically, researchers located within government institutions struggle for autonomy, while those outside face difficulties in getting heard, generating unhealthy competition among researchers. Between 2010 and 2012, the authors were part of the Fostering Knowledge Implementation Links Project (FKILP), which brought together health researchers in the state of Karnataka (India) and senior to mid-level health programme managers and implementers on a range of issues linked to maternal health. The project succeeded in breaking communication barriers through two strategies: (1) Embedding the project in a World Bank funded government programme, while retaining an independent and respected academic institution as the nodal agency; (2) Creating an interactive trust-based network of researchers, policymakers and field practitioners. As a result, unhealthy competition was minimised and the benefit–cost ratios for all key stakeholders were favourable to participation.

KEYWORDS

knowledge translation, communication barriers, knowledge network, knowledge broker, knowledge co-production, maternal health, maternal anaemia, health-care quality, Karnataka, India.

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1. INTRODUCTION

This chapter analyses an experience of addressing the often-impermeable barriers between health research and policymaking in India. Between 2010 and 2012, the authors were part of the Fostering Knowledge Implementation Links Project (FKILP),² which created a network linking health researchers in the state of Karnataka with senior and mid-level health programme managers and implementers on a range of issues linked to maternal health and healthcare quality. The chapter identifies the key factors that worked to break down seemingly impenetrable limitations to communication between researchers and the government's health programme managers.

Despite significant financial and related investments in high-level research institutions in India, the extent to which health research done in the country actually informs policymaking or programme implementation is unclear. Because policymaking and programme delivery are largely viewed as the exclusive purview of a bureaucracy with limited lateral entry,³ health researchers (especially behavioural and health systems researchers) struggle to obtain a hearing for their ideas and research results. While researchers located within government institutions struggle for autonomy, those outside face difficulties in getting heard. This scenario also tends to generate unhealthy competition among outside researchers for contacts, connections and influence with government.

A further challenge is posed by the fact that senior and middle-level civil servants who are viewed as part of the so-called steel frame of governance in the country function as the executive heads of ministries and departments (just below the ministers) but hold transferable positions. For an external researcher or organisation, attempting to establish connections and credibility amid recurrent changes in personnel can become a Sisyphean slope. The absence of mechanisms within government for systematic consideration of research evidence or project outputs (including sometimes even the government's own designated pilot projects) can act as a major barrier to evidence-based policymaking. As discussed in Box 1, health managers are often constrained by inadequate human, financial and institutional resources for the creation of knowledge infrastructure,⁴ including for training and capacity building (Belay, Mbuya and Rajan 2009; Ellen et al. 2014; Lavis et al. 2008), and the inherently time-consuming nature of knowledge translation activities (Lavis et al. 2008). The ability to institutionalise knowledge translation initiatives so that they can be proof against bureaucratic transfers may hold the key to longer-term impact and sustainability, but it can also be very hard to accomplish.

The translation of knowledge to policy thus faces barriers at three levels in the Indian policy system: at the immediate levels of (1) *communication* and (2) *uptake*, and at the medium- and longer-term level of (3) *institutionalisation*. These concepts are discussed in more detail below. Though this chapter focuses mainly on *communication*, it is worth noting that effective reciprocal communication is an important basis of *uptake* and

institutionalisation. Unfortunately, the time frame of the project was too short to allow a proper assessment of the latter barriers, as discussed later in the chapter.⁵

Channels of communication between researchers and policymakers (and implementers) tend to be weak and sporadic in many countries and contexts (Bennett and Jessani 2011; Bennett *et al.* 2012; Decoster, Appelmans and Hill 2012; Jessani, Kennedy and Bennett 2016). Policymakers complain that research findings are inaccessible or impractical (Belay *et al.* 2009; Innvær *et al.* 2002; see also Box 1). As a consequence, policies are often uninformed by insights from research and sometimes may even conflict with existing evidence. Similarly, researchers are often not attuned to the needs of policymakers and programme implementers. It is worth noting, of course, that the relationship between research and policymaking is seldom linear. Rather, research may influence policies in more indirect ways, by seeding new ideas and by affecting how policymakers think about problems or find solutions (Weiss 1980, 1986). This awareness has led to emphasis in recent years on programmes that seek to increase collaboration between researchers and policymakers through enhanced knowledge sharing, focusing on how knowledge is produced and consumed, the positionality of various stakeholders in the translation process and its implications for how knowledge translation activities are structured.

Ellen *et al.* (2013) and Lavis *et al.* (2006) highlight the need to build a knowledge culture by sensitising stakeholders, promoting stakeholder ownership of the process, ensuring proactive participation and securing overall commitment to the process. Knowledge-related public resources, tools and products such as scoping or systematic reviews, policy briefs and research databases have also been highlighted as useful end outputs of knowledge translation projects (Ellen *et al.* 2013, 2014; Lavis 2009; Lavis *et al.* 2006, 2008).

This chapter focuses particularly on the need to move beyond a unidirectional approach to knowledge transfer and uptake, discussing the FKILP's experience of breaking the divide between communities of researchers and policymakers. The resulting co-production of knowledge and institutionalisation of communication can leverage the power of networks that engage along the whole research–policy continuum.

Evidence-informed policymaking is still in its nascent stages in India. Health system reforms in the last decade, particularly the launch of the National Rural Health Mission (NRHM), have been accompanied by a more concerted effort on health systems research. The establishment of the National Health Systems Resource Centre (NHSRC) and the Public Health Foundation of India at the national level, and the State Health Systems Resource Centres in the states, has played an important role in furthering this agenda. However, Rao, Arora and Ghaffar (2014) find that the bulk of the research capacity is concentrated in a few research institutions and is focused on only select states and domains. Critical sectors such as

health-care human resources, financing and governance remain neglected. Research capacity is thus a critical concern. India is also one of the lower-ranking countries in knowledge translation efforts globally, regionally and among the BRICS countries (Brazil, Russia, India, China, South Africa) (Decoster *et al.* 2012). Formal knowledge translation programmes that systematically engage policymakers, researchers (within and outside government), interest groups and civil society organisations to jointly discuss key policy challenges and take stock of the available research around those issues, are rare.

The FKILP was one such endeavour to link health research and policy in the state of Karnataka. In the following sections of the chapter, we discuss this experience in terms of the strategies and methodology employed, the major successes of this project and some of its limitations. We then draw lessons for other knowledge translation initiatives, identifying the key factors that worked to break down seemingly impenetrable barriers to communication between researchers and the government's health programme managers.

2. | THE FKILP

2.1 Origins

The FKILP was commissioned in July 2010 as a joint initiative of the Centre for Public Policy at the Indian Institute of Management Bangalore (IIMB) and the Department of Health and Family Welfare (DoHFW) of the Government of Karnataka. The project was an attempt to formally link research institutions, civil society organisations and government ministries working on health or related issues, for the purpose of knowledge translation. The project was commissioned on a pilot basis under the aegis of the World Bank assisted Karnataka Health System Development and Reform Project (KHSDRP), as part of a larger process of organisational development and capacity building within the DoHFW.

2.2 Objectives

The goal of the project was to facilitate partnerships between academic/research institutions and the government in Karnataka, in order to maximise access to new knowledge by government officials engaged in programme implementation, and to indicate relevant knowledge gaps for research. The project was aimed at enhancing the capacity of senior officers in the DoHFW to appreciate the role of evidence in policymaking and develop evidence-based responses to pressing policy problems; and also at supporting district-level health staff to identify and deal with bottlenecks that weaken service delivery on the ground.

2.3 Approach and strategy

2.3.1 Choice of knowledge broker

IIMB was appointed by the DoHFW as the nodal agency to steer this effort. IIMB's role was to foster a process of mutual exchange of ideas among the academic/research community, civil society organisations and the

government, and to help create learning opportunities for all participants, i.e. the role of a knowledge broker. The project came about through intensive efforts by IIMB, supported by key staff at the World Bank. IIMB is an autonomous public institution of national importance and one of India's premier management institutes, recognised for its teaching, research and consulting capacities.

It has been noted in the knowledge translation literature that messages are more convincing when delivered by messengers who have credibility with the target group.⁶ Even so, overly close relationships can lead to conflicts of interest and create biases in research prescriptions (advertently or inadvertently), thereby diminishing their usefulness (Jessani *et al.* 2016; Lavis *et al.* 2008).⁷ The identity of the knowledge broker can therefore have major implications for the sustainability and autonomy of the knowledge translation effort. Processes led by reputed academic institutions have the advantage of being insulated from political interference and these institutions can thus be more independent and objective in their actions, while still maintaining good rapport with diverse stakeholders (El-Jardali *et al.* 2014). For the DoHFUJ, the choice of IIMB was a carefully considered one, which in hindsight was instrumental in the project's effectiveness.

The project was housed within the Centre for Public Policy at IIMB, a policy thinktank created in partnership with the Department of Personnel and Training of the Indian government and the United Nations Development Programme. Moreover, the project director was a member of the Mission Steering Group, the apex body of the NRHM; on the governing board of the NHSRC; and on the High Level Expert Group on Universal Health Coverage set up by the Planning Commission of India. The project's core team had been involved over a number of years in conceptual and field-based research on reproductive health, health inequalities, health system performance and non-government-to-government partnerships in health-care delivery, and thus it was well networked with key researchers and research institutions in Karnataka and outside. This unique positioning gave IIMB the ability to quickly bring together relevant stakeholders and the credibility to vet the evidence objectively and make independent recommendations, while giving both sets of stakeholders at least some feeling of working with 'one of their own'.

2.3.2 Collaboration and co-production of knowledge: overcoming the 'us' versus 'them' divide

Because this was uncharted territory, the project adopted an exploratory 'ground-up' approach to identify the best way of bringing diverse groups of stakeholders together, keeping them engaged, and providing them with the required technical assistance to make the research-to-policy transition. It started with a basic strategic framework that drew on some of the key elements that are known to be effective means for linking research to action (Lavis *et al.* 2006). Thus, the project included overlapping phases of network building, research mapping and review, operations research, learning workshops and production of policy briefs.

It was determined at the outset that the project would not attempt to force-feed research to the policymakers. Researchers and practitioners, based on their respective experiences, often have differing notions of what constitutes actionable evidence, which evidence is more crucial and even what is good evidence (Shrivastava and Mitroff 1984), and they may have distinctive policy priorities and constraints (Johns 1993; Thomas and Tymon 1982).⁸ They are often sceptical of each other's motivations and competence, which creates mutual suspicion and makes them more resistant to change (Ellen *et al.* 2014). Various authors have recognised the need for more inclusive and collaborative approaches to knowledge translation (Baumbusch *et al.* 2008; Ellen *et al.* 2013, Lavis *et al.* 2006), instead of more traditional methods that regard researchers as originators or keepers of knowledge and policymakers as passive recipients (Weiss 1979). Accountability, reciprocity and mutual respect have been identified as key ingredients of an effective knowledge translation project.

In this spirit, the FKILP recognised the need for both sides to engage with one another without reservation and in a spirit of cooperation and joint discovery. Researchers and civil society members, on the one hand, and government officers, on the other, do not always trust each other sufficiently to join the same platform. As described later in the chapter, the project worked to create a congenial environment that would inspire trust between stakeholders, dismantle the inherent power dynamics between and within the groups, and provide avenues for an open, yet critical, exchange of ideas.

2.3.3 Leveraging the power of networks

The project put together a state-wide knowledge network comprising government officers, researchers and civil society organisations working on health or related issues and initiated a formal dialogue between network members, in recognition of their shared interests. The network was intended to enable all factions to understand each other's perspectives, create opportunities to include each other in their respective agendas, nudge groups towards lowering their resistance to each other's positions, and open up new windows of cooperation. It aimed to help the government tap into the considerable technical expertise of network partners, thereby increasing its knowledge resource pool at low cost and in a very short time.⁹

It was envisaged that the institutionalisation of such linkages through the project would help sustain interaction between the stakeholders during and beyond the life of the project itself. It would lend legitimacy to the evidence-based movement and eventually lead to greater infusion of research into policy processes at the state level. At a higher (national) level, it would help demonstrate the potential usefulness of network-based approaches in knowledge translation and offer a set of tested strategies that could be emulated in other contexts.

To lay the groundwork for productive dialogue and to support network members in their deliberations, the project undertook the following:

- Syntheses of research evidence and best practices in priority policy areas, which were identified in consultation with the government;
- Rapid operations research studies to generate further field evidence to fill in gaps in current research; and
- Clear evidence-based policy directives based on network discussions and the reviewed evidence.

2.4 Methodology and outputs

A project office was opened at IIMB. A small team comprising a project coordinator, research coordinator and project assistant was put together to manage project activities under the overall direction and supervision of the project director. The work of this team was backed up by a larger research team that had been engaged in health research at IIMB over many years. A brief description of the project’s activities and outputs is shown in Figure 1.

Figure 1 Project activities and outputs



2.4.1 Technical Advisory Committee (TAC)

A TAC including researchers, civil society and government was convened in order to serve as a scientific group for reviewing research and policy papers, identifying research gaps, guiding operations research studies and advising the project team. TAC members were also tasked with assisting the project team in constituting task groups or working groups to address specific issues as they arose. They made specific recommendations on policy-relevant research for presentation and discussion during workshops and helped facilitate these discussions. Because of members’ seniority and consequent time constraints, it was not possible to organise multiple repeat meetings of the TAC. However, TAC members were very open to meeting one-on-one with the project coordinator to provide feedback and suggestions.

2.4.2 Knowledge network

The first initiative was to set up a knowledge network to maximise access to new knowledge and best practices by government officials engaged in programme implementation and to support state-level advocacy. A provisional list of researchers and community-based organisations working on health and health system issues in Karnataka was drafted. The project undertook a systematic process of reaching out to these groups in order to build rapport and to get a sense of their research or other activities. The project's objectives, intended activities and tentative action plan were discussed with each as they were invited to become network members. The list was updated through snowballing as the project went along, and more members were enrolled. Eventually, the network came to include members from a wide spectrum of policy actors including staff of the DoHFW, the Department of Women and Child Development, the Karnataka State Health System Resource Centre, the NHSRC, multilateral organisations such as the World Bank and the United Nations Population Fund, academic and research institutions, independent researchers and consultants, non-governmental organisations (NGOs), civil society groups, medical and public health professionals and health-care providers. In the final tally, the network consisted of approximately 200 individual members or member organisations, including officers from the DoHFW. The project office at IIMB maintained an inventory of all previous and ongoing health research by network members.

2.4.3 Research repository

The project conducted a systematic mapping exercise to identify, review and collate relevant research evidence and best practices on three linked themes: maternal health, health-care quality and maternal anaemia. These themes were chosen through discussions in the TAC and with senior members of the network's different stakeholders. For this purpose, the project drew upon the inventory created from contributions made by members of the knowledge network and from literature searches. These included both published and unpublished resources (journal articles, books, book chapters, working papers, reports, discussion drafts, fact sheets or policy briefs) extracted from libraries, selected websites and electronic databases. Prior to their inclusion in the repository, the studies were screened for their methodological and analytical rigour, contextual and contemporary relevance, and expected utility to the policymaker. These resources were compiled in the form of thematic compendia and made available in both print and electronic versions to members of the knowledge network and workshop participants. In addition, a project website was created to serve as a knowledge-hub for the dissemination of project updates, research compendia, workshop summaries and policy briefs, freely accessible as a public resource.¹⁰

2.4.4 Operations research

The project executed short operations research studies to generate further field evidence on two critical areas related to maternal health. The first study evaluated the capacity of primary health-care providers in Koppal district in northern Karnataka to prevent and manage obstetric emergencies, through an assessment of their medical knowledge with respect to identification and management of obstetric risks and complications. It also sought to determine whether the Skilled Birth Attendant or Emergency Obstetric Care trainings are able to improve their knowledge. The study was triggered by an investigation of maternal deaths, which found a high incidence of deaths resulting from poor identification of maternal risks and ineffective management of obstetric emergencies (Iyer *et al.* 2012). The second study evaluated the government's tool for conducting Maternal Death Reviews (MDRs), to test its ability to generate reliable evidence on the causes of death. Findings from both studies were used to contextualise current policy pitfalls and suggest methods for course correction.

2.4.5 Learning workshops

Three consultative learning workshops (one each on maternal health, health-care quality and maternal anaemia) were organised to discuss a smaller subset of the most relevant and the most recent research in these areas and to discuss recommendations. The senior leadership in the DoHFW and programme implementers at different levels attended these, as specified in the terms of the project's contract. Being able to include their participation in the contract was unusual and pointed to the credibility of the knowledge broker and the enthusiasm of the policy managers. The research to be presented was selected through a rigorous review process and underwent multiple rounds of iterative feedback through pre-workshop consultations with presenters (including from the government). Its purpose was to vet the content and form of workshop presentations and to make sure the messaging was on target. Other background work also contributed to the efficiency and substantive contribution of the workshops. These included development of concept notes and production of research compendia via contributions from members of the network and online literature searches.

These workshops brought together diverse stakeholders including senior and mid-level officers from the government such as the health secretary, mission director (NRHM) and programme managers, members of the knowledge network including researchers, NGOs, civil society groups, medical and public health professionals, representatives of professional associations such as the Federation of Obstetric and Gynaecological Societies of India and the Society of Community Health Nurses of India, health-care providers and invited experts. One-third to one-half of the participants in each workshop were from the government. Table 1 summarises the themes, participants and outputs of the learning workshops.

Table 1 Learning workshops

THEMES DISCUSSED	PARTICIPANTS	OUTPUTS
WORKSHOP 1 MATERNAL HEALTH IN KARNATAKA, 9 DECEMBER 2010		
<p>Programmatic challenges in delivery of maternal health care from the perspective of the DoHFW</p> <p>Strengthening the quality and adequacy of health system responses to maternal health needs</p> <p>Tackling iron deficiency anaemia in pregnancy</p> <p>Learning from MDRs</p>	<p>Government: 2 senior officers 7 mid-level officers (state) 8 mid-level officers (field) 2 junior officers</p> <p>23 academics 5 NGO representatives 1 professional association representative</p>	<p>Concept note</p> <p>Compendium of policy analyses, estimates of maternal health outcomes and relevant research</p> <p>Workshop presentations</p> <p>Summaries of the empirical research informing workshop presentations</p>
WORKSHOP 2 HEALTHCARE QUALITY, 8 JUNE 2011		
<p>Applying quality management methods to healthcare</p> <p>Lessons learned from (1) Quality Assurance Programmes in the public health-care system in Karnataka, Maharashtra, Rajasthan; (2) Quality improvement of PHCs in Andhra Pradesh</p> <p>Evidence of health-care quality in public health facilities in Tamil Nadu, Karnataka, Bangalore</p> <p>Suggestions for the way forward</p>	<p>Government: 2 senior officers 1 senior adviser (research) 8 mid-level officers (state) 10 mid-level officers (field) 3 mid-level consultants (research)</p> <p>23 academics 5 NGO representatives 2 multilateral agency representatives</p>	<p>Concept note</p> <p>Compendium of resources on the principles, concepts, approaches, innovations and best practices on quality improvement in Karnataka and across India</p> <p>Workshop presentations</p>
WORKSHOP 3 MATERNAL ANAEMIA, 29 SEPTEMBER 2011		
<p>Overview of maternal anaemia in Karnataka</p> <p>Current governmental approaches and challenges in addressing maternal anaemia</p> <p>Synthesis of findings about programmatic strategies for tackling maternal anaemia: what works, what does not work</p> <p>Synthesis of findings about the assessment and treatment options for anaemia in pregnancy</p>	<p>Government: 2 senior officers 1 senior officer (research) 1 mid-level consultant (national) 11 mid-level officers (state) 1 junior officer</p> <p>17 academics 5 NGO representatives 3 professional association representatives 9 practising doctors</p>	<p>Concept note</p> <p>Compendium of relevant research and best practices in Karnataka and across India</p> <p>Workshop presentations</p>

In the first workshop, presentations focused on policy-relevant questions emerging from empirical research on maternal health in different parts

of Karnataka. In the second, presentations focused on the theory and practice of quality-of-care interventions within health-care organisations in the public sector. Both workshops used a fairly traditional top-down model with researchers playing the role of knowledge producers and the health personnel acting as the recipients. This initial approach was based on the organisers' experience in academic settings. But we learned through discussion and reflection that we needed a much more participatory approach if we were to get middle-level health managers to open up during the discussions. Indeed, the presence of the top leaders of the DoHFW was not sufficient to elicit open participation from those below them. Their trust had to be built and painstakingly earned.

The third workshop on maternal anaemia differed dramatically in its approach. The workshop was shorter (half a day) and designed to be more interactive. Its focus on maternal anaemia was initially suggested by the health secretary and resonated with both communities alike. A short opening presentation by the project director defined the extent of the problem in the state and identified a number of questions requiring policy attention. This was followed by a presentation from the government's side spelling out the measures the government was taking to tackle anaemia. Two short syntheses of research evidence and best practices followed on the approaches, challenges and programmatic strategies to address maternal anaemia. There was a lot of time available for discussion, and almost all of the 54 policymakers, programme implementers, researchers and public health practitioners in the room managed to have their say in a spirit of collective learning and reflection.

The question of the most cost-efficient and effective way of screening for anaemia has been a vexed one. Because of the high prevalence of anaemia and the consequent need for universal testing of pregnant women, this has been a pressing concern. The Government of Karnataka had used the unreliable 'filter paper' method for a very long time. By the time of our third workshop, the government was moving towards replacing this with Sahli's hemoglobinometer, which is relatively more accurate, although far from being fully reliable. Having just introduced this change, the government side were naturally somewhat reluctant to reopen the question. However, researchers pressed for re-examining the issue and the possibility of introducing the HemoCue, which is far more accurate. There was a lively debate on the pros and cons, and on different funding possibilities. This discussion illustrated the point that the issues that evoked maximum discussion were those where there had been prior advocacy or recent government action. Completely new ideas emerging from research were usually met with silence or wary responses.¹¹

2.4.6 Policy briefs

A set of four policy briefs was prepared based on an analysis of the findings from existing and new research and workshop consultations, outlining the implications of the reviewed research and making recommendations for the programme and policy. These included recommendations for (1) strengthening the government's maternal death review protocols,

(2) improving the capacity of health workers at the primary care level to identify risks and prevent and manage obstetric emergencies, (3) programmatic strategies for tackling maternal anaemia, and (4) evaluating options for screening and treatment of moderate to severe anaemia in pregnancy. The objective was to clearly communicate what was wrong with current programmes and how this could potentially be fixed.

The policy briefs represented two distinct approaches. The briefs on maternal death reviews and the competence of health-care providers served as a way to raise issues, problematise areas of the programme and policy that were otherwise getting little attention, and provide recommendations for action. They were outcomes of exploratory operations research under the project and the research areas were determined by our team early in the project life cycle. To that end, they resonated more with conventional understandings of knowledge transfer. The briefs on maternal anaemia, on the other hand, were aimed to guide policymakers on how to deal with a problem that was already identified as important by both senior representatives of the DoHFW and other members of the network. These briefs were a culmination of a longer process of engagement with stakeholders and reflected greater participation, collaboration and co-production of knowledge.

Policy briefs on maternal death reviews (MDRs) and provider competence

Two briefs drew on primary research conducted under the project and responded to specific components of maternal health policy as they operate in Karnataka (FKILP 2012a, 2012b). MDRs were adopted by the Karnataka government in 2009 to strengthen reductions in maternal mortality. Based on a study of maternal deaths in the district of Koppal in Karnataka, the brief (FKILP 2012a) summarised findings on critical lacunae in the government's MDR process that contributed to incorrect diagnoses of causes of death and a failure to capture health provider lapses, among other deficiencies. Specific recommendations were presented on how to improve the quality, reliability and accuracy of the information captured. The second policy brief (FKILP 2012b) was based on a study to assess the knowledge and practices of medical officers and staff nurses to prevent and manage obstetric emergencies at the primary care level in Koppal. The brief summarised findings on the differential impact of training across cadres of providers and deficiencies in the quality of training itself, and it recommended changes to training and related protocols.

Policy briefs on maternal anaemia

Despite long-standing programmatic efforts, anaemia is recognised as a widespread and persistent problem nationally and in Karnataka. At the time of the project, the state government had introduced a new anaemia screening method across the state, and was engaged in a pilot intervention in partnership with an NGO to better treat and track populations at risk. Additionally, interest groups were at the stages of testing and advocating

alternative treatment options for severe anaemia. The issue was therefore seen as important to programme managers and researchers alike. Not only did members of the network express interest in addressing anaemia, but (as noted previously) the health secretary himself chose this topic for the third and culminating workshop under the project.

Two researchers who were part of the network were engaged to synthesise evidence on programmatic strategies and on screening and treatment options for severe anaemia for the workshop. Since both groups were invested in the issue, the workshop created an opportunity for researchers to propose what is 'good' or strong evidence and for policymakers to debate what evidence is actionable. To increase collaboration on the production of the brief, the researchers who conducted the reviews were also invited to co-author the briefs. One brief summarised literature on barriers to effective prevention and treatment, and lessons from other states (FKILP 2012c). The other brief assessed the most commonly used screening methods and treatment options for moderate to severe anaemia, weighing the evidence on effectiveness, safety and cost (FKILP 2012d). The briefs also responded to key points of debate in the workshop and proposed recommendations that reinforced ideas and proposals generated from discussions. It is likely that this fostered a sense of joint ownership of the process and outputs, and potentially reduced biases in how policy recommendations were shaped.

Several measures were taken to ensure that all briefs would be relevant and of interest to policymakers. First, the research areas chosen spoke to the existing maternal health policy context, and drew on research either conducted in Karnataka or on evidence from other settings that have direct application. They aimed to make clear the implications of the findings in terms of programme performance and thereby health outcomes. Importantly, they proposed specific, practical and actionable recommendations that were careful not to undermine existing efforts, but to build on them incrementally. Formulation of the latter two briefs on anaemia was characterised by communication and collaboration. Such co-production created value in the process of generating the briefs, in addition to increasing the potential for uptake. Notably, these briefs facilitated policymakers to be more active players in the generation of knowledge and challenged the unidirectional view of knowledge translation.

3.1 AN ASSESSMENT OF THE FKILP

The FKILP did not have a very long life for reasons unrelated to its effectiveness or its perceived value for network members. The project was funded as a consultancy to IIMB under the World Bank supported KHSDRP. The initial contract lasted for a little over a year, although the work continued beyond that with small supplementary funds. All involved parties had been more than satisfied with the outputs and potential of the project and were set to renew the grant for a further period. At that stage there were unrelated glitches in the World Bank's funding to Karnataka state and, as a result, project funding halted. By the time these problems were sorted out over a year later, practical limitations made it impossible to continue the project, even though the DoHFWJ was eager to renew the grant to IIMB.

Nonetheless, in its short time span, the FKILP was able to accomplish a considerable amount of work. A number of knowledge outputs were delivered, including a vibrant knowledge network, operations research, research compendia, three consultative workshops, four policy briefs and a 'one-stop shop' project website – all of which output types have been widely acknowledged in literature as valuable end products of knowledge translation processes (*Ellen et al.* 2013, 2014; *Lavis* 2009; *Lavis et al.* 2006, 2008). For the project team, it was a fairly intense two years with a high workload but also a high pay-off in terms of learning and knowledge networking. Team members learned to adapt and be flexible, as evidenced by the shift in the methodology of conducting the consultative workshops and producing the policy briefs.

The project was an attempt to address the prevailing deficit in formal knowledge translation efforts in the country (*Decoster et al.* 2012). It demonstrated a potentially replicable model for engaging diverse stakeholders in tackling outstanding policy challenges in other states and sectors, based on inputs from research and practice. The process of interaction and networking showed both researchers and policymakers what is possible in terms of knowledge translation even in India's complex policy environment. There were around 50 participants in each of the learning workshops with roughly equal numbers of researchers and government personnel (see Table 1). There was considerable enthusiasm for the project outputs and consistent and sustained interest in the workshops and in the possibilities they opened up for further exchange and interaction between stakeholders.

A POLICY MANAGER'S PERSPECTIVE¹²

A major challenge faced by the policy manager or administrator who is interested in evidence-based policymaking and implementation in India is the paucity of institutional tools dedicated to this purpose. There are no human resources available in-house who can access or sift research results or ground-level experiences in order to guide policymakers and managers and make cross-learning possible. Typically, access to published research is very limited within the administration. But even if research materials and results were available, there have to be people who can analyse their policy and programme implications and suggest changes. Such people are few and far between and rarely interact systematically with researchers outside government.

In this context, the FKILP was an innovative platform providing suggestions to policy managers based on pulling together research on maternal health in Karnataka including the work done in Koppal, a district with major health challenges. From the government's perspective, a broader focus than only maternal health would have been useful to provide a more holistic picture, but this was certainly a good beginning with potential for growth. The project made the government's state-level health managers and officers aware of many ground-level realities through facts and anecdotes, which we would not otherwise have known.

For instance, in the second workshop there was an anecdote of a maternal death due to haemorrhage that occurred because of delays in transporting a woman from the primary health centre to the tertiary hospital. Even though free transport to health facilities had come in through the NRHM, it was limited to the nearest health facility and did not provide further transportation. The incident made us think about the challenge of transport during referral, and ambulances were made functional or new ones were made available for this purpose.

Another instance was the intensive discussion during the third workshop on the HemoCue as a tool to ensure accurate haemoglobin test results. Although introduction of the HemoCue had been under consideration by the Health Department for quite some time, this workshop helped in piloting its usage by the auxiliary nurse midwives.

Getting the FKILP to be effective was not without challenges. Government institutions, especially district-level officers, are not used to continuous interaction with researchers or NGOs on an equal footing. There was a lot of inertia and even resistance to participation in the workshops or using the research findings and insights. But the support of the most senior civil servant (the Secretary, DoHFW) and the fact that he was open-minded and had a more holistic view of the health system helped a great deal.

Although, for various reasons, the FKILP itself had a short duration, it showed that regular and systematic interaction between policymakers, researchers and NGOs holds many potential benefits for bridging the existing divides between research and policy.

3.1 What accounted for the FKILP's effectiveness?

Undoubtedly the existence of high-quality researchers and research on health in Karnataka was a key prerequisite. The fact that the project leader and team were already well-networked and recognised health researchers certainly speeded up the process of network creation and linking. The interest and physical presence of a succession of interested senior health bureaucrats helped considerably. The provision of tangible materials, especially the research compendia, and the opportunity to be able to meet the government people across the table in an open atmosphere were especially valuable to researchers and drew their continuous participation. However, there are other factors that were at least as important.

Knowledge translation literature has widely acknowledged that weak channels of communication between researchers and policymakers (and implementers) make research findings inaccessible or impractical for use (Belay *et al.* 2009; Bennett and Jessani 2011; Bennett *et al.* 2012; Decoster *et al.* 2012; Innvær *et al.* 2002; Jessani *et al.* 2016). The FKILP was able to break through the seemingly impermeable walls barring communication between these two distinct groups through the following strategies:

- Embedding the project in a World Bank funded government programme resulted in both funding and government ownership being secured.
- Retaining an independent and respected academic institution (Centre for Public Policy at IIMB) as the nodal agency permitted the FKILP network to be convened by a credible and effective knowledge broker acceptable to both researchers and policymakers.
- Investing time and effort to build trust, negotiate rules and processes, and manage or even subtly transform in-built power relations.
- Adopting an approach to communication that gradually became more open and genuinely interactive, and broke with traditional unidirectional methods, thereby enriching the quality of the debates and interactions.
- Attempting to learn from the process, being open to suggestions, and to make course corrections.
- Creating an open multi-stakeholder network that included researchers, policymakers and field practitioners served to minimise unhealthy competition among research and other groups vying for attention.

The FKILP did not challenge the power of the state through head-on confrontation. Rather, it focused on building relationships towards a more sustained and open, yet critical engagement. It had all the benefits of networking, allowing researchers to reach and communicate with policymakers at the highest level as well as with middle-level implementers, and making it possible for policymakers to tap into the considerable research resources available outside the government's system to overcome the inherent capacity constraints that typically hinder the government's use of research in policymaking (Belay *et al.* 2009; Ellen *et al.* 2014; Lavis *et al.* 2008). With both sides benefiting in these ways, the benefit–cost ratios for all key stakeholders from both the research and the policy sides were favourable to participation, and a significant amount of 'translation' could be done within a relatively short time period.

This chapter presents the project's experience and salient issues from the authors' perspectives and does not include those of other participants in the knowledge network. These perspectives, though limited, are important because they seek to explain the process we adopted (why we did what we did and how we did it) and what our experiences were as knowledge brokers who led the effort, as research aggregators, and as researchers who contributed to the primary research that fed into the project's policy prescriptions. We are hopeful that these will be useful to other knowledge entrepreneurs working in this space.

The chapter does not attempt to evaluate the project's success in terms of research uptake and concomitant policy outcomes. The project was not set up in a way that this could be established and, as acknowledged, the duration of the project was far too short for major changes to be effected. What this chapter has tried to demonstrate is the collaborative nature of the process itself and the usefulness of such efforts in creating ownership and value for research within the government, and spaces for candid dialogue between stakeholders, the need for which has been recognised in literature (Baumbusch *et al.* 2008; Ellen *et al.* 2013; Lavis *et al.* 2006). That we were able to get this to happen in a sustained manner over the duration of the project is an achievement. The chapter argues that such channels of communication and trust-based relationships are critical precursors for effective uptake, and that it is important for knowledge translation efforts to first invest in creating a congenial environment to catalyse the adoption of research into the policymaking process.

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ENDNOTES

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- 2 FKILP was underway while Gita Sen was professor at Indian Institute of Management Bangalore, and it was part of a larger body of work on changing the policy and social environment for maternal health in Karnataka.
 - 3 'Entrance to the civil service by external recruitment or otherwise than through promotion or transfer from within the service' (World Bank, n.d.).
 - 4 By knowledge infrastructure, we mean the organisational elements required to support the production, preservation, distribution and assessment of knowledge, including libraries, databases, research teams, technical/expert groups, etc.
 - 5 The project was intended to set the foundation for greater collaboration; therefore, we focused on the very first step – communication. It was not really designed to measure impact through uptake.
 - 6 Professional groups such as medical associations may be able to better convince physicians to adopt certain protocols or clinical practice guidelines (Hayward *et al.* 1997).
 - 7 Lavis *et al.* (2008) report how locating researchers within institutions fully funded by the Thai Ministry of Health created tensions when research findings challenged government positions on policy, making it difficult for researchers to speak truth to power. Likewise, vested interests of physicians in the pharmaceutical and medical equipment industries in the Philippines affected their practice and shaped their views on research.
 - 8 Policymakers are wary of just following the evidence, because policy recommendations are sometimes based on flimsy or contradictory evidence (Boaz and Pawson 2005), or because policymakers are generally cautious and prefer incremental change (Starkl *et al.* 2009).
 - 9 It is well recognised in the public management literature that multi-stakeholder research networks are a collaborative response by diverse organisations having different self-interests and varied views on policy problems and preferences, which are unified in their efforts towards the fulfilment of shared objectives (Agranoff and McGuire 2001; Klijn 2007; Provan and Kenis 2008). Such networks have many strategic advantages over hierarchical forms of knowledge translation for governments, researchers and civil society organisations (Jessani, Boulay and Bennett 2015).
 - 10 The project website was not in the original plan but evolved out of project discussions and turned out to be a very useful output.
 - 11 For example, discussions on the suggestion that the DoHFUW switch over to the HemoCue to test haemoglobin counts were lively and varied, given its recent decision to use another inexpensive but less sensitive method. In contrast, the suggestion to set up independent Maternal Death Review Committees, a topic on which enough prior discussion had not occurred and which was a source of some nervousness among front-line health providers, evoked considerably less enthusiasm.
 - 12 S. Selvakumar, author of the text in Box 1, belongs to the Indian Administrative Service, which has the main responsibility for policy formulation and implementation in India. From 2009 to 2012 he was the Mission Director for the National Rural Health Mission and Project Administrator of the World Bank assisted KHSDRP in the state of Karnataka. The FKILP was negotiated and implemented during his tenure. His views present the alternate perspective of a policymaker. While they may not be sufficient to validate our findings, they provide credible support to our assertions about the benefits of engaging in such a process, even if they do not amount to evidence of its effectiveness.





04

ENGAGING THE MIDDLE:

Using research to support progress on gender, education and poverty reduction initiatives in Kenya and South Africa*

Amy North, Elaine Unterhalter and Herbert Makinda

ABSTRACT

This chapter reflects on the ESRC/DFID Joint Fund for Poverty Alleviation Project Gender, Education and Global Policy Reduction Initiatives (GEGPRI), drawing out how the research process catalysed impact among groups who engaged with policy in what we have termed the middle space that lies between centres of global or national-level policy formulations and sites of enactment. The GEGPRI research revealed some of the challenging conditions that might limit the impact of reform initiatives. Many of the people working in the middle space – bureaucrats, NGO workers and school governing bodies in Kenya and South Africa – felt disconnected from the global goals on education and gender equality associated with the Millennium Development Goals and Education for All. For these participants, opportunities for developing deeper understanding of forms of inequality and how these may be challenged were limited. The chapter explores how a quasi-action research methodology allowed the project to open up new spaces for critical discussion of gender, poverty and inequality. In discussing the different research contexts, it reflects on some of the challenges of developing impact through the co-production of knowledge. In doing so it draws out how negotiations over meaning and researcher positionality are an important thread in understanding approaches to impact.

KEYWORDS

gender equality, education, poverty, action research, MDGs, policy enactment, impact.

BIOGRAPHIES

Amy North is a lecturer in Education and International Development at the UCL Institute of Education, London. Her research interests include gender, adult learning, and migration, with a focus on the ways in which ideas, policies or practices move and are interpreted across different contexts. She was a research officer on the GEGPRI project.

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1. INTRODUCTION

The debate about defining what research impact is, who research users are and how to approach them has been linked with concerns in the social sciences about accountability for the use of public funds; however, this has generated a wider debate about research and the co-production of knowledge, where and how to look for impacts and how the relationships of dialogue and engagement are different across particular fields of enquiry (Bannister and Hardill 2016). Although international development research on gender and education has long had a concern with practice, and the dialogue with practice has been a long-running thread in nationally located work on education, the connection between research, policy and practice is not a simple one with well-maintained processes of dialogue, shared languages or established ways of listening across different communities (Moss 2016; Unterhalter 2015; Whitty 2006). This chapter reflects on the experiences of the Gender, Education and Global Poverty Reduction Initiatives (GEGPRI) research project that set out to develop and document a process of co-production of knowledge with a range of professionals located in terrains of what we have termed a middle space (see Unterhalter and North, forthcoming), situated between the formulation of policy and its realisation as practice. We discuss the project's experiences of engaging stakeholders through a process of quasi-action research and consider how the possibilities for engaging in dialogue across boundaries, as well as differences regarding how the meanings of key terms and ideas were contested in the process of the co-production of knowledge, were significant factors in shaping impact.

The GEGPRI project was concerned with examining initiatives that engage with global aspirations to advance gender equality in and through schooling in contexts of poverty, particularly the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), the Education for All (EFA) Declaration and the Beijing Platform for Action. It looked at how these were engaged with and enacted in a range of local and national settings in Kenya and South Africa, two countries that had put in place policies to address poverty reduction and gender equality, were expanding education provision and had active players in relation to the global policy frameworks in these areas. Drawing on research conducted between 2007 and 2010 in a range of sites located in what we came to define as a middle space that lies between the site of policy formulation in global or international policy conferences and local realisation – the national and provincial education departments, a school, and two non-governmental organisations (NGOs) in each country – the project set out to investigate how connections were and were not made between global, national, regional and local policy and practice regarding gender, education and poverty reduction. A key aspect of this was understanding how stakeholders – including national and local bureaucrats, NGO officials and members of school governing bodies – working in these sites related to, understood and interpreted the global goals and how they drew on these interpretations in their interactions with each other and in their work and practice with regard to education delivery at national, provincial and local levels.

In this chapter we consider the research project's findings on the lack of connection to and ability to engage with the global goals that was apparent among many of the research participants. Drawing on the notion of impact as linked to a process of dialogue, capacity building and the co-production of knowledge, we then discuss the project's experiences of trying to open up spaces for discussion on these findings and consider the challenges that we encountered in doing this. We suggest that an important feature of achieving impact through the GEGPRI project was associated with the research team and participants developing their understanding of some of the dynamics of this stakeholder engagement with the global goals together through the research process itself. In our analysis of the way in which the project was able – or not able – to contribute to changes at local, national and global levels, we distinguish between what we have termed *impact with* – whereby a two-way process of dialogue and co-production of knowledge is directly associated with changes in understanding and practice – and *impact on/for*, linked to a more passive process of knowledge or information transfer that may be associated, sometimes indirectly, with shifts in awareness or forms of action. We also draw on work by the UK Collaborative on Development Sciences (UKCDS) in our analysis of how the research process and the co-production of knowledge initiated through it was associated with building capacity in relation to developing understandings of gender equality and poverty at the individual, organisational and environment – or institutional² – level (see Vogel 2012).

2. GLOBAL GOALS, GENDER AND ACTORS IN A MIDDLE SPACE

In September 2000, when the MDGs – including goals on poverty reduction, education and gender – were agreed by world leaders in New York at the UN's Millennium Summit, achieving the agreed targets within the 2015 time frame appeared achievable. The MDG frameworks were formulated with the intention of guiding and accelerating existing processes that had been initiated both internationally and through the reformist agendas of many national governments, and the summit itself marked the culmination of a decade of unprecedented levels of international collaboration in which issues relating to gender, education and poverty reduction had been a key concern. In 1995, the Beijing Declaration and Platform of Action from the World Conference on Women had been agreed by almost every government in the world and in June 2000 the Dakar Framework for Action on Education for All was agreed by governments and civil society representatives at the World Education Forum held in Dakar, Senegal. The MDGs picked up on aspects of both the Beijing and Dakar frameworks, but, in relation to education and gender equality, they were considerably less ambitious in scope, with education framed simply in terms of access to primary schooling, and gender equality in terms of gender parity: equal numbers of girls and boys in school. Despite this, in the lead up to the 2015 deadline, it became clear that these limited targets would not be met: despite significant progress in reducing poverty rates (largely because of economic growth in China) and

increasing enrolment in schooling worldwide, in 2015 an estimated 57 million children worldwide remained out of school (UNDP 2015). Fewer than half of countries achieved the MDG 3 target of gender parity in primary and secondary education, and in 2015 girls from poor communities particularly continued to be likely to be out of education (UNESCO 2015).

The MDG and EFA frameworks, and the monitoring processes associated with them, were sometimes presented as requiring a 'simple' exercise of political will, resting on an unexamined assumption that policy in itself would be enough to make change happen. The findings from the GEGPRI research contest this. Instead, they suggest that although policy – and how ideas regarding gender, inequalities and rights are articulated within it – is important, the locations and relationships of people working with and interpreting policy from within the middle space also play a significant role in shaping how policy is realised. Our research findings from Kenya and South Africa suggest that stakeholders working within a middle space engaged with implementing policy do not do so passively. Rather, they are involved in processes of interpretation, negotiation and contestation.

In some cases, our research suggests that these processes entail expansions of ideas around rights, equality and understandings of gender, as could be found among some research participants working in international agencies in the global North (see North 2010). However, in Kenya and South Africa, while elements of this critical and strategic engagement with the global frameworks could be found among a few participants employed at national level and in the global NGOs, our interviews with government officials, local NGO workers and teachers suggest that making space for these sorts of critical discussions at national, provincial and local levels was much more difficult. Instead, we found that often the processes of interpretation and negotiation that occurred in relation to the global goals at national and local levels involved a narrowing of vision and a closing down of processes of democratic engagement with transformation (see, for example, Dieltiens, Unterhalter, Letsatsi and North 2009; Karlsson 2010; Unterhalter 2012; Unterhalter and North 2011b; Unterhalter, Yates, Makinda and North 2012). This could be seen, for example, in the Kenyan Ministry for Education where, although the MDG gender parity target was seen as a useful way to manage data and reporting across hierarchies upwards from the provincial level to the global, the general view was of a formal acknowledgement of the framework, requiring particular organisational actions but with little room for critical reflection or concern with inequalities beyond counting numbers of boys and girls. In South Africa, where the gender parity target had already been met, there was a sense among some officials that the MDG framework could be drawn on strategically to help open further interrogation of questions of gender or distribution of resources to attend to inequalities. However, interviews with participants also revealed how a gender-blind approach to equity was a key feature of policy text and talk in the department, with very little monitoring for gender equity beyond an assessment of enrolment numbers or matric passes.

In both countries, the relational dynamic between national, provincial and local sites of policymaking and enactment entailed a narrowing focus. For officials working in provincial and district education departments, or at school level, the global frameworks were often unfamiliar and viewed as something

coming from very far away. In these spaces, the limited opportunities for critical engagement apparent at the national level disappeared. Instead, in the face of the distance they felt from sites of policy development at national and global levels, participants often deflected responsibility for addressing concerns with gender equality to marginalised communities or poor girls and women. Thus in Kenya, what were termed 'cultural values', and the communities that practise them, were often blamed by officers for the failure to meet MDG targets, and gender inequities associated with education were located somewhere else, outside the responsibility of the education department. In South Africa, concerns with morality and pregnancy often dominated discussions of gender issues in the school, local NGO and provincial education department, with the blame for such 'problems' clearly placed on the girls and their families:

girl children [are] opting to have children so that they [can] collect [the child support] grant. In our dialogues it came out a number of times that girl learners – some of them would come out in the open and say it's their parents pressing on them to have babies so that the entire family could receive something to eat, you know. So they are pushed into prostituting and uh you know: 'it's ok'.

(South African provincial official, 6 February 2009)

We argue that, in the absence of opportunities to develop understandings of different meanings of gender, this process of blame and distancing, which draws on stereotypical assertions about the behaviour of the poor and, in some cases, particular notions of ethnic identity, was not only used by policymakers as an excuse for lack of progress, but was also associated with the active construction of horizontal inequalities. This had implications for practice: in Kenya, for example, the assumptions that poor parents from particular ethnic groups do not value education was associated with efforts to prosecute parents or 'rescue girls' from their communities; and, in both countries, a process of distancing and blame resulted in the maintenance of a horizontal disjuncture between the schools and their communities of parents and pupils. In all research sites there were few opportunities to question the assumptions on which these forms of actions draw or to initiate processes of critical reflection on the content of education or the nature of the policy- and decision-making process itself.

The GEGPRI research data thus suggest that a lack of understanding of and engagement with the complexities of gender inequality and poverty constrained and limited the extent to which actors charged with the enactment of global policy were able to effectively contribute to the transformation of gendered hierarchies and inequalities, and build the institutions necessary to support girls and women's rights in and beyond schooling. Finding ways to enable processes of debate and interaction that would support the development of more nuanced and reflective understandings of gender inequality was therefore an important aspect of thinking about impact in relation to our research. In the following section we discuss how the research process sought to engage research participants in dialogue around gender, poverty and inequalities, and what this might mean for practice, through a quasi-action research methodology.

3. ENGAGING STAKEHOLDERS THROUGH QUASI-ACTION RESEARCH

Our research data highlight the complexity of local interpretations and engagements, and the project was designed to explore this. Integral to the GEGPRI project design was a quasi-action research methodology through which data was collected in each of the research case study sites and then fed back to participants, giving them a chance to reflect on emerging findings with researchers. It thus drew on learning from action research, which suggests that in order for research to have an impact in terms of effecting change ‘people affected by or having an effect on an issue should be involved in the processes of inquiry’ (Stringer 2013: xv).

The research design built in opportunities for discussion between researchers and participants over two cycles of reflection. The first cycle of data collection and reflection was followed by a second, where, one year later, researchers considered with participants what had happened in response to the issues raised the year before. This feature of the research design represented an attempt to get beyond the ‘snapshot in time’ form of research, where what is presented to research teams and what they select to comment on is only what participants or researchers seek to record. Through this method it was hoped the assumptions of the research team and the participants – all stakeholders working within the case study sites located in the middle space – could be scrutinised together. In this process, which entailed the co-production of knowledge between research team and research participants, it was envisaged that the issues of gender and education policy and practice across the multiple sites the study was concerned with – particularly vertical and horizontal relationships of meaning making, allocation of value, power, authority and distribution of resources – could be discussed, and challenges regarding change reviewed. It was hoped that this process would also enable the opening up of the sorts of critical discussions regarding gender inequalities and how they relate to poverty and forms of educational delivery that seemed to be so difficult to sustain in the different research sites in each country.

Central to this aspect of the GEGPRI research design was the organisation of report-back sessions held with research participants in each case study site at the end of each of the two main phases of research, after in-depth interview data collected from key stakeholders had undergone initial analysis by the research team. These provided researchers with an opportunity to present their initial findings, but, importantly, were intended to be participatory and relatively informal in nature to enable research participants to engage in critical discussion of these with the research team.

The two phases of the project, and the report-back sessions in particular, also enabled researchers to review changes that occurred in the case study site and to discuss these with participants through a process of co-production of findings. This made it possible to identify where the project itself had contributed to changes in people’s views and ideas on the issues under study, as well as where wider impacts in relation to changing policy or practice could be attributed to the project.

The research project also sought to encourage the active engagement and participation of research participants through the establishment of research advisory committees in each project, which included participants from case study sites as well as other relevant stakeholders, such as representatives from teacher unions, gender and women's rights groups, and NGO campaigners, as well as from within the research community. These advisory groups provided critical feedback as the research developed and presented the opportunity to develop discussions regarding the implications of the research findings with key stakeholders, both close to and critical of governments, over a more sustained period of time. As we discuss below, the presence of key research participants from particular case study sites within the research project's advisory group, in some cases helped bridge the insider–outsider divide between researchers and research participants, and, in doing so, was particularly significant both in facilitating access and in enabling research impact.

In developing the research project in this way, we aimed to have a modest impact in terms of catalysing discussion about the EFA and MDG goals among groups who, despite playing important roles in the enactment of gender and education policy, might not have heard of the global goals, or might have felt there was little they could contribute to reflection on them. Two key issues affected the extent to which we were able to achieve this aim. First, the repertoire of meanings and understandings of gender that participants were able to draw on, and the ways in which these were affected by their institutional and cultural locations, in some cases affected the sorts of discussions, and forms of practice that could be developed in relation to the research. Unterhalter (2009) has noted that the language of gender and the meanings associated with it are not always easily translated across contexts, and our research pointed to a range of different ways in which gender and ideas around equality were articulated and engaged with in the different sites. In some sites existing interpretations provided openings for dialogue, widening understandings and the possibility of transformative action. However, in others very attenuated notions of gender linked to limited framing of parity or essentialised identities, as well as wider contextual conditions associated with backlash and hostility to girls' and women's rights, made opening up discussions of research findings linked to changing practice more difficult.

Second, the nature of the relationship that was established between the researchers and the research participants, and the ways in which this was shaped by horizontal and vertical forms of connection and boundary making, played a significant role in shaping the form and extent of impact that could be achieved in relation to each site. While the research teams were outsiders to all the sites where data were collected, the angle from which we looked as outsiders was different in each site because we were positioned either closer or further away from key decision-makers, which had implications for how we collected and interpreted data. While in none of the research sites were members of the research teams insiders with close knowledge of the workings of the organisation on gender or poverty reduction, in some sites relationships with particular individuals gave opportunities for greater depth in interviews and observations, and more sustained forms of engagement.

The politics of knowledge, however, and the frameworks we brought to the data collection and analysis needed constant interrogation, and a research team from different countries, with contrasting perspectives on the issue, meant that the nature of emergent themes needed to be critically reviewed throughout the research process.

In the next section, in reflecting on our experiences in relation to impact at local, national and global level, we draw out some of the ways in which contested meanings, and the complex nature of the relationships that were established between research teams and participants, affected the ways in which research participants engaged with the project and its findings and were able to draw on them in their work.

4. BUILDING IMPACT THROUGH ENGAGEMENT AT THE LOCAL, NATIONAL AND GLOBAL LEVEL

4.1 Local engagement: building fragile understandings of gender in schools

When researchers started work in the two case study schools in Kenya and South Africa – both of which were located in peri-urban areas with high levels of poverty – there was a very clear positioning of the research teams as outsiders to the research sites. This positioning was occasioned by the perception of the research participants who felt that the research teams came from a higher level of education. In both countries the research teams coming from universities were at some considerable social distance from the teachers and parents interviewed. The university association meant there was little difficulty in securing access to the sites, once the necessary documentation had been provided, but the research team's positioning as outsiders meant that the level of access was limited to observing relations of learning and teaching, and interviews proved to be quite formal. Detailed observations of the school management were more difficult to secure.

At the school in Kenya, the team was well received and assigned an office where they could conduct interviews and write field notes. This office space was provided at the initial stages either as a way of keeping the 'guests' away from the staff room or because some of the teachers were pursuing further studies at the university where the researcher came from. However, over time researchers were able to develop more trusting relationships with school staff. Many teachers consented to stay after school hours for interviews. In South Africa, interviewing teachers was more of a challenge. Many female teachers did not frequent the staff room and staff left the school premises as soon as lessons ended. While access to school records in Kenya was granted readily, in South Africa copies of only a few school documents were made available. In both countries it was not possible to observe management and governance meetings. Thus, there were particular policy implementation and decision-making spaces that were deemed appropriate for an outsider to observe, but others that were only to be reflected on through formal interviews.

In both schools, however, despite the way in which boundaries were established between the school sites and the research teams, during the course of the research it was possible to engage head teachers and governing committee members in some discussion around the issues they faced in the schools. To some extent both the distance that the research participants felt from the global goals, and their view that they lacked capacity to engage with issues relating to gender, meant that, for some participants, the research process appeared to represent an opportunity to learn more from the research team, who were positioned as experts.

In the Kenyan school, despite the fact that a national Ministry of Education gender policy had been developed and was designed to help fill this gap in expertise, at the time of data collection it had not reached the school. All 12 teachers in the school were asked whether they were aware of the national gender policy and nine answered 'no'. One teacher explained: 'I have only heard [of gender policy] today as you brought the posters to school and as we are discussing [it]'.

None of the teachers had known or heard of anyone consulted about the policy, despite the fact that the school was located only 35 km from a very large city. Members of the research team took copies of the gender policy to the school and discussed some of the issues it raised in report-back meetings. The involvement of the research team in the school thus presented an opportunity for participants to learn about the policy and reflect on its implications for their work. In the exit interviews teachers were asked about what had changed in relation to the policy since the research had begun. The head teacher explained that as the pamphlets with the gender policy had been brought to the school by the research team, teachers would have read it, saying 'so nobody can have an excuse of not having read about it. So I can say that we now have it'. However, in discussing gender his own reading did not appear to have taken on the complexity of analysis in the policy, and for him the gender issues remained those associated with numbers enrolled:

It has changed in that it has improved. Last time the number of boys was bigger than the number of girls. But now, more girls are coming than boys. So the turn out has changed and it is not like the way we started

(Head teacher, Kenyan school, 28 January 2010)

For this head teacher, who was working in a context where the effects of poverty and hunger were seen as an urgent priority affecting children's attendance, and where even concerns with gender equality constructed in terms of parity of numbers were controversial among parents and community members, who expressed the view that promoting girls disrupted local traditions and cultural values, developing understandings of and practices linked to gender equality that went beyond this narrow view of parity was clearly not easy.

In the South African case study school, participants expressed a similar sense of distance and lack of familiarity with policy relating to gender coming from the national level, and, as with the school in Kenya, saw the presence

of researchers in the school as an opportunity to access information and resources. As in Kenya, there was a sense that research participants did not feel adequately prepared to understand and address gender issues, and in the report-back sessions they requested help from the researcher in developing their understanding of these. This is reflected in the following extracts from the report-back session:

I think this research is an eye opener to all of us. To say the least I think we must agree that we were not aware that we are not doing any justice in this category of gender. Maybe if you have some things that you think can help us, because we want to know more about this so that we can start.

...

Perhaps... as you are connected with the Department of Education, what do they say about gender, please.

(South African school report-back 26 June 2008)

Unlike in the Kenyan school, in the South African school the engagement with the project did translate into some widening of understandings of gender beyond a concern with parity. In the final report-back meeting the senior management team reported that they had made major changes in how they considered gender issues within the school as a direct result of the project. They said the staff now had greater awareness about gender issues, and that the school had established a seven-person committee comprising the SMT and staff from each of the academic phases and that this committee had begun to formulate a policy on gender within the school. The plan was that the committee would take up matters such as teen pregnancy. At the time the research was completed, however, they had yet to take any actions, and their comments – and requests for further help from the researcher – suggested that they continued to lack confidence with regard to understanding and responding to gender issues in the school.

These experiences in the two schools highlight both the importance and the challenge of deepening and sustaining dialogues beyond the lifespan of the project, in contexts in which stakeholders feel very far from processes of policy discussion and development, and lack both the professional development and the resources necessary to understand and address the complexity of gender inequality in contexts of poverty. The positioning of the researchers as experts who could impart knowledge on national and global policy, meant that while there was evidence of some impact in the school sites, this was in relation to *impact on/for* rather than *impact with* research participants in the schools. Although participation in the GEGPRI research contributed to raising awareness of gender equality as an issue among individual teachers and head teachers, and to building connections to national and global policy frameworks, it was much more difficult to build understandings that went beyond a concern with parity of numbers, or to connect these to wider institutional processes of transformation within the schools and communities in which they were located.

4.2 Talking across boundaries: research and reflection at the national and provincial level

In South Africa, although some participants from the National Education Department were hesitant to report on activities of the department without assurance that proper procedures had been observed to secure permission for the study, and a number of officers said they did not have time or appropriate knowledge to be interviewed, the team's previous working relations with this department and key officers holding an engaged interest in gender issues made gaining access easier than in a number of other sites. These relationships were also significant in shaping the sorts of conversations researchers were able to develop with research participants. Although boundaries positioned the researchers as outsiders, these lines were crossed with certain key informants who engaged in a deeper discussion and exchange with researchers. This, together, with the pre-existence of some more critical engagement with the MDG framework and wider concerns around gender and equalities among some participants, noted above, deepened the level of debate and reflection that occurred both within, and as a result of, the report-back meetings and discussion of research findings.

Of particular significance in enabling the development of a productive and critical exchange between researchers and research participants, was the participation of a more senior official with responsibility for equity within the department in the project's advisory group. This official had an interest in gender before the project began – and thus had been identified as an important contact for the project – but as the extract indicates, found this expanded considerably through the discussions with researchers. Thus engagement in the project played a significant role in influencing their work:

My involvement in the GEGPRI project as a government official, policy maker and perhaps more importantly a manager of policy implementation in such an unequal society, had a significant effect on my work. It gave me an opportunity to reflect differently on the work that I was doing, but more importantly, the process of engaging with the research and its findings, provided me with a new and different lens to think about how to do my work... The findings of the project helped me to think more carefully about policy assumptions and the disconnections between intention and reality, or the limitations of policy.

(National official, South Africa, by email, 8 November 2012)

This official reported that the project had resulted in a new focus on addressing teenage pregnancy within the national department, which tried to move away from blaming girls themselves to examining the role of the education system in engaging with girls who become pregnant as well as reflecting critically on the causes of pregnancy and the intersection with gender and other inequalities:

One example of how this project influenced [work in the department] was the imperative to find solutions to high levels of teenage pregnancy amongst schoolgirls... Through research that the Department commissioned on teenage pregnancy to understand the nature of the problems, and by working directly with provincial education officials and schools, it was possible to come to a greater

understanding of the inseparable links between poverty and gender inequality in relation to schoolgirl pregnancy and the limitations of written policy to manage teenage pregnancy within schools. We had to examine how schools deal with pregnancy, how they support learners who become pregnant and what support could be provided to teachers and principals in managing pregnancy. In the Department, we began to engage much more deeply with the complexity of inequality, the multiple causes of teenage pregnancy, the need to eradicate a 'blaming girls' culture, how practically to bring girls back into schools, how to provide adequate pastoral care, the role of families and communities and organisations working in the area. We knew that multiple levels of engagement were needed to fairly and equitably both understand the complex causes of teenage pregnancy and the ways in which schools deal with pregnant learners, as well as the impact of social attitudes on impeding fair policy implementation. Despite a policy that was fundamentally about ensuring continued access and support for pregnant schoolgirls, the reality of implementation was that social attitudes fundamentally influenced how schools engaged with pregnant schoolgirls, often working against policy objectives.

(National official, South Africa, by email, 8 November 2012)

This official's testimony suggests a very direct engagement with the project's findings with regard to the way in which discourses around blame, pregnancy and morality affected and limited the way in which wider gender equality concerns within education were interpreted and acted upon. It points to the initiation of a process designed to tackle this directly through working with officials at different levels in order to build and develop a deeper and more nuanced understanding of the interconnections between teenage pregnancy and wider gender issues within and beyond schooling. For this participant, active participation in and engagement with the research project was central in enabling impact through developing understanding at the individual level, which was then linked to wider impact at organisational and institutional levels, through work with officers across the department, and the development and implementation of new national policy.

In the provincial education department in South Africa, although researchers were not able to cross insider boundaries in the same way as occurred within the national education department, they were also able to establish good relationships with research participants, resulting in some engaged and critical discussion of findings, linked to concrete plans for action. In the first report-back session, when discussing findings from the first phase of research, participants identified the development of agreed policy on gender issues as a key need. As can be seen in the following extracts, they suggested that their engagement with the research had empowered them to take the conversation further, and push for more concrete action:

[my colleague] next to me here was saying to me that this research is reflecting exactly what is happening... And I was saying to her that it came at a right time when we're going to have a seminar, in which we want to address such issues.

(Gender focal point, South African province, 14 August 2009)

As an individual I've been struggling [with] what is it really that we are not doing? We know that [gender]'s an add-on function but I am in a sub-directorate which we are dealing with policies and I've been struggling to go out and say [that] I have this [motions as though holding an imaginary document] so that things will go in my district this way. So now that you've just picked on that vacuum of policies... So thank you so much. I think the senior management will look at it very soon.

(Provincial official, South Africa, 14 August 2009)

When the researcher returned to the provincial department for the second round of data collection, although it was not clear that these discussions had resulted in new policy development, a number of actions with regard to gender had taken place. These had provided space for further discussion and engagement with some of the issues raised. They included a gender mainstreaming workshop facilitated by the Public Administration Leadership and Management Academy and attended by administrative staff, a school-level training programme, and the establishment of Gender Focal Point networks at district level. Here, the discussion and actions that were generated stopped short of the engaged and critical processes that explicitly set out to tackle stereotypical and essentialised assumptions around gender and girls, and the discourse of blame that pervaded discussion and action to address school girl pregnancy that were initiated at the national level. However, they do point to a renewed commitment and energy to support capacity building and develop networks for the discussion of gender issues and the development and implementation of policy.

In contrast to the experience with the South African departments, working across the insider–outsider divide was much more difficult in relation to Kenya's national Ministry of Education, and this presented challenges both for the research process and for the extent to which we were able to clearly identify impact linked to the project. In Kenya, some members of the research team had prior personal and professional connections that helped secure access to conduct research. However, despite formal access permission from the government, they experienced difficulty in securing interviews and documents and arranging to observe meetings. Although some members of the research team had a long history of working with colleagues in the Kenya Ministry of Education, and in some ways saw themselves as a knowledge broker working between funders and bureaucrats in a middle space, shifting politics in the ministry, in which aid relationships, race and ethnicity were all in play at different moments, meant it was hard to consistently maintain such a role for the research team. As a result, some interviews were scuttled by impromptu meetings, or if they were held often the team was directed elsewhere for information about gender. Thus, access to the ministry was to a limited level only, and the team was kept at arm's length as outsiders. In many instances the researchers experienced gatekeeping that made it difficult to reach the senior officials.

This was exacerbated by narrow interpretations of gender equality as a technical issue that could be compartmentalised and addressed through particular organisational structures, rather than as being something that was embedded across different facets of the ministry's work. Despite the fact that gender was a cross-cutting investment programme under the Kenya Education Sector Support Programme (KESSP), the researchers were constantly referred to the gender officer for interviews on gender research. Responses such as, 'Yes, gender is a cross-cutting issue. The officer in charge of gender and education is the one who handles all these issues across the board. That is the person who will help you' were very common. It was thus difficult to establish a sense of shared concern on aspects of the question of gender between members of the research team and ministry officers.

This distance between the researchers and the research participants was reflected in the report-back sessions. These, although well attended by department officials, were much more formal and less engaged than those held in the South African national department. In these, while participants were keen to engage critically with aspects of the project's research methodology, there was much less willingness to engage with the findings themselves in any depth, or develop discussions around how to take these forward. This meant that, in contrast to the *impact with* that we documented in relation to the national department in South Africa, engagement with the research findings at a national policy level was much less immediate, and a wider range of processes around more traditional forms research dissemination had to be drawn on in order to achieve *impact on/for*. These included large dissemination events attended by a range of stakeholders including research participants as well as academics, other government officials, civil society organisations, community leaders, teachers and the media, and the extensive distribution of copies of the final report. It was also significant that the global NGO that took part in the study had a very close working relationship with the national Ministry of Education and was actively involved in the implementation of ministry programmes. This meant that some of the discussions that we were able to initiate with NGO staff through their participation in the project could be fed indirectly into the work of the national ministry.

Since the finalisation of the research project, there have been a number of significant developments in relation to gender in Kenya at the national level. Of particular note was the promulgation of the new constitutional dispensation in August 2010 following a successful referendum. In the constitutional order the issues of education and gender were enshrined: Article 53 paragraph (1)(b) states that every child has the right to free and compulsory basic education and in relation to gender Article 81(b) also states that the electoral system shall comply with the principle that not more than two-thirds of the members of elective public bodies shall be of the same gender. These two provisions marked a significant step towards achieving the two MDGs on education and gender equality, and the institutionalisation of a concern with gender equality. However, there are concerns as to how effectively they are being implemented. The findings from the GEGPRI

research suggest that ensuring that these constitutional commitments are realised through transformative action will require ongoing efforts to engage stakeholders charged with their delivery in discussion about what they mean and entail.

In the research sites associated with globally connected NGOs based in Kenya and South Africa, the nature of the boundaries that were established between researchers and research participants affected the extent to which project members were able to engage in the discussion with the level of depth required to facilitate impact, despite there being pre-existing relationships with key stakeholders and researcher participants. With professional connections and a sense of familiar 'insiderness' between some of the most senior staff of the national/global NGOs selected for study and certain members of the research team, it was anticipated that conducting these case studies would be easy. However, in both Kenya and South Africa, these case studies proved the hardest to complete.

In Kenya, initially it was difficult to gain access to the organisation owing to a tight command structure and the key decision-maker being away in the field or abroad. It was a challenge setting up interviews with officers running projects across the country and only published documents were made available. In South Africa, there were similar access difficulties and some interviewees felt their work did not have any gender focus. Ironically, despite the team's sense of kinship and insiderness with NGOs, strong boundaries positioned the teams as outsiders. The initial assumption that a global NGO, with a declared interest in gender issues, might be forthcoming with the research team was contradicted in the research process. The rhetoric that we were all insiders to a global civil society discussion on gender, education and poverty reduction was not given content during their fieldwork. The reasons for this were complex. In some cases they reflected power dynamics that affected relationships both within organisations and between individual participants and the research team. The process was also affected by logistical difficulties associated with small organisations being caught in tight time frames and budgets, in which research and deliberation is seen as somewhat luxurious. These were exacerbated by the contested nature of work on gender, and a sense of a backlash and hostility to work on women's rights within the wider environment in which the NGOs' work was located. In South Africa, for example, one interviewee who was working on a girls' computer literacy and empowerment project in a peri-urban area with high levels of poverty was open in discussing her previous experiences of women's activism and the hostility she has encountered:

[At a meeting some months back before I worked for global organisation] I stood up and I was giving a statement on gender equality. I was just talking. I think I mentioned just one statement and all the men in the room walked out. They said we cannot come here and be humiliated and be forced to give women more rights... They did not just stand up and walk you know. There was a 'Whooo' in the room and there was a lot of noise... And now in relation to [organisation] work, cyber training the group. We normally have

parents meetings – parents of the children that attend cyber training and things that parents say you can hear. That it's not well taken by both parents. They say we are taking their kids somewhere...: taking their girls particularly so these girls are going to grow up to be lesbians.

(NGO official, South Africa, 2009)

In this context, where even the provision of computer training to girls was hotly contested, opening up space for wider discussions around the transformation of gender inequalities was clearly very difficult.

Taken together, the experiences of working at national and provincial levels and with NGOs and education bureaucracies highlight the potential for research processes to engage research participants in processes involving the co-production of knowledge, and, in doing so, to open up new spaces for dialogue around complex issues in relation to gender equality in order to enable the development of new policy and practice, and institutionalise concern with the transformation of gender inequalities. However, they also point to the challenges of doing this. The GEGPRI project's experiences in these spaces highlight the importance of establishing and sustaining relationships with key research participants in order to develop and maximise *impact with* as well as *impact on/for*. Significantly, they also point to the importance of paying attention to the power dynamics that characterise relationships both within organisations and between researchers and participants, and of understanding the wider context within which individual and organisations are located and different meanings of gender are negotiated and contested.

4.3 Global frameworks, indicators and implementation: learning for the Sustainable Development Goals

In addition to the work developed in the two case study countries, the GEGPRI project also conducted research with key stakeholders involved in the development and implementation of global policy on gender and education who were based in international organisations located in the global North. These included international NGOs, multilateral agencies and bilateral donors. Although this element of the project did not adapt the quasi-action approach of two cycles of research and reflection through feedback sessions used in the case study countries, for some of the global research participants involvement in the research was nonetheless useful for their own work. One staff member from an international NGO, for example, explained:

because what you have done, I have also been reflecting on these issues too. I was like, 'I don't know how I am going to answer these questions' but it has really helped me reflect

(International NGO officer, 27 January 2008)

Finding ways to engage more widely in discussions on global policy initiatives in relation to gender, education and poverty at international level was also a key dimension of the project's approach to impact. One way in which we did this was through participation in the E4 conference hosted by the

United Nations Girls Education Initiative (UNGEI) in Dakar, Senegal, in 2010. The conference, which was held online and face to face, brought together practitioners, national and international policymakers and researchers working on gender and education to review ten years of the UNGEI and other organisations concerned with gender and education since the world education conference held in Dakar in 2000 (see Peppin-Vaughan 2010). Members of the GEGPRI research team participated in the organising committee for the conference, presented findings from the GEGPRI research and contributed to the formulation of the conference declaration.

The E4 declaration, which was developed at the conference, noted the progress that had been made in reducing the numbers of girls out of school, but also recognised that 'poor quality of education, extreme poverty, structural inequality and violence against girls continue to jeopardize the achievement of the education- and gender-related Education for All and Millennium Development Goals by 2015' (UNGEI 2010). In arguing for 'urgent action in support of girls' rights to education, gender equality and empowerment opportunities', it set out a meaning and understanding of gender equity that went considerably beyond the minimal stress on gender parity in the MDGs, and the narrow ways in which this had been interpreted by many of the research participants in Kenya and South Africa.³ This reflects the nuance of the discussions that occurred at the conference, which facilitated the development of richer understandings of gender equality in education among conference participants. However, the declaration stopped short of setting out strategies for action or a clearer indicator and measurement framework through which these could be monitored (see Unterhalter and North 2011a for more detailed discussion).

Since the E4 conference, global policy attention has turned to the development of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) framework.⁴ The findings from the GEGPRI project with regard to the experiences of the MDGs raised a number of significant issues for the development and implementation of the SDGs, and researchers from the project have been actively involved in feeding these into deliberations and consultation processes on the SDG framework. Our findings on how participants working at national, provincial and local levels and from within national departments and NGOs interpreted the MDG targets and drew on them in their work, clearly revealed the limitations of the indicators used within the MDG framework, particularly the gender parity indicator. Researchers from the GEGPRI project have been actively engaged in the discussions and consultations on indicators for the SDGs at the global level, working closely with the UNGEI to input into the development of indicators relating to gender equality and education. Moreover, the research project itself, and the experiences of the research process documented in this chapter, also highlighted the need for much wider consultation on the SDGs. To a large extent this has been taken up, with extensive consultations at regional, national and local levels, through, for example, platforms such as 'the world we want' and the ID100 project.⁵ These large surveys and consultation processes, however, did not look closely at issues around the middle space and the complex relationship the stakeholders working in this space may

have with issues around gender equality. Our research findings, and our experiences of the research process itself in relation to thinking about impact, suggests that continuing to explore, theorise and engage with actors in this middle space will be essential as we move into the post-2015 agenda.

5.1 CONCLUSIONS

Discussion of impact in relation to research projects often focuses on building impact either from the bottom up or from the top down. The GEGPRI project experience suggests that while these are both important, so too is paying attention to the people working in terrains of the middle space located between these two extremes of the policy arc. Stakeholders engaging with policy from within national and local education departments, NGOs or school governing bodies play a significant role in shaping the form its enactment takes. Yet our research suggests they often do not have opportunities to step back and reflect critically on the policies themselves, or the – often complex – issues associated with them. Using research – and the research process itself – as a way of creating opportunities for this reflection, can therefore be an important part of achieving impact.

The GEGPRI research highlights the importance of engaging stakeholders working in the middle space, but, like subsequent research studies in this area (see, for example, DeJaeghere 2012; DeJaeghere and Wiger 2013; Unterhalter 2016), it also uncovered how fragile the understandings of these stakeholders may be. The project documented many different meanings of gender across the different research sites and highlighted some of the challenges in developing and supporting meanings that stressed equality, human rights and social justice, rather than entailing distancing and blame or a knee-jerk gesture towards noticing girls, often in some essentialised ways that focused on vulnerability and embodiment.⁶

The research thus points both to the possibilities and to the challenges of thinking about impact in relation to complex – and often contested – ideas such as gender equality. It suggests that developing and sustaining impact requires complex, two-way collaborative processes, which may involve stakeholders providing new research agendas, as well as researchers finding and reflecting on things that may be uncomfortable to them. Our experiences through the GEGPRI research suggest that in order to support change it is important to open and sustain new spaces for dialogue and discussion, but also to pay attention to building and crossing bridges, translating between insiders and outsiders, and reflecting on the connections between what works and what matters (Unterhalter 2009).

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ENDNOTES

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- 2 Drawing on Unterhalter (2007), we associate institutional capacity with the establishment of legal, organisational, redistributive, or regulatory processes that are necessary for the transformation of inequalities.
- 3 According to the declaration: 'Achieving equity in education will entail putting in place a rights-based empowerment framework that will target the most vulnerable and transform power hierarchies in learning spaces, communities and policy structures in order to give poor and vulnerable girls a voice and ensure that their right to quality education is sustained'.
- 4 See <https://sustainabledevelopment.un.org/sdgs> for details of the goals and targets.
- 5 See www.beyond2015.org/world-we-want-2015-web-platform and UNRISD and SIID 2015.
- 6 In this way the research foreshadowed some policy and programme changes that were emerging, exemplified, for example, through the girls' education challenge, which emphasised 'what works' to get girls in school, with very limited attention to how to understand marginalisation and do integrated development to support change (see Unterhalter 2016).





05

HOW COLLABORATION, EARLY ENGAGEMENT AND COLLECTIVE OWNERSHIP INCREASE RESEARCH IMPACT:

Strengthening community-based child protection mechanisms in Sierra Leone*

Michael Wessells, David Lamin, Marie Manyeh, Dora King,
Lindsay Stark, Sarah Lilley and Kathleen Kostelny

ABSTRACT

Using inter-agency action research in Sierra Leone, this chapter provides a case study on how a highly collaborative approach can enable child protection research to achieve a significant national impact. The chapter describes how the inter-agency research facilitated a community-driven approach to addressing teenage pregnancy. The promising results obtained before the Ebola crisis helped shape a new Child and Family Welfare Policy that featured the role of families and communities rather than formal structures. Then it examines how the social process of the research enabled it to have a national impact. A strategic partnership with UNICEF, a collaborative, dialogue-oriented approach to finalising the methodology and site selection, and ongoing learning enabled a spirit of collective ownership. Key lessons include the importance of using a collaborative, inter-agency approach at all stages; promoting early engagement with diverse actors; having ongoing engagement with the relevant government ministry at multiple levels; and working with a broker that helps to understand and manage power dynamics. Although the process described may not be possible in all settings, a collaborative, collectively owned approach is a promising approach for boosting research impact.

KEYWORDS

child protection, early engagement, collaboration, collective ownership, child protection policy.

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Research is typically designed and conducted with an eye towards technical considerations such as robustness, validity and reliability. However, research that meets stringent technical standards frequently fails to achieve the desired impact in enabling changes in practice, policy, or both. Not uncommonly, this situation leaves researchers scratching their heads and asking ‘Why aren’t the leaders listening?’

The purpose of this chapter is to help illuminate how a collaborative, partnership approach can enable research to have a greater impact on policy and practice at a national level. Telling the story of inter-agency action research on child protection in Sierra Leone, it features the human side of research and the importance of collective ownership. First the chapter outlines the origins of the action research on child protection and wellbeing and discusses its methodology, key findings and contribution to a new national Child and Family Welfare Policy. It then analyses the key lessons learned about how the action research process enabled it to have national impact.

1. | BACKGROUND ON THE INTER-AGENCY ACTION RESEARCH

Many of the world’s most vulnerable people are children, defined under international law as people under 18 years of age. In many developing countries, children frequently comprise half or more of the population. In both emergencies and development settings, children’s vulnerability owes in no small part to the myriad threats or child protection risks in their environment, that is, in their social ecologies (Bronfenbrenner 1979) such as families, schools, communities, and the wider social system. These may include risks such as violence, rape and other forms of sexual assault, armed attack, mass displacement, separation from caregivers, loss of loved ones, trafficking, HIV and AIDS, child labour, and recruitment into armed forces or armed groups (Boothby, Strang and Wessells 2006; Fernando and Ferrari 2013). As these risks accumulate, children may be likely to experience intense suffering, mental health issues, developmental delays and difficulties functioning well in tasks such as education. Collectively, these issues make it a high priority to provide child protection, defined as ‘the prevention of and response to abuse, neglect, exploitation, and violence against children’ (Child Protection Working Group 2012: 13).

A largely unanswered question, however, is ‘What are the best means of protecting children?’ At present, the emphasis is on the strengthening of national child protection systems (African Child Policy Forum *et al.* 2013; Davis, McCaffery and Conticini 2012; Krueger, Thompstone and Crispin 2013; UNICEF *et al.* 2013; Wulczyn *et al.* 2010). Key to system strengthening is the work of formal actors such as police, government social workers and magistrates and also non-formal actors such as families, communities and leaders including religious leaders, elders and teachers.

In strengthening child protection, international non-governmental organisations (NGOs) have used a predominantly top-down approach in which outside child protection experts impose their approaches on local people (Freymond and Cameron 2006; Wessells 2009, 2015). For example, at grassroots level, international NGOs have made widespread use of community-based mechanisms such as Child Welfare Committees (CWCs; also called Child Protection Committees) to help protect children (Wessells 2009). Typically, a CWC consists of 10–15 people and includes women and men and several teenage boys and girls. Having been trained in child rights and child protection, the CWC members monitor their village or neighbourhood for violations against children and report the violations to appropriate authorities such as the police. CWC members also work to prevent violations through community discussions and education. This is a top-down approach in that the idea for the CWC came from the NGO, which then persuaded and led the community to accept it. As explained below, there are reasons to question this approach.

1.1 A global review

In 2009, however, a global, inter-agency review of community-based child protection mechanisms reported that the evidence base showing the effectiveness of CWCs is quite weak (Wessells 2009). Few evaluations used robust designs that enable one to make causal attributions about the intervention's effectiveness, and most evaluations focused more on outputs such as the number of trainings conducted for CWCs than on the actual outcomes for children. Also, NGO-facilitated CWCs typically had low to moderate levels of community ownership, as local people tended to view them as NGO projects rather than as processes that communities themselves had constructed to fulfil their obligations to protect children. This finding was problematic for the use of CWCs because the review found that community ownership was the most important determinant of effectiveness and sustainability. In many settings, when the funding for the CWCs dried up, the CWCs typically languished or collapsed. In addition, NGO-facilitated CWCs were found in some cases to compete with and undermine indigenous community mechanisms such as action by chiefs and elders on behalf of vulnerable children. This is unfortunate because the latter mechanisms frequently enjoy high levels of community ownership and are more likely to be sustainable. Further, community-based mechanisms were more likely to be effective and sustainable when they were linked with and supported by formal actors at higher levels (e.g. district level) within the wider child protection system. Together, these results indicated the need to develop a different child protection approach that enables higher levels of community ownership.

1.2 Designing the action research

Subsequently, Save the Children and the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) convened a meeting of inter-agency stakeholders, including government and community stakeholders, in Nairobi to plan appropriate next steps. Through a highly participatory process, the participants decided to develop and test, using mixed methods, an alternate approach to community-based child protection mechanisms that would feature high levels of community ownership and also appropriate links with district-level child protection stakeholders. In contrast to the top-down approach, the non-formal–formal links were to be decided by the community in a grassroots-driven or bottom-up approach.

Broadly, the design included elicitive learning (i.e. not using preconceived questions and categories) about harms to children and community mechanisms for supporting vulnerable children, followed by use of a robust design that permits one to make causal inferences about the effects of the intervention. To achieve high levels of community ownership, the intervention was to be community-driven rather than NGO- or expert-driven. Following an action research approach, communities themselves would select which issue to address, develop an intervention, implement the intervention and help to evaluate it. To help strengthen the evidence base, the design included the use of baseline, mid-point, and endline measures of actual outcomes for children.

The group also decided to form an Inter-Agency Learning Initiative on Community-Based Child Protection Mechanisms and Child Protection Systems. Save the Children (via Sarah Lilley) was selected to coordinate a global Reference Group, with one of its members – the Columbia Group for Children in Adversity (via Michael Wessells) – serving as the technical arm for the research. This collaborative approach was not incidental but grounded in the belief that no single agency by itself can protect children and that mutual learning and collaboration are at the heart of strengthening the child protection sector both nationally and globally.

To increase the generalisability of the approach and findings, the group decided to conduct the action research in two different regions of sub-Saharan Africa: West Africa, and East and Southern Africa. The selection of one country in each region as a site for the research was guided by multiple criteria, including the willingness of the UNICEF country office to help support the research. This criterion proved to be of pivotal importance since UNICEF has a mandate to work closely with and support governments and is well positioned to influence policies relating to children. Also, since UNICEF is the global standard bearer in regard to child protection, UNICEF involvement and support are key for influencing practice.

1.3 The action research in Sierra Leone

Sierra Leone was selected in 2010 through a consultative process that had both national and international dimensions. A key consideration was the keen interest of UNICEF Sierra Leone in participating in and supporting the research. Sierra Leone had a plethora of child protection issues in 2010, some eight years following the end of its brutal decade-long war. UNICEF was concerned about addressing these issues not only because of their magnitude but also because they had reason to question the dominant approach then used to protect children. In 2007, the Government of Sierra Leone (GoSL) had enacted a Child Rights Act that had mandated the establishment of a CWC in each village. Even in 2010, however, UNICEF had preliminary evidence that this approach was not functioning as had been intended (Child Frontiers 2010). This realisation made the research of keen interest to UNICEF. Internationally, Sierra Leone was of interest because many CWCs had been established during the war but had collapsed afterwards, suggesting the need for an alternative approach. Also, the Principal Investigator (PI) (Wessells) had worked in Sierra Leone off and on during the war and was

familiar with the context. From experience, he knew that Sierra Leone had many talented child protection workers, chief among whom was UNICEF worker David Lamin.

The action research was led by a mixture of national and international researchers. The Lead National Researcher, Dora King, oversaw national teams of trained, female and male Sierra Leonean researchers who spoke the local languages and understood the local contexts. The data collectors were backstopped and mentored by Team Leaders in Moyamba (Lamin) and Bombali (King). In turn, the Team Leaders were supported by international researchers, primarily Lindsay Stark (Lead Methodologist) and the PI.

The research was conducted in multiple phases, beginning in January 2011. The initial ethnographic phase aimed to establish trust with and learn deeply about communities and their views of who were children, what were the main harms to children, and what happened when particular harms to children occurred. Living and working in villages, the researchers used methods such as participant observation, in-depth interviews, group discussions and body mapping to learn from different sub-groups such as girls, boys, women and men. The main harms to children that local people identified were: children being out of school, teenage pregnancy out of wedlock, heavy work, and maltreatment of children not living with their biological parents. Surprisingly, among the top ten harms was 'child rights', which adults said had undermined their authority as parents since child rights workers had taught that parents should not discipline their children by corporal punishment. Further, the participants reported overwhelmingly that people did not report violations against children, even criminal offences, to the CWCs or government officials such as the police (Wessells 2011; Wessells *et al.* 2012). These findings, which resonated with others (e.g. Behnam 2011; Child Frontiers 2010), raised strong questions about the effectiveness of top-down approaches (Wessells *et al.* 2012, 2015), including CWCs and the Child Rights Act itself.

In the second phase (2012), the research team used a free listing methodology to learn how local adults and teenagers (13–18 years of age) understand children's wellbeing. They consistently identified aspects such as participation in education, contributing to one's family, respect for elders and obedience as key signs that children are doing well (Stark *et al.* 2012). These outcome areas, together with those derived from the ethnographic research, were used to define key outcome areas for children's risks and wellbeing. Subsequently, these outcome areas were used to define specific indicators and to construct a survey that measured children's risks and wellbeing outcomes. In this manner, local views regarding important outcomes for children were incorporated into systematic measures. The population-based survey that was developed also reflected a balance of outcomes for children that were based on international child rights standards.

In the third phase (2013–15), the research used a quasi-experimental design in which clusters of communities were assigned randomly to an intervention condition or to a comparison condition.² To enable community ownership of work to support vulnerable children, the approach taken was that of participatory action research, which both reflects and enables community resilience (Mckay *et al.* 2011; Wessells 2012). In participatory action research, local groups of people collectively identify a problem of concern and then mobilise themselves to plan, implement and evaluate an intervention to address the problem. This approach generates high levels of community ownership since it is the community that holds the power and makes key decisions, defines the problem and manages or runs the intervention.

The idea was to have communities select a harm to children and then implement a self-designed intervention to address it. To promote bottom-up system strengthening, the communities were to choose and collaborate with formal (government) actors in the child protection system. Living within each intervention cluster was a trained facilitator who was highly process-focused and enabled inclusive participation, slow dialogue and group problem solving, and decision-making by the communities, without excessive guidance by their chiefs. The plan was to collect baseline, mid-line, and endline survey data and to collect qualitative data as well. Towards the end of the planning process, baseline measures were collected (Stark *et al.* 2013) using the survey and also intervention-specific measures.

In both districts, the intervention cluster chose to address teenage pregnancy through a mixture of family planning, sexual and reproductive health education and life skills. To build community capacities for the intervention, trainings were provided by Marie Stopes and Restless Development in Bombali and by Restless Development in Moyamba. High levels of ownership were achieved because the communities themselves created an inclusive planning process, defined the problem to address, chose how to address it and implemented the intervention. Government collaboration occurred through the District Ministry of Health providing contraceptives, training health post staff how to use implants, and having health staff contribute to education around issues of puberty, sexuality, pregnancy and pregnancy prevention. The foundation of the intervention was community action, including: role plays by teenage girls and boys followed by discussions; parent–child discussions of puberty, sex and pregnancy; creation of and transmission by teenagers of youth-oriented messages about preventing teenage pregnancy; ongoing community dialogues and reflection about teenage pregnancy; and support from health workers and authorities (Wessells 2015; Wessells, Manyeh and Lamin 2014). Table 1 provides an overview of the intervention elements.

Table 1 The main components of the community-driven intervention to reduce teenage pregnancy

ELEMENT	DESCRIPTION
Collective dialogue, awareness raising and negotiation	In village meetings and sub-groups such as teenage girls, teenage boys, adult women, adult men, and elders discussed the main harms to children, which issue should be addressed, how to address the issue, and diverse aspects of teenage pregnancy. These dialogues raised collective awareness and created readiness to receive various messages associated with teenage pregnancy.
Collective decision-making, empowerment and responsibility	The communities made their own decisions about which issue to address, how to address it, etc. As a result, they saw the decisions and intervention process as 'theirs', and they took responsibility for insuring its success.
Linkage of communities with health services	The District Medical Office agreed to keep up the supply of contraceptives and train health post nurses to do procedures such as implants. Feeling supported by health staff, people visited the health post for contraceptives and invited nurses to visit the villages and help to educate people about puberty, reproductive health and pregnancy.
Peer education	Community-selected Peer Educators (including teenage girls and boys), trained by NGOs, helped to educate their peers on an ongoing basis. Informal peer education occurred also through everyday discussions in the community.
Use of culturally relevant media	Using song and drama, peer educators conducted culturally appropriate educational activities such as role plays followed by group discussions in which teenagers and adults discussed the benefits of good decisions made by young people, and the problems associated with bad decisions.
Child leadership and messaging	Girls and boys played leadership roles. In light of the fact that children talk in distinctive ways, children created their own messages based on what had been learned in NGO-led workshops and discussions with health workers.
Inclusion and outreach	Representatives of diverse sub-groups took part on a task force that facilitated much of the work to prevent teenage pregnancy. To include marginalised people such as children with disabilities, the task force members and peer educators made home visits on a regular basis.
Parent-child discussions	Rejuvenating an older practice that the war had disrupted, parents and children discussed issues of puberty, sexual and reproductive health, sex, and teenage pregnancy prevention. In some cases, the children were better informed than adults and helped to correct parental misconceptions.
Role modelling	By taking part in activities such as drama and singing songs, young people, including teenage boys, signalled that they wanted to prevent teenage pregnancy. Similarly, parents provided role models for each other in talking constructively with their children about teenage pregnancy.
Legitimation by authority	The paramount chiefs publicly supported the importance of preventing teenage pregnancy and encouraged people to get involved in the intervention. Other community leaders such as teachers and religious leaders also encouraged support for preventing teenage pregnancy.

The intervention began in March–April 2013, and the mid-line effects of the intervention were assessed in 2014 using the quantitative survey (Stark *et al.* 2014) and qualitative findings from key informant interviews and a community self-assessment (Wessells *et al.* 2014). As shown in Box 1, the midline results were promising and featured high levels of community ownership and diverse signs of the intervention effects in addressing teenage pregnancy. However, the results were preliminary in that more time was needed to see fully the effects of the intervention. Also, some of the effects visible from the community descriptions and qualitative data were not triangulated fully with the quantitative data. It was hoped that the subsequent endline measures would allow full triangulation and analysis of the results, including systematic comparisons with the control clusters.

Unfortunately, the eruption of the Ebola crisis in Sierra Leone in August 2014 disrupted the intervention and also made it impossible to collect the endline survey data as had been planned. Reports from the field indicated that the Ebola crisis had introduced a host of confounding variables and threats to children, including increases in teenage pregnancy. Without knowing more about the status and characteristics of the intervention, what the confounding variables were, and how conditions that affect teenage pregnancy had changed, it would have been impossible to interpret the endline survey data in a meaningful way. For these reasons, a decision was taken to replace the endline survey with open, ethnographic learning that would illuminate the situation in the communities. This ethnographic learning took place in November–December 2015 (Kostelny *et al.* 2016) and is not discussed here since the focus is on the community-driven intervention and its wider impact.

1.4 National impact

Notwithstanding the impact of the Ebola crisis, the inter-agency research approach and findings, which converged with the findings of other studies (e.g. Child Frontiers 2010), enabled the action research to have a significant influence on the national policy to support vulnerable children in Sierra Leone. The findings that local people relied mostly on family and community mechanisms and that community-owned processes were effective even in addressing challenging issues such as teenage pregnancy argued in favour of a policy that emphasised the importance of supporting existing family and community mechanisms. At the same time, research conducted by Harvard University with UNICEF indicated that local people were more likely to report severe violations against children to two people acting as focal points who had been chosen by the community and trained for their work.

PROMISING FINDINGS

The preliminary results included positive outcomes related to child protection, the community process and system strengthening.

Community ownership. High levels of community ownership were evident in how many people volunteered their time and work, without material compensation, and regularly referred to the intervention as 'ours', stating that NGOs and the government support them but do not lead the intervention.

Non-formal–formal linkage and collaboration. The intervention process significantly improved communities' collaboration and linkage with the local health posts. In contrast to previous low use of health posts, many teenagers and/or their parents visited the health posts regularly for contraceptives or advice. Villages frequently invited nurses and other health staff to visit in order to educate villagers about puberty, sex and preventing teenage pregnancy.

Contraception. The district medical officers fulfilled their promise to supply the contraceptives and train the health staff. Relative to the comparison condition, teenagers in the intervention communities reported increased intent to use condoms regularly and increased willingness to ask their partners to use a condom. These can be precursors of wider changes in behaviour and social norms related to sex.

Life skills. Teenage girls reported that because of the intervention, they said 'No' more frequently to unwanted sex. Both girls and boys said that they had learned how to discuss and negotiate with their partners about sex, and also how to plan their sexual activities in light of wider life goals. In addition, boys said openly that they had a responsibility to prevent teenage pregnancy, which contrasted sharply with the boys' previous behaviour.

Teenage pregnancy. Participant observations and interviews with health post staff, monitors, teenagers and adults indicated a significant decrease in teenage pregnancies. In the intervention communities in both districts, participants reported that in an average school year (September–June) before the intervention had begun there were five or six teenage pregnancies per village. In contrast, in the 2013/14 school year, half the communities reported no new teenage pregnancies, and the other half reported only one new teenage pregnancy. Grandmothers, who are respected community figures, assured that it was impossible to hide pregnancies in the villages.

Spin-offs. Participants said that school dropouts had decreased. Also, some villages had spontaneously begun to discuss the problem of early marriage. Having learned more about the adverse effects of teenage pregnancy, villagers had begun to question the appropriateness of any teenage pregnancy and also of early marriage.

Encouraged by these findings, the GoSL and UNICEF decided to develop a new policy that placed support for families and communities at the centre and avoided the 'add a structure' approach that governments frequently take in addressing problems. To support the drafting and development of a new policy, UNICEF hired Child Frontiers, the consulting group that had led the initial mapping of the child protection system in West Africa. However, the development of the new policy was interrupted by the Ebola crisis beginning in July 2014 and also hampered by turnover in the Ministry of Social Welfare Gender and Children's Affairs. Nevertheless, the GoSL enacted in December 2015 a new Child and Family Welfare Policy that embodied the insights from the inter-agency action research. Ultimately, the GoSL listened to the research because it saw it as its own and as addressing the questions that were at the heart of its efforts to support vulnerable children.

The implementation of the new policy faces challenges related to scale, cost and the capacities of different partners to enable effective implementation. Via UNICEF, a technical unit of four agencies that had been very active in the research has been convened to plan and prepare for the roll-out of the new policy using the methods and approach of the research. The plan is to go to scale in a measured approach that enables learning about capacity building and implementation on a continuing basis. Initially, the approach will be extended throughout Moyamba and Bombali Districts through partners that have been trained in how to facilitate the community-driven approach. Subsequently, the community-driven approach will be extended to cover all 14 districts. In this manner, UNICEF, the GoSL and the research team hope to address the frequently expressed concern that bottom-up approaches have difficulty going to scale. Collectively, this work will transform the strictly top-down approach to child protection system strengthening towards the mixture of top-down and bottom-up approaches that are needed for building a system that effectively enables children's protection and wellbeing.

2. LESSONS LEARNED ON HOW TO MOVE FROM RESEARCH TO IMPACT

A key question is what enabled the research to achieve a national impact? Broadly, five key factors are discernible: a collaborative inter-agency approach, early engagement with diverse actors, vertical engagement with the key government ministry, collective reflection on the implications of the research, and the management of power dynamics. These factors are examined below in the form of lessons learned that aim to highlight the practical implications for other research projects. Although the lessons are discussed individually, their interconnectedness should also be recognised.

2.1 Lesson 1: Use a collaborative, inter-agency approach at all stages of the research

A key lesson was that inter-agency collaboration contributed to a sense of collective ownership in the research. As discussed above, even the idea behind the action research originated in collaboration and discussion between

key international agencies that work on child protection. The fact that the question being asked and the broad methodology had been worked out collectively meant that some of the main NGOs in the global child protection sector (e.g. UNICEF, Save the Children, Plan International, World Vision, ChildFund) saw the importance of the research and experienced a sense of collective ownership for it. This collective backing for the research probably increased its salience and perceived importance in Sierra Leone. Also, the sense of ownership felt by individual agencies such as Save the Children internationally probably trickled down to their Sierra Leone offices. The fact that the research was collective in nature may also have helped to calm the inter-agency rivalries that might otherwise have impeded the research.

An important part of the collaborative process early on was the establishment of an in-country Reference Group, which was coordinated by Save the Children in Sierra Leone. Its purpose was to develop a collaborative, interagency approach in guiding and supporting the research. Different members such as UNICEF, Plan International, World Vision, ChildFund, Action Aid and Goal supported the research in diverse ways. Save the Children, for example, seconded one of its staff to the research team for the initial ethnographic phase of the research. Plan International provided financial support for the field testing of the survey instrument, and it provided the use of its guest house and office in Moyamba at various times. World Vision helped to support the intervention planning and development process. As agencies invested in the research, they also developed a sense of ownership for it.

Over time, the collaboration with UNICEF became increasingly important in areas such as resource sharing, door opening and logistics. At the request of the PI, UNICEF agreed to enable David Lamin to serve as one of the leaders of the national research team. Lamin went on to become the main strategist and actor who orchestrated the national team building and collaboration with government and civil society partners that underpinned the impact of the research. UNICEF also provided financial support, for example, for the initial baseline survey. In addition, UNICEF opened the doors with the government actors at district level and with UNICEF regional staff who advised on how to contextualise the research methodology. With respect to operations, an ongoing financial challenge was the rising costs of fuel and vehicle rentals. Fortunately, UNICEF provided on multiple occasions the vehicles and drivers that were needed to transport research teams during the research.

An important part of the collaborative process that enabled national impact was a collaborative approach to co-learning with and influencing multiple stakeholders on an ongoing basis. As described below, the process of ongoing engagement, mutual learning and reflection on how to improve policy and practice was probably as important as were particular events and decisions. This co-learning orientation helped to bring forward the insights of different actors and also avoided making agencies or policy leaders feel that somehow an outside group of researchers was imposing its own views.

2.2 Lesson 2: Promote early engagement with diverse actors on a national level

A second lesson learned was the importance of early engagement, both horizontal and vertical, with diverse actors in Sierra Leone. Typically, engagement strategies are guided by a stakeholder analysis that identifies relevant stakeholders, their relative power, and appropriate means of engaging with them. Fortunately, in Sierra Leone UNICEF had in practice already conducted a stakeholder analysis, was highly knowledgeable about various stakeholders, and was engaged with different key actors on an ongoing basis. Via David Lamin, UNICEF helped to develop an early engagement strategy that would help to contextualise the research and cultivate collective ownership for it.

As recommended by UNICEF, two key actors to engage with were the national Child Protection Committee (CP Com) and the Ministry of Social Welfare Gender and Children's Affairs (MSWGCA), which serves as Chair of the CP Com. The CP Com is an influential group because its members include UNICEF, international NGOs and Sierra Leonean groups that lead the national work on child protection and could help to contextualise and guide the research. In many respects, the CP Com is the national 'brains trust' on child protection in Sierra Leone, and it offers influential advice on policy and practice issues. The MSWGCA is the lead government agency in Sierra Leone on issues related to child protection. It oversees work on strengthening the national child protection system, including steps to improve policy and practice regarding children's protection and wellbeing.

With UNICEF support, Sarah Lilley and Michael Wessells had an initial two-hour meeting with the CP Com in late 2010 that was chaired by the Minister of the MSWGCA and was important both for its process and its outcomes. The process included a UNICEF briefing on the research with the minister and key actors on the CP Com. This pre-briefing was essential in helping key people to understand the research and see its potential relevance to the agenda of the CP Com. The process of the CP Com meeting itself was characterised by participatory dialogue and a spirit of mutual learning. Important elements included exploration of the potential value of the research, critical dialogue about why the research would focus only on a few areas when the needs in the entire country were severe, and how the approach could be adapted to the Sierra Leone context.

A significant outcome was that the CP Com, including the minister himself, expressed support for the research, saying it would help them to learn more deeply and find better ways of protecting children. In addition, the CP Com members agreed that the research should be conducted in two areas: Moyamba District within the Mende-speaking southern area and Bombali District within the predominantly Temne-speaking northern area. These two areas were regarded as broadly typical of Sierra Leone, which remains a primarily agricultural society. Further, CP Com members whose agencies worked in Moyamba and Bombali districts agreed to provide advice and operational support for the effort to identify within each district two non-contiguous, similar chiefdoms where the research would be conducted. Overall, the early discussion about sites and methodology planted the seeds for ongoing collaboration and also built a sense of collective ownership of the action research.

2.3 Lesson 3: Organise ongoing engagement with the relevant government ministry at multiple levels

A key strategy for achieving a national impact was to influence the MSWGCA, since it played such an important role in the protection and wellbeing of vulnerable children. A critical lesson learned in this research was the importance of ongoing engagement at multiple levels of the Ministry. Not infrequently, researchers focus primarily on getting the attention of the minister, yet it can be equally important to cultivate strong relations with mid-level managers in the ministry.

The engagement with the MSWGCA regarding the research took two forms, the first of which consisted of meetings between the minister and David Lamin and the PI, Michael Wessells. UNICEF brokered an early meeting with the minister that explained the research in greater depth, discussed its potential significance for policy and practice, and suggested how the MSWGCA could help to support it at both district and national levels. Similar meetings of the minister with Lamin and the PI continued to occur every six months.

Inter-agency larger group meetings were the second means of vertical engagement with the MSWGCA regarding the research. Following each main stage of the research, members of the research team met with the national CP Com, chaired by the Minister of the MSWGCA. Typically, the PI made a brief research update, sometimes accompanied by a slide presentation, followed by open discussion of the implications of the findings. A primary example was a meeting of Wessells and Lamin with the CP Com following the ethnographic phase in 2011. A slide presentation on the findings stimulated animated discussion about the value of open-ended learning and the importance of trust between researchers and community members. The discussion of the findings could have been a very tense moment since the findings indicated significant limitations of the Child Rights Act and the CWCs. However, the minister himself commented that they had received some reports of problems in the child protection system at community level and that this research had confirmed those reports and provided a more systematic understanding of the problem. The minister's words were pivotal in establishing respect for evidence, even when the findings contravene existing policies. They also opened the door to trying new approaches for supporting vulnerable children.

A challenge, however, was the rapid turnover in the post of minister (three different ministers served during the period 2011–14). If the effort to gain the MSWGCA's support had focused exclusively on the minister, a change in ministers could have caused serious discontinuities or loss of support for the research. In addition, the minister had too many responsibilities to be able to do the follow-up work needed to fully take on board the approach and its implications. For both these reasons, emphasis was placed also on meeting regularly with and cultivating the support of the senior managers within the MSWGCA who enjoyed longer-term posts and were positioned to help it to achieve its intended impact.

When a new minister arrived, David Lamin met with him and briefed him on the research, what it was finding, and how it had been helping the ministry, UNICEF and partners achieve their goals related to child protection. When Wessells visited, Lamin organised a meeting with the minister that helped to enable understanding of and support for the research and to consider its policy implications. The PI deliberately avoided pushing too hard on the latter because UNICEF was best positioned to use the research to advocate for policy changes and improvements. Nevertheless, a key message was that communities themselves are significant, functional actors in the child protection system who need support in their work on behalf of vulnerable children. This message pointed in a different direction than the extant GoSL priorities of forming and capacitating CWCs. On an ongoing basis, UNICEF reinforced this message and influenced the GoSL to make more space for and to prioritise community action in support of vulnerable children.

In addition, Lamin and the research team worked closely with senior managers within the MSWGCA to cultivate understanding of and support for the research, including a willingness to identify ways of enabling the GoSL and the MSWGCA to prioritise community action and also provide more space for it in practice. A senior management team from the GoSL and UNICEF participated in a key regional meeting on national child protection systems in West Africa (Davis *et al.* 2012). This meeting provided a platform for discussing community-driven action and helped other African governments learn about the bottom-up approach pioneered in Sierra Leone. As the senior managers became supporters, they provided a valued source of continuity within the MSWGCA and a consistent voice for the importance of community-led action on behalf of children.

2.4 Lesson 4: Support multiple partners in learning about and taking on board the approaches, methods and tools of the research

The impact of the action research was due also to the fact that multiple agencies – not just the MSWGCA – had developed a solid understanding of and support for the research approach, methods and tools. This understanding and support was achieved by means of inter-agency workshops, sharing of findings, tools and approaches and, above all, the creation of reflective space.

Regular meetings with the CP Com served these functions of sharing and collective learning and reflection. For example, the meeting with the CP Com following the baseline data collection sparked discussion of the value of blending qualitative and quantitative work, and also of using population-based approaches to measurement like those found in the field of public health (Wessells 2014). Also, the CP Com meetings provided reflective space in which busy practitioners were able to step back and reflect on the advantages on a community-driven approach. The group reflections whetted the appetites of different agencies to delve more deeply into the methods, tools, and approaches of the action research.

To meet the desires for ongoing learning, single agency and multi-agency reflective workshops were conducted to help different stakeholders understand more fully the tools, approaches and current findings of the research. Taking a non-didactic approach, these workshops provided space for reflection on the implications for how the agency partners conducted their work. For example, in August 2013, Save the Children and UNICEF convened an inter-agency workshop for 35 people that reviewed the ethnographic outcomes study and baseline phase approaches, tools and findings. The emphasis, however, was on the implications for the work of the eight partner agencies that participated. Different agencies were asked to describe how they typically evaluated child protection programmes and to identify how the action research work differed from their usual mode of doing assessments or baseline studies. Together they reflected on what they would like to change in their own work based on the more grounded, participatory approach to learning inherent in the action research. Animated discussions centred on the importance of building trust in learning deeply from communities, taking a non-judgemental position early on, learning and asking about local categories and understandings rather than asking only outsider-constructed questions, and the value of using mixed methods.

Because UNICEF was such a central partner in the action research, visits to Sierra Leone by the PI were frequently used as occasions for him to make a presentation or give an update on the research. The discussions that followed frequently involved group reflection on the current approaches to child protection systems strengthening in Sierra Leone and their limits, and how the action research and approaches could help to lead to different approaches that would strengthen child protection systems in a more effective, sustainable manner. The topics discussed included the limits of top-down approaches, the value of linking community mechanisms and with formal stakeholders, the importance of building local ownership at all levels, and the value of an intersectoral approach that engaged not only the social welfare sector but also health, education and other sectors. These meetings also enabled reflection on the value of policies that placed less emphasis on structures such as CWCs and greater emphasis on supporting the families and communities that did the 'heavy lifting' in regard to children's protection and wellbeing.

Collectively these workshops and discussions both embodied and enhanced the spirit of collective ownership and mutual learning that were at the heart of the action research. Because they were part of an ongoing collaborative process, different agencies saw the methods, findings, tools and approaches as relevant and as having implications for how to reorient or enrich child protection work. As participants reflected together, they took on board particular findings or approaches and thought critically about how to strengthen and transform not only their work but also the collective work on child protection in Sierra Leone.

2.5 Lesson 5: Work with a broker to understand and manage power dynamics

The analysis and management of power dynamics was key to the success of this action research. To achieve a positive impact, it was essential to understand the different stakeholders and focus limited human resources on engaging with the appropriate actors in ways that would most likely contribute to a positive impact. UNICEF played a pivotal role in regard to both points. UNICEF knew that the government and the CP Com would probably be receptive to learning more about and strengthening community-driven approaches because previous work on mapping the national child protection system had suggested the existence of a gap between community processes and the government-led aspects of the child protection system (Child Frontiers 2010). In particular, local people preferred to rely on community processes rather than on CUJCs. To follow up on that finding, a logical next step was to conduct more systematic enquiry into the nature and origins of the gap, which this research was able to provide. As one UNICEF worker put it, 'the research fell into fertile earth'. Also, UNICEF understood the importance of bringing in both the MSWJGCA and the CP Com since the ministry would be more likely to move in new directions when it had the support of its main national partners. These understandings, together with David Lamin's skilful door opening and relationship building, enabled the researchers to concentrate their energies on the people and agencies who were at the centre of power on issues pertaining to child protection.

On an ongoing basis, UNICEF also served as key adviser and intermediary in managing power relationships. Understanding how perceptions of exclusion or privileging particular agencies can derail a collaborative process, Lamin helped to navigate the inter-agency environment and to insure that the inter-agency process and workshops were respectful of diverse partners. For example, there was little, if any, privileging of particular agencies or of expatriates in the inter-agency workshops, which included and were respectful of different agencies and Sierra Leonean workers. The fact that different agencies had a seat at the table and an equal voice created an environment of mutual respect and trust, both of which are necessary for reducing the competitiveness and perceptions of privileging that can be harmful. Further, the emphasis on Sierra Leonean voices and views was critical in reducing perceptions that the community-driven approach was somehow an external imposition.

Since UNICEF was a key broker of relationships, an important question is how power relations with UNICEF were managed. In short, they were managed through a consultative, trustful process that involved significant leadership by David Lamin. As both a research team member and a key UNICEF staff member, Lamin was in a position to balance the interests of the research with the longer-term, multifaceted UNICEF agenda. Since he saw the importance of the research for Sierra Leonean children, the government and UNICEF, he was not disposed towards backgrounding the research or allowing its interests to be eclipsed by UNICEF's wider agenda. Having seen the equanimity and good judgement Lamin exercised, Wessells regularly turned to him for advice, which Wessells then followed.

When issues arose that could have strained the relationship with UNICEF, Wessells acceded to Lamin's judgement on how to address the issue. For example, when the ethnographic findings were about to be fed back to the CP Com and the MSWCGA, Wessells became concerned that the ministry might react defensively or see the presentation as disrespectful since it showed the failure of the CWCs. Having greater knowledge of the minister and having had prior discussions with him of the findings of the child protection systems mapping, Lamin advised presenting the data in a straightforward manner. Wessells followed this advice with a positive outcome, as noted above. Later in the research, when Wessells had learned that there were discussions under way about a new Child and Family Welfare policy, he asked Lamin before a meeting with the minister whether and how to advocate on behalf of a policy change that provided greater support for community action. Lamin's counsel was that UNICEF was already promoting such a change and that Wessells did not need to actively lobby but should only mention what the research was finding. In Wessells' view, there was no need to negotiate this issue further since Lamin was clearly in the know and there was excellent convergence between the UNICEF agenda and the research agenda.

Needless to say, it does not always happen that relations between researchers and a large agency with its own interests, such as UNICEF, go so smoothly. Perhaps the main implication, though, is that researchers who want to have a significant impact on policy should identify and cultivate a positive relationship with a well-positioned person who can serve as both a power broker and a trusted adviser.

3.1 CONCLUSION

Traditionally, much research is done by a single agency that designs a study and its methodology, collects and analyses the data, and then presents the results afterwards to policymakers and practitioners with a request for changes in policy and practice. Although this approach has value, it is limited by low levels of inter-agency collaboration and collective ownership. In many cases, neither practitioners nor policy leaders will see the relevance of the research or view it as sufficiently important to change their own practice. This approach may also leave policy leaders and practitioners wondering whether the research group had bothered to learn about their priorities and strategies or why no or little effort was made to engage deeply with them in advance. This approach may also leave policy leaders and practitioners feeling that they have been disrespected, with the result that the research is left sitting on the shelf.

This case study highlights a very different approach that features collaboration and collective ownership at all phases of the research, leading to more positive impact. Indeed, this case study underscores that the social processes around the research may influence its impact as much as the technical merits and the findings of the research. However, it would be misguided to suggest that such a collaborative approach is a 'silver bullet' that will boost impact in

all situations. A collaborative approach may not be possible if the research agency or an NGO or UN agency that commissioned the research wants to pursue its own agenda or claim the glory for itself. Also, circumstances could lead governments not to take a collaborative approach. Still, a truly collaborative approach with high levels of collective ownership may yield higher impact and build the coordination that is critical to the success of efforts to strengthen child protection systems. Perhaps the time has come to give increased attention to moving beyond the priorities of one's own agency and working in a more collaboration manner. Ultimately, a collaborative approach can help to achieve what ought to be an overarching global priority: realising child rights even in challenging circumstances.

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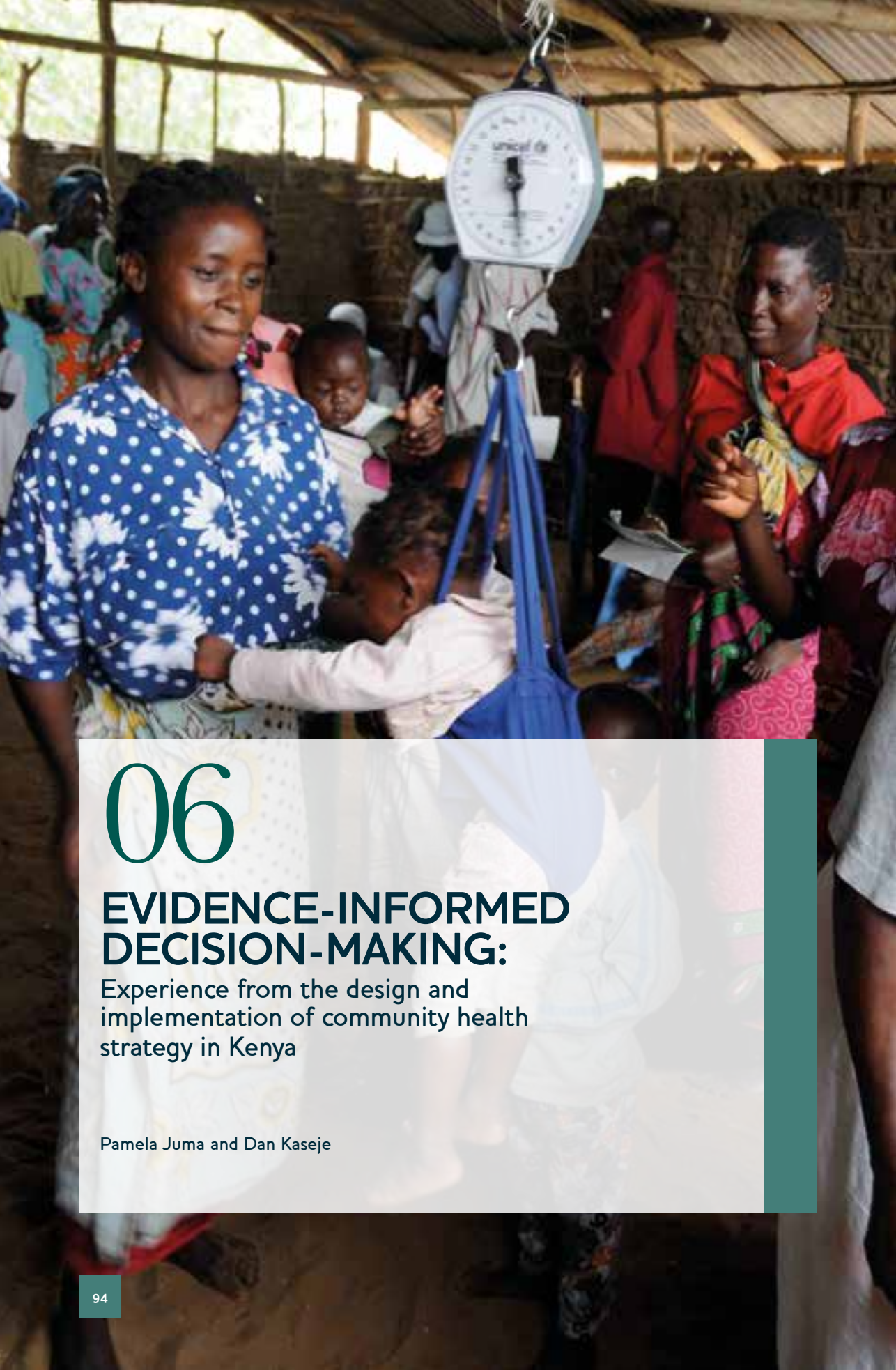
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ENDNOTES

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- 2 For both ethical and practical reasons, the action research is currently being extended to the former comparison communities with support from the Oak Foundation.





06

EVIDENCE-INFORMED DECISION-MAKING:

Experience from the design and
implementation of community health
strategy in Kenya

Pamela Juma and Dan Kaseje

ABSTRACT

Objective: We describe how a collaborative research involving health decision-makers, service providers, communities and research institutions provided a pathway for getting evidence into the design of Kenya's community health strategy as part of wider health systems improvement.

The case study: The process started with a review of community-based health care in the eastern Africa region, followed by pilot projects in western Kenya. More demand for evidence by national decision-makers arose when a window of opportunity emerged to develop a national community health strategy. The decision-makers were engaged in the follow-up studies to inform further development of the strategy. Challenges included competing work interests of the decision-makers, delays in getting research results, and financial modalities.

Conclusions: Decision-makers can utilise locally generated research evidence to address a major health systems problem if they are engaged in the study from the beginning. Their continued engagement in the study can also lead to more resource mobilisation for additional evidence generation. The involvement of influential development partners and strengthening decision-makers' capacity in knowledge translation are also critical for effective research utilisation.

KEYWORDS

evidence, policymaking, community health.

BIOGRAPHIES

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1.1 INTRODUCTION

Community-based health care (CBHC) was taken up by many sub-Saharan African countries following the Alma Ata declaration on health by the year 2000 (Kaseje and Sempebwa 1989). However, Kenya lagged behind other countries in the region in the 1980s. In many sub-Saharan African countries, non-governmental organisations (NGOs) trained and supported community-based health workers to implement primary health-care activities with positive outcomes (Haines *et al.* 2007). Scaling-up of the initiatives was hindered by the lack of a national policy framework. More formal recognition of CBHC by the public sector occurred with the development of the second Health Sector Strategic Plan 2005–2010 (MOH 2005), which incorporated a community strategy, but with no clear framework to guide implementation. The objective of the national community health strategy was to provide health-care services for all life cohorts and socioeconomic groups at household and community level. The community strategy was being developed against the backdrop of a persistently weak national health system coupled with weakness in implementation of previous health sector policies and poor resource allocation in the sector (MOH 2005). While the country's health policy documents and strategic plans have consistently emphasised issues of access and equity, inadequate human resources for health remains a major challenge.

Although Kenya has performed better than some countries in the region in terms of human resource numbers, there are still major challenges in the distribution of health workers, particularly to the rural and hard-to-reach areas (MOH 2005). Community-based initiatives implemented in the past, mainly by NGOs, emphasised engagement with communities, but did not adequately engage policymakers in planning and implementation. Furthermore, actions were not based on local research evidence. Recent health sector efforts led to the development of the community health strategy, which aimed at enhancing access to health care by providing health-care services for all cohorts and socioeconomic groups at household and community levels; building the capacity of community health extension workers (CHEWs) and community health workers (CHWs) to provide community-level services; strengthening health facility and community linkages; and raising the community's awareness of its rights to health services. At the point of developing the second Health Sector Strategic Plan in 2005, it was not clear how the sector was going to operationalise the community health strategy; thus there was a need for evidence to inform implementation of the strategy.

The Tropical Institute of Community Health and Development (TICH), currently under the Great Lakes University of Kisumu, had engaged in a CBHC initiative in the western region of the country. The initiative became necessary as it was clear that efforts to deliver effective and essential health care by the formal health system had grossly limited coverage (Nganda, Wangombe, Floyd and Kangangi 2004). In this chapter, we share experiences that illustrate how a collaborative approach to research, involving health decision-makers, health service providers, communities and research institutions, provided a pathway for getting evidence into the design of Kenya's community health strategy as part of a wider district health systems

improvement programme. We illustrate the role of evidence and other factors in focusing Kenyan health decision-makers on community health and how a collaborative research approach built on this window of opportunity to generate evidence that informed the design of Kenya's first community health strategy. We reflect on the intricacies of research-to-policy and practice, and the iterative and interactive experiences of co-creating knowledge with decision-makers.

2.1 THE INTERVENTION

2.1 Design of the intervention

The overall initiative adopted an implementation-science approach, where interventions are developed, tested for effectiveness and disseminated to enhance uptake and scaling-up of research findings to achieve better population health outcome (Brownson, Colditz and Proctor 2012). The focus is to test what, why and how interventions work in real-world settings and approaches to improve them (Peters *et al.* 2014). In implementation research, a mix of methods is applied to generate evidence on how interventions work. Thus, in this initiative, a mix of evidence was generated through surveys and spin-off studies, including a quasi-experimental study that set out to develop and test the effectiveness of CBHC (Olayo, Innvaer, Lorenc, Woodman and Thomas 2014). The case documents the partnership that brought together national-level health decision-makers, community representatives, health service managers and an academic institution in generating and sharing evidence for improving CBHC.

2.2 Implementation

We will describe the intervention process in three main phases. The first phase was the evaluation of CBHC in the eastern African region. In the second phase, the researchers and communities were engaged in knowledge generation and application while the policymakers played an advisory role. In the third phase, policymakers became *bona fide* partners in knowledge generation and application, eventually taking over leadership of the research process.

2.2.1 Phase 1: Generating evidence and design of the CBHC model

Evaluation of CBHC in the eastern African region

Between 2000 and 2001, we reviewed the effectiveness of CBHC in Tanzania. This review was commissioned by UNICEF, because they had been supporting CBHC projects in the country. Through a cross-sectional sample survey covering 12 districts implementing CBHC and 12 comparison districts, we found that the populations covered by the CBHC approach had better health indicators. Based on these findings, the Tanzanian Ministry of Health elaborated a strategy for scaling up CBHC nationwide. With the support of the Rockefeller Foundation, we extended the CBHC review to the other countries in the region in 2001–02, notably the then Southern Sudan region, Malawi and Ethiopia and the findings were considered. From this review, CBHC was associated with improvement in child health indicators such as immunisation.

Engaging decision-makers in the design of the CBHC model

Using the findings from the multi-country review, we commenced the design of a study to test CBHC effectiveness in Kenya in 2003/2004. At the time, there was a window of opportunity, because Kenya was completing the second national Health Sector Strategic Plan (KNHSSP II). It emerged that the health indicators had reversed downwards in Kenya from the early 1990s (MOH 2005). This realisation became a powerful incentive for the involvement of Kenyan policymakers in designing the project. The purpose was to strengthen community-based health services and to generate evidence to guide the implementation of the Kenyan health policy framework. Evidence was needed on how to bridge the complex interface between the community and the health system to enhance timely access to care at times of need (KNHSSP II, 2005). The process began with the invitation of the national directors of health services from Kenya, Uganda and Tanzania and a representative from the World Health Organization (WHO) Kenya Country Office to participate in the design of the study and share their experiences of CBHC implementation. The regional directors testified to the contribution of the community-based approaches in improving health status in other contexts, with the WHO representative adding evidence of its effectiveness in Ghana as an example. This set the stage for the engagement with the Kenyan Ministry of Health (MOH) and WHO Country Office, which led to a concerted effort to address the glaring health and development inequities in Kenya. They formed the Technical Advisory Group (TAG), which was brought together in a workshop to share experiences and evidence from various reviews and design the CBHC model for Kenya. Several meetings involving other major partners were held to design the model, led by MOH and WHO representatives. WHO, UNICEF, community representatives and the MOH became strategic allies in influencing policy change. The WHO representative was primarily involved throughout, not only as a member of Technical Advisory Group and Technical Advisory Committee (TAC), but also as an adviser in the process.

2.2.2 Phase 2: Testing and adoption of CBHC model

Testing the effectiveness of CBHC in western Kenya

The CBHC model designed at the TAG workshop was tested in six districts in western Kenya between 2004 and 2007. This was to answer the question 'What is the effectiveness of CBHC in reversing the trends of poor health indicators?' The pilot study was funded by the Rockefeller Foundation. The design of the study was quasi-experimental, consisting of a CBHC intervention in selected sites and a comprehensive assessment of selected indicators before and after the intervention. The interventions included: establishment of community units with governing structures to act as a link between communities and the health system, CHWs and their supervisors; identification and training of CHWs to support households in improving health-seeking behaviour and disease prevention, as well as to maintain the village register (covering 20–50 households per CHW) and facilitate health dialogue at the household level; and establishment of village registers of all households to provide community-based information on health status aspects targeted for improvement such as health facility delivery, antenatal

care, water treatment, use of latrines, use of insecticide-treated nets and family planning service utilisation.

The information collected in the household registers was updated every six months by the CHWs to monitor change in health-seeking behaviour among the household members. The information was analysed and displayed on chalkboards within sub-locations. Once collected at sub-location level, reports were submitted to the district level for electronic processing. Manual analysis of relevant health facility data for posting on chalkboards at the sub-location level was also done. The results were used during quarterly dialogue meetings that were attended by health managers, service providers and community representatives for each community unit. The dialogue process included reflections of data from health facilities within the catchment area and from the community chalkboard to clearly depict the current situation in the community. This was then followed by discussion towards consensus building on what actions to take to address the situation. A plan of action was then developed, with targets to be achieved before the next dialogue session. Since the sessions at the community and sub-district levels were as large as 50 people or more, the action-planning stage of the process was undertaken in groups of eight to 12 participants.

Cross-sectional surveys were carried out in 2004 and 2007 at intervention and non-intervention sites in the six study districts to assess performance using the assessment framework approved by the TAG. The surveys covered three health centres in intervention and non-intervention sites in each district. Each assessment team included three researchers, one provincial health manager and six district health managers to ensure the participation of health managers in data collection. After data analysis, we wrote reports highlighting key findings, which included improvement in priority indicators identified by the TAG such as the performance of governing structures, service delivery and coverage, performance of CHWs in service provision and information collection (Akinyi *et al.* 2014; Otieno-Odawa and Kaseje 2014). The outcome measures included health facility delivery, antenatal care, water treatment, latrine use and utilisation of insecticide-treated nets and family planning services. These were disseminated to the TAG members, and through them to the Director of Medical Services. Through community dialogue, research results were discussed with the communities, leading to decisions and actions based on emerging issues. In this way, the public participated in interpretation and application of findings to drive continuous improvement in health indicators at community levels (Akinyi, Nzanzu and Kaseje 2015; Buong *et al.* 2013; Kaseje *et al.* 2010; Moth, Kamiruka and Olayo 2015).

The TAG meetings were often held at study sites for members to observe sub-district dialogue days in order to gain insights into practical aspects of the intervention process and thus be able to provide inputs for the refinement of policy propositions. In this way, the meeting brought all stakeholders together, including a representative of the Parliamentary Committee on Health, to discuss the findings and their policy implications. This was part of the iterative process bringing together decision-makers, researchers, managers, service providers and communities into the dialogue. These sessions created public awareness and political engagement.

Adoption of and implementation of CBHC

By 2008, the Ministry of Health and all the stakeholders had been convinced that the CBHC model was effective in improving the health status of populations and the strategy was approved for country-wide implementation. In policy formulation, the MOH termed it Community Health Strategy for delivering the Kenya Essential Package for Health (KEPH). The structures to sustain effective linkage included the TAG, which was the key policy dialogue mechanism. At the time of adoption, the MOH had not budgeted for the implementation of the strategy and tended to expect partners to finance its implementation. This led to many questions, such as whether all the elements of the strategy were applicable in the different sociodemographic contexts in Kenya and what modifications were required in different contexts; how cost-effective was the strategy; what were the mechanisms for sustainable task-shifting to community health volunteers in different contexts; and what was the reliability and validity of data collected by community health workers. This set the stage for the next phase of our research-to-policy engagement, since these questions were not addressed in the original study. It is because of the importance of these questions to the policymakers that they were willing and interested to be co-principal investigators in the next phase to provide leadership, not as advisers but as part of the research team. In the end, the Ministry of Health established a Research Unit to enable it to lead CHS research and commissioned us as advisers, and they invited University of Cape Town and Nagasaki Universities, supported by the Japan International Cooperation Agency (JICA), to join the consortium. JICA had a much more direct influence than any other donor, as it also commissioned further studies and supported the running of the Community Health Research Technical Working Group. JICA invited us to be members of the working group it spearheaded.

2.2.3 Phase 3: Engaging policymakers and managers as co-investigators

The collaborative research team designed a new phase of the study to address the questions about the uptake and effectiveness of the strategy, the cost-effectiveness of the model, the appropriateness and sustainability of task-shifting to community health volunteers, and the validity of data collected by community health volunteers in different sociodemographic contexts in Kenya – nomadic, rural and urban slums. Our collaborative study focused on western and north-eastern Kenya, areas with the worst child mortality rates (according to Kenya Democratic and Health Survey 2008–09, see KNBS and ICF Macro 2010), and was implemented with funding from the Global Health Research Initiative and the Consortium for National Health Research. It was our contention that if this strategy could improve health status in these areas, it would probably improve health indicators anywhere in the country.

The study design was again quasi-experimental, with three intervention districts and three control districts in urban slums, rural agrarian and nomadic areas to represent the main sociodemographic contexts in which the strategy was being implemented. The interventions were similar to those covered in

the section above. The methodological details have been described by Olayo *et al.* (2014). The research team included responsible personnel from each of the study regions to spearhead relationship development with communities, managers and service providers at the study sites. The involvement of the Director of Primary Health Care as a co-principal investigator facilitated engagement with government policymakers and managers at all study sites.

There was value in providing platforms and an environment for quality deliberation between decision-makers and research stakeholders. When debating and making decisions, public policymakers and stakeholders drew not only on research, but also on many other types of evidence. These included engaging those locally involved in or affected by a decision in the research synthesis process through a deliberative process based on the research synthesis. Furthermore, involving local policymakers and other stakeholders led to better local ownership of decisions and improved implementation of policies. Additionally, they advised research teams on local priorities and the cultural and contextual relevance of knowledge generated, and acted as fulcrums for evidence uptake.

The processes led to the finalisation of the revised community strategy by the National Community Health Services Technical Working Group in 2012/2013. Following the implementation of the new constitution in Kenya in 2013, in which governance was devolved to counties, the research team undertook a series of county dissemination workshops in an effort to accelerate the implementation of the policy by the counties. The new community health strategy was disseminated to the counties that we worked with and dialogue held with the stakeholders to enhance adoption and implementation of the strategy by the county health team. The workshops brought together the members of the county assemblies, the county ministers of health, county health management teams, service providers and consumers.

3.1 DISCUSSION

3.1 Relating process to existing evidence uptake theories

Key concepts and themes that have emerged from this experience can be explained in relation to the existing policy development theories. First, the theory around the ‘policy window of opportunity’ described by Kingdon (2005) is explicit. Second, the policy cycle and evidence use throughout the process is described (Buse, Mays and Walt 2012), and lastly, the research uptake theory around push and pull factors have also featured in this experience (Lavis, Posada, Haines and Osei 2004).

3.1.1 The ‘policy window’

Kingdon (2005) uses a political science approach to propose ‘policy windows’ – agenda setting where changes in policy can be made because of opportunistic circumstances or available windows of opportunity where components of the policy process are connected, for example, the policy solution and the political climate surrounding the issue. The windows of opportunity may be defined by environmental factors, gaps in achieving desired policy objectives, or the availability of effective interventions

not included in contemporary policies. In this study, the main problem was reversal of health indicator trends as demonstrated by the Kenya Demographic and Health Surveys of 1993, 1998, 2003 and 2008 (see CBS, MOH and ORC Macro 2004; KNBS and ICF Macro 2010; NCPD, CBS and Macro International 1994, 1999), which demanded urgent policy action. It was clear that the existing health sector policy was no longer meeting desired objectives as demonstrated by the reversal in indicator trends and other health sector issues. Furthermore, there was the need to meet not only national health targets, but also international commitments such as the millennium development goals (MDGs) by 2015. This realisation created a policy window and thus CBHC strategy was available as a policy solution. There was a clear political will to facilitate change, and community strategy became an agenda in national health forums. Key stakeholders such as politicians, sector decision-makers and the media were willing to engage in policy formulation or change, as was the case in this collaborative initiative.

3.1.2 The policy cycle and research influence

Policy process often occurs in stages, which include problem identification and agenda setting, policy formulation, implementation, and monitoring and evaluation. Evidence played a role at all four stages of the policy cycle (Buse *et al.* 2012). The CBHC agenda featured during the second health sector strategic planning stage. At the agenda-setting stage, decision-makers were grappling with the idea of developing effective community strategy to link health service delivery between the communities and formal health-care system. Research evidence, particularly from national surveys and health service reviews, was used to identify the problem, but did not provide adequate solutions. Thus, evidence from the CBHC surveys and experiences from other contexts were brought in to inform the agenda and strategy development. This was achieved through several consultative meetings and workshops involving various stakeholders. Research evidence was crucial in identifying policy options, particularly on community-based interventions and organisation of the community-level structures. At implementation stage, the pilot studies informed the implementation design and further review of community health implementation guidelines. New evidence also informed revision of the final strategy based on the emerging issues from the study.

Participation of the research team in the Interagency Coordinating Committee, a policymaking body in the Ministry of Health, created opportunity for sustained engagement with the policy processes beyond the Technical Advisory Committee as members. In addition, the Technical Advisory Committee influenced the creation of the Technical Working Group on research to policy, which provided another sustainable mechanism for research into policy engagements. Several organisations, particularly NGOs, became members of the Technical Working Group and shared evidence from specific pilot studies. Data from the studies were fed continually into these mechanisms to enable continuous adaptation of the policy guidelines as contexts changed with geography and time. Other bilateral organisations, particularly UNICEF, WHO, USAID and JICA, were crucial actors in the process. They provided funding and technical support during the meetings, but also brought in experiences and evidence from the other contexts as

well as from global consultations on the work of community health workers who were key in this strategy. In particular, WHO/UNICEF guidelines for community-based health care, including the guidelines on integrated case management for childhood illness, were very useful during the development and review of the community strategy implementation guidelines.

3.1.3 Research to policy efforts

A combination of research uptake efforts was applied, including push and pull efforts and exchange efforts described by Lavis *et al.* (2004). 'Push efforts' are typically unilateral strategies, led by researchers to encourage the uptake of research findings in policy-oriented decision-making. In the past, these were typically academically oriented approaches such as peer-reviewed publications and presentations. More promising approaches that are tailored to the working realities of policymakers include the preparation of evidence briefs and sharing policy-relevant messages arising from research, as we did in this study. Through these strategies public policymakers and stakeholders draw not only on research, but also on many other types of evidence and values (Lavis *et al.* 2004). These approaches may also engage those locally involved in or affected by a policy decision, through a deliberative process, which considers synthesised research. Such interactions between research producers and users have been shown to increase research use by policymakers (Innvaer *et al.* 2013; Oliver *et al.* 2014; Lomas 2005). Although contextualising the evidence and ensuring its applicability increases the likelihood of its use by policymakers and managers (Lavis *et al.* 2004; Oxman, Fretheim and Schönemann 2006), single strategies are rarely adequate to bridge the 'know-do' gap.

Systems were developed to encourage the 'pull' efforts, recognising that, in decision-making, policymakers and stakeholders draw not only on research, but also on many other types of evidence. Such interactions between research producers and users have been shown to increase the prospects for research use by policymakers. This approach is noted as becoming more common and increasingly recognised as a strategy for supporting the decision-making process for policymakers. Research users have a critical role, as they advise research teams on local priorities and the cultural and contextual relevance of knowledge generated and act as fulcrums for knowledge translation, expansion and scaling-up. The activities included preparation of briefs with tailored policy-relevant messages from evidence arising from their research.

Policy space was jointly identified by key stakeholders. The platform for the interaction and exchange between policymakers and researchers was the TAG, which included policymakers from Uganda and Tanzania; both of these countries had longer experience with CBHC as part of their national health policy. Kenyan policymakers were thus more likely to listen to their peers from the other countries than to researchers. These external policymakers became powerful policy influencers in the desired direction. The group facilitated results-driven dialogues based on the research findings and other relevant experiences (Lavis *et al.* 2004). Interactions between research producers and users have been shown to increase the prospects for research use by policymakers (Innvaer *et al.* 2013; Oliver *et al.* 2014). Research

syntheses, contextualising evidence and ensuring the applicability to context have been shown to increase the likelihood for evidence to be used by policymakers and managers (Dobrow, Goel and Upshur 2004).

Involving local policymakers and other stakeholders provided additional benefits, such as better local ownership of decisions and improved policy implementation (Estabrooks, Thompson, Lovely and Hofmeyer 2006). The CBHC policy was adopted even before the study was completed because of the demonstrated effectiveness of the model. There were indications that the ownership of the policy was not fully internalised by the policymakers. This necessitated further research to address frequently asked questions. It has been shown that training decision-makers in knowledge translation strategies can enhance leadership skills and in addition strengthen organisational or community capacity to use research more effectively. The lack of skilled human resources to undertake research-to-policy initiatives has been found to be a main challenge to supporting evidence-informed health policy efforts.

3.2 Facilitators and challenges

3.2.1 Facilitators

High decision-maker interest in addressing major health systems issues, including the reversal in health indicators, created a demand for evidence on the best options to address the issue. In addition, regional competition among countries and the fact that Kenya, in spite of a slightly better economy than most of the countries in the region, was lagging behind in CBHC created an impetus for change in the country. Carrying out research within the framework of the Kenya Health Sector Strategic Plan KNHSSP II (2005) captured and sustained the interest of the end users in the Ministry of Health policy, management and service delivery levels, as they saw the research project providing answers to questions they were asking. In addition, early engagement and collaborative approach in the research-to-policy process enhanced research knowledge uptake. Researchers interested in influencing policies have demonstrated that early collaboration on health systems research is important (de Savigny, Kasale, Mbuya and Reid 2008). This includes the joint development of research questions and how to answer them, which strengthens research relevance and facilitates a deeper appreciation and utilisation of research findings at the policy level (Lavis *et al.* 2006). Furthermore, the approach creates a common purpose for research and frames the research to support decisions of interest to all partners, thereby generating action-oriented results of interest to all parties (Lomas 2005). In this study, the decision-makers and other actors participated actively, becoming co-creators of knowledge.

Another factor was the research approach. The research applied implementation research design where CBHC intervention evidence was generated, and a package was developed to suit the Kenyan context and tested and taken to scale in the country. The broad nature of the initiative allowed integration of evidence from various sources and pilot studies with an intention to improve the health-care system at the lower levels. Finally, we recognised that decision-makers at programme level who acted as the change champions did not have adequate knowledge in research-to-policy

uptake. Since they were the link between the more senior decision-makers, such as politicians, and the research community, it was necessary to train them on tools for evidence use such as policy briefs.

3.2.2 Challenges

Challenges in this research-to-policy process included numerous programmes competing for the attention of service providers, managers and policymakers, which made them miss meetings or appoint representatives rather than attending in person. These programmes diverted the attention of personnel from their core roles in the study. The activities with more funds and allowances to staff tended to take priority. However, there were a few champions who remained focused on supporting the study process through attending the meetings and the field visits. Another challenge was the timing of the research results. Policy development does not always go harmoniously with research processes and time frame. Often results were too late, but having a policymaker as co-investigator enabled greater understanding of such delays and hence tolerance. This underlines the importance of making policy engagement an iterative process that needs to be mutually reinforcing. The joint process of developing policy briefs with policymakers and community representatives increased their relevance to the policy implementation context and hence improved evidence uptake. In addition, the decision by the Ministry of Health to take over the leadership of CHS research and establish a unit to generate research questions and conduct research that would complement our work, accelerated steps towards implementation, specifically the development of the schemes of service for community health personnel, and a training curriculum for community health assistants. This process also brought in other stakeholders including NGOs who were implementing community health programmes.

Even though the evidence process was successful and the emerging community strategy and guidelines were widely accepted, adequate implementation of the strategy is still challenged by existing contextual factors. These challenges include inadequate resources and failure to pay CHWs, leading to attrition, supervision challenges, inadequate geographical coverage and inadequate community awareness (McCollum *et al.* 2015; Oliver *et al.* 2015). These challenges should be addressed by the decision-makers to ensure effective community-based health care.

4.1 CONCLUSION

In this case study, we demonstrate how an iterative and collaborative research approach involving policymakers, health services providers, communities and research institutions is possible and effective in influencing policy change. Each partner contributed to the research process at all stages and according to their unique and shifting capacities and perspectives. Often, data collection and analysis was guided by demand for evidence by the end users. Over time, structures were established within the Ministry of Health to take responsibility for generating research questions. The study yielded information on policy-influencing mechanisms that changed the way that community health services were being planned for and offered to households. We were thus able to accelerate the implementation of the community-based health-

care approach supported by communities and strategic partners. In addition, it demonstrated the critical role played by strategically positioned individuals contributing to policy windows that researchers should pay attention to, such as persisting or worsening health indicators.

The initiative illustrates how research users can advise research teams not only on local priorities, but also on the cultural and contextual relevance of knowledge generated. They act as fulcrums for change, expansion and scaling-up, as described by many implementation researchers (Bennett et al. 2011; Lomas 2005). Collaborative implementation research approach optimises the means by which the research itself acts as an instrument for capacity building for both the individuals involved and their institutions, acting as levers for change (Edwards et al. 2009).

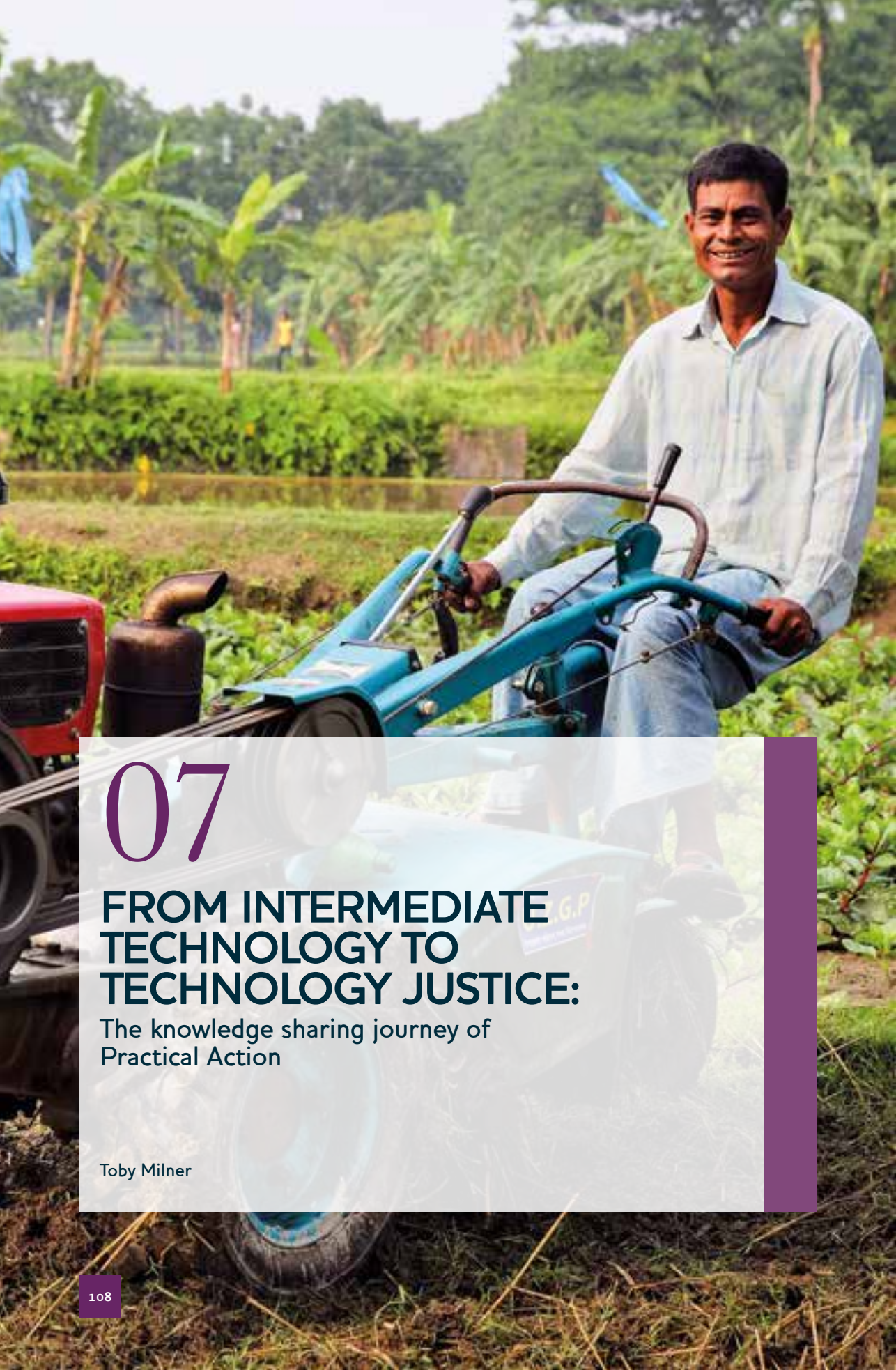
From the issues raised in this initiative, the gaps and bottlenecks in the uptake of research findings into policy and practice may be due to competing priorities, lack of resources for research and lack of technical know-how in how to synthesise research evidence for use in policy planning and implementation, and ultimately to improve the health of populations. Political support for undertaking research and using outcomes is key in a research-to-policy continuum, particularly where there is a need to change policy directions or to formulate strategies and frameworks for service delivery. Involvement of key stakeholders in the research design, data generation, analysis and use of the findings to inform policy is crucial in fostering interactions and partnership in devising workable solutions.

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07

FROM INTERMEDIATE TECHNOLOGY TO TECHNOLOGY JUSTICE:

The knowledge sharing journey of
Practical Action

Toby Milner

ABSTRACT

Knowledge work in international development NGOs has many aspects. While it is considered vital for maintaining effectiveness and extending impact and influence, demonstrating proof of resultant policy and practice change has often proved difficult. One development NGO, Practical Action (formerly ITDG), which has been in operation for over 50 years, has placed an unusually high level of emphasis on knowledge sharing work since its very beginning. This chapter tells the story of how its knowledge and learning work has developed, and the lessons that have been learned in the context of a changing sector and an evolving organisational approach. Considering both knowledge deriving from Practical Action's own programmes and the organisation's work as an intermediary broker of knowledge from other organisations, it is concluded that while its knowledge strategy has been revised over the years, its enduring commitment, flexibility of organisation, and ability to localise and contextualise its knowledge has played a key role in enabling it to adapt its knowledge offer to different target audiences and so effectively leverage policy and practice impact.

KEYWORDS

knowledge, research, learning, information, international development, non-governmental organisations, intermediate technology, appropriate technology, Practical Action.

BIOGRAPHIES

Toby Milner was Managing Director of Practical Action Publishing and a Director of Practical Action from 2001 to 2015 where he was involved in the knowledge work of the organisation. He previously worked for Oxfam and other international development NGOs and campaign organisations in publishing, communication and information roles.

1. | KNOWLEDGE AND DEVELOPMENT NGOS

It is a commonplace observation that the volume of information generated and communicated in our digital world rises exponentially and this is no less true within and between international development non-governmental organisations (INGOs). In addition to the challenge of how best to share and interpret source materials available to them in a world of big data and information overload, INGOs now also have their claims for effectiveness placed under more scrutiny, have come under greater threat from competition for resources, and face increased challenges to their legitimacy. INGOs have themselves engaged in extensive soul-searching as to how to move forward in an operational context of rapid change and increasing complexity where the requirements for transparency and stakeholder inclusion have increased markedly and in which pressure for a devolution of operational management to the global South has asked profound questions of the role of INGO offices based in the North.¹

As a key element in proving effectiveness, the value of research, knowledge and learning to INGOs is now held in high esteem. First acknowledged in general organisational and business management theory, particularly for technology transfer and innovation, knowledge is reckoned by many analysts to be the most valuable of all the assets that any organisation possesses and its effective use the most important factor in driving competitive advantage. As in business and industry, the pace of change and need for innovation by INGOs has required improved knowledge management to facilitate more effective and adaptive development that maximises the productive use of research and learning to leverage impact and influence. In addition, donor demand and the increasing need for collaborative consortia in programme work has further encouraged the sharing of knowledge, skills and best practice (Ramalingam 2005).²

When the World Bank's President James Wolfensohn announced in 1996 that the Bank was to become a 'global knowledge bank' (Wolfensohn 1996) focused on research and dissemination of knowledge rather than lending money it sent a signal to governments, international organisations, INGOs, and others that the knowledge agenda was firmly in the ascendant for the whole development sector (Cummings 2003). The Knowledge for Development programme of the World Bank Institute continues to be influential in defining a framework for knowledge-based economic development and is a major producer of learning resources for development knowledge management.³ However, for many international development practitioners and INGOs working with poor communities, the importance of a nuanced understanding of knowledge to take account of its implicit complexity and uncertainty had long been apparent (Chambers 1983, 1993, 2014). For all its funding influence, the World Bank's research paradigm was not accepted by many influential thinkers in the development sector (Broad 2010).

Knowledge and learning work is widely understood as intrinsically difficult to evaluate for INGOs and, with a need to show value for money to donors, delivery of the metrics required of the standard log frame for knowledge

work have sometimes proved problematic. The difficulty of assessing indirect beneficiary impacts, the usual relatively short project life cycle, and the need for snapshot external evaluations, among other issues, have all rendered research and knowledge impact disputable.⁴

Nevertheless, for all the contestation over value and values in knowledge work, the benefits of seeking and disseminating knowledge of what works to build evidence-based principles for the development and learning of best practice is a broad principle that few, if any, practitioners working in an INGO would dispute. How best to do it and the attribution of empirical worth to the results of that work are where the difficulties lie. In response to critics, the demonstration of evidence of impact, value for money and an ability to establish a distinctive and convincing theory of change have become increasingly vital components of INGO organisational and brand development. The knowledge work required to research, underpin and contextualise these attributes has become crucial in proving organisational effectiveness and reinforcing recognition of quality with funders and beneficiaries alike. The adoption of concepts such as that of the learning organisation and systems thinking, the continuing refinement of monitoring and assessment techniques, and the recruitment of more specialist evaluation and knowledge workers, have all acted to enhance INGOs' understanding of the nuances of impact and the learning implications for their work.

Despite these advances in understanding of knowledge and learning in INGOs, much of their knowledge sharing work has continued to be linear and unidirectional. As authors on complexity in international development have recently noted:

Over recent years there has been a shift from development interventions which can show a logic which links inputs to outputs (and possibly outcomes), to a theory of change which has required assumptions to be tested and evidence to support theories of how change happens. But these processes are still fundamentally based on a view of logic that assumes linear relations between cause and effect and such assumptions are often not congruent with the world with which we are engaging.

(Burns and Worsley 2016: 23).

For many in development NGOs also, the requirements of donor reporting, habitual procedures and staff working practices, as well as the need to present a story of steadily improving effectiveness to their public, have, in practice, acted to preserve an essentially linear knowledge impact paradigm.

Although a somewhat unusual example, one UK INGO, Practical Action, has placed knowledge work, and particularly knowledge sharing, at the heart of its work since its foundation, and it may help to exemplify how approaches to knowledge in INGO development work have developed over the last half-century. By no means always successful, the continuity and change in the way in which Practical Action has conducted its knowledge work is reflective of wider patterns of INGO work, as it has come to understand both the importance of knowledge and how problematic assessment of impact may be mitigated.⁵

2. PRACTICAL ACTION AND ITS KNOWLEDGE WORK DEVELOPMENT

'The gift of material goods makes people dependent, but the gift of knowledge makes them free'

E.F. Schumacher, *Small is Beautiful* (1973: 165).

Practical Action, known as the Intermediate Technology Development Group (ITDG) until 2006, was founded in 1966 by Dr Ernest Schumacher, a German economist who had lived in England since arriving in 1937 to escape Nazism (Wood 1984: 89). Having published several articles, most of them in *The Observer* through the 1940s, 1950s and early 1960s, he began to formulate the idea of an organisation to promote 'intermediate technology' in 1963–64. In August 1965, an article by Schumacher on the virtues of intermediate technology appeared in *The Observer* and provoked a large post bag from supportive correspondents, after which he was encouraged to found ITDG (*ibid.*: 320–29). Schumacher later brought together his ideas about development in a timely and influential book, *Small is Beautiful* (Schumacher 1973), which was among the earliest books to clearly articulate the dangers of unsustainable development. It received considerable acclaim and was published in several subsequent editions and translations, although Schumacher died not long after its publication at the comparatively young age of 61 just as his ideas were gaining traction internationally (Wood 1984: 367).

Although by no means entirely concerned with 'the developing world', Schumacher's essays and *Small is Beautiful* had a profound influence on the work of ITDG. Unlike any other UK charity INGO of the time (perhaps apart from the Christian agencies who had the Bible), ITDG had from its early years a set of deeply influential documents to underpin its view of how development work should proceed. From the outset, ITDG/Practical Action enjoyed an unusually active relationship with ideas and philosophy, a concern with intellectual rigour, and an engagement with the written word that was to find expression in its later knowledge work. Knowledge was always intrinsic to the ITDG view of development work.

Knowledge sharing work was to the fore in the work of ITDG from the very outset, as demonstrated in the 'Objectives' of ITDG set out in its first annual report:

- To promote the systematic assembly and documentation of all data relating to intermediate technologies
- To draw attention to them by publishing information about them, promoting the concept of Intermediate Technology, and advertising ITDG's services
- To offer practical advice and assistance to overseas projects to demonstrate the practical use of intermediate technologies in helping poor people to help themselves.

At a time when access to knowledge was difficult, especially for those in the global South, that ITDG was concerned with disseminating this specialist knowledge was an almost inevitable outcome of its focus on appropriate technology. Indeed, the very first task of ITDG was to produce a *Directory of Hand and Animal-Drawn Equipment* commissioned by the British National Export Council for its Agricultural Implements Mission to Nigeria in June 1966.⁶

From earliest days, the need to respond to the technical enquiries it received had been obvious. It grew to become a cornerstone of the service that ITDG provided to development practitioners and was recognised as such in its initial funding by the Ministry of Overseas Development (1964–70 and 1974–79), subsequently by the Overseas Development Administration (1970–74 and 1979–97) and latterly by the Department for International Development (DFID) (from 1997). The establishment of voluntary expert advisory panels to assist with the various commissions the ITDG received grew into a network of sympathetic specialists who were convened formally and consulted informally on any matters where their input was deemed helpful. The work of the expert panels grew as more requests for information were received and later, with increased funding, Technical Units were established, which employed staff to help service the expert panels and to provide additional expertise. In 1969 Intermediate Technology Services Ltd was founded to provide services to organisations including UN agencies and the World Bank. By 1970, expert panels existed for Agriculture, Building, Co-operatives, Education and Training, Food Processing, Water, Power, Rural Health and Women in Development (Frost 1991).

Schumacher was famously concerned with appropriate scale in economic production and had advocated establishing 'lots and lots of small autonomous units' (Schumacher 1973: 54) and extolled the benefits of 'a multiplicity of small-scale units' (*ibid.*: 62). He saw this principle as being just as relevant to the organisations he helped to found as for the productive units he envisaged to ensure a more human-scale economic growth in wider society. This approach was adopted in ITDG as subsidiary companies and associated charities were established to focus on, for example, energy (IT Power), transport (IT Transport) and, most importantly from the knowledge perspective, on consultancy in 1970 (IT Consultants, now Practical Action Consulting), and publishing and bookselling in 1974 (IT Publications, now Practical Action Publishing).⁷

From 1970, ITDG was aided by grants from the Overseas Development Administration, and a Working Party on Appropriate Technology Report commissioned by the Ministry for Overseas Development in 1977 (Ministry for Overseas Development 1977) resulted in ITDG receiving a substantial increase in government funding. Indeed, such was the extent of the funding that it completely dominated ITDG's resources for many years until the Appropriate Technology Project Fund was withdrawn at the end of the 1990s. The result of this steady core funding was that ITDG, in respect of its knowledge work, had at its disposal considerable unrestricted resources which it applied to knowledge sharing in a way that no other UK charity INGO could match.

The knowledge production of ITDG was largely formal and explicit in nature from the start. The concern was to produce accurate, quality assured, relevant

publications, papers, reports and technical diagrams that were intended primarily for the use of practitioners, mostly external. At first, the aim was technology transfer and the knowledge work was concerned with finding and referencing existing materials and making them more widely available. To this end a bookshop was established at the London office of ITDG and only gradually did the reworking of existing materials and the preparation of new manuals based on the experience of project staff start to grow in importance and the publishing work begin. The brokering of knowledge from other organisations and knowledge sharing to an external audience was always present in Practical Action's work.

The first publication from ITDG was a 190-page directory, *Tools for Progress*, produced in 1967, which listed various appropriate technologies (ITDG 1967). It set the tone, and other technology directories followed, of which *Tools for Agriculture* and *The Power Guide* were examples. A regular series of *IT Bulletins* were published to describe in detail the use of various technologies and from this publication grew the Group's quarterly journal *Appropriate Technology*, which was launched in 1973. The production of knowledge objects in the form of printed publications, both public and private, were essential to the early purpose of ITDG (Frost 1991).

However, because of the limited demand for publishing work on the part of ITDG/ Practical Action and the requirement for a high degree of cost-effectiveness in its work, the business dynamics of the subsidiary publishing company drove it to seek the majority of its customers and publishing clients outside of the ITDG/ Practical Action group and encouraged a broader base of subject-matter interest. Currently, its partnerships with Oxfam and the Sphere Project have, for example, led it to build a profile of publishing work in the field of humanitarian assistance and health that is not represented in the work of Practical Action. In other units also, for example in its Technical Information Services and consultancy work, Practical Action researched and shared knowledge that did not derive from its own operational project work in the South.

Although ITDG had helped establish intermediate technology institutions and had engaged in some project work in Africa and Asia in the 1970s, it was only in the 1980s that ITDG began its own programmes in Peru, Kenya, Sri Lanka and Bangladesh, with the first Regional Office opening in Peru in 1985. The registration of local offices led to a growing concern for the provision of information to Southern NGOs and the influencing of provincial, municipal and national governments on policy issues in the countries in which Practical Action operated. With the growth of the regional and country offices staffed by local nationals also came greater awareness of the need for localisation of knowledge content, including translation into local languages.

In this work, the Peru office led the way being the first non-UK office and having Spanish as the office language. Over 30 years it has built a considerable list of publications with its own editorial committee to assess quality and has supplemented this with an equally strong digital presence through its website and online portals. Local language publications have now been produced in all Practical Action local offices, both original publications and translations of existing English language editions. Currently, high-profile lobbying reports such as the regular *Poor People's Energy Reports* are

produced in English, Spanish, French and Arabic so that all staff, local partners and policymakers can read them (Practical Action 2010, 2012a, 2013, 2014).

In the 1990s, the importance of indigenous knowledge was being given more recognition, and several of the country offices of Practical Action engaged in practical work that sought to build on local traditional knowledge. For example, in Peru and Bangladesh this included agricultural methods, and in Sudan and Sri Lanka food processing and storage technologies were promoted. For a more academic audience, Practical Action Publishing produced a series of books on indigenous knowledge that found an appreciative readership in students and researchers of applied anthropology.

A growing concern for livelihoods and the rise of a more participatory focus in NGO international development work during the 1980s and 1990s encouraged more strategic thinking about the sustainable use and management of technologies with a resultant growth of interest in how markets functioned. This also led to a greater interest in issues of popular access to technology, particularly in rural areas, and a deeper concern with the wider political and economic dimensions of technology, including questions of policy environment and decision-making on such matters as technology research investment and gendered access to technology. A more political understanding of technology and development was nascent.

By the time of the 2002–07 ITDG strategic plan, entitled ‘Knowledge, Impact and Influence’, knowledge remained central to purpose just as knowledge and access to learning continued to be in the 2007–12 and 2012–17 strategies where Practical Action’s mission was stated as:

To use technology to challenge poverty by:

- building the capabilities of poor people,
- improving their access to technical options and knowledge, and
- working with them to influence social, economic and institutional systems for innovation and the use of technology.

Practical Action’s approach as set out in these plans defined technology as ‘including both the physical infrastructure, machinery and equipment, and the associated knowledge and skills, and the capacity to organise and use all of these’ (a reduced version of the strategic plan is available, see Practical Action 2012b). Practical Action concluded its half-century of work with knowledge as central to its purpose as it had been at the beginning.

Furthermore, Practical Action’s current ‘Knowledge Approach’ relates that:

Practical Action works in partnerships at all levels to enable women and men to access new and improved technologies and to make informed choices from the range of technical options available to them. It seeks further to empower women and men to change in their favour the institutions, policy processes, legal standards and development decisions that affect their lives – building from the local to the national and international levels.

Practical Action gains knowledge and experience through practical projects with local partners and combines its learning with partners

with research and best practice around the world. While practical work is at a local level, it aims to maximise impact on poverty reduction by informing and influencing the national and international practices and policies that affect the lives of women and men living in poverty.⁸

Knowledge and learning are the very essence of what Practical Action does at both the policy level and in its work at the first mile of development with poor communities. At the time of writing, Practical Action was developing a new strategic plan and reconsidering its working model, but it is certain that knowledge and learning will remain central to its activities.

3. PRACTICAL ACTION RESEARCH AND KNOWLEDGE WORK METHODOLOGY

As we have seen, knowledge continues to be as firmly embedded in Practical Action's narrative explanation of what it does and why it does it as was true at the start of the organisation's work. However, the problem of lack of access to knowledge and how it goes about addressing that challenge are now different. These changes have been gradual in implementation and have evolved at different speeds in the various units and offices. However, they have all involved an acceptance of a greater need for adaptation of content to meet the needs of different audience contexts, a need to work more collaboratively with others, a need to ensure a greater degree of interactivity with the intended beneficiaries of the knowledge shared, and a realisation that knowledge is a matter for all of the organisation and not just for specialised units.

That there remains a significant gap between the knowledge haves and have-nots in the world is not in doubt. Now, while vastly more useful knowledge is available worldwide via digital sources than was the case 50 years ago, the sheer volume of it necessitates it being localised, contextualised and championed for it to be actionable by poor communities. The listing of information sources in directories, the publication of adapted technology manuals and information briefs can help but is, of itself, not enough. Content needs curation. As Practical Action's professed strength is to 'capture, organise, format, contextualise, and share' (Practical Action 2015), it needs also to produce knowledge products that are increasingly pragmatic and actionable, that permit user feedback and dialogue, and that have a clear objective.

3.1 Knowledge brokering

While many NGOs have researched and disseminated knowledge about the project and programme work they have undertaken either alone or in partnership with other NGOs and delivery agencies, Practical Action also began to develop knowledge brokering programmes that included the work of other agencies, academics and associate consultants, in addition to its own project experience. Early recognition that Practical Action could never hope to provide the technical expertise for all disciplines relevant to its technology focus led it to

pull in research expertise from beyond its staff, initially through the employment of consultants and the voluntary efforts of external experts and, now, increasingly through commissioned research from academics and thinktanks.

The Technical Enquiries/Information Service, now Practical Answers, used panels of experts to decide on what areas of expertise to focus upon and to assist in the development of knowledge resources with which to respond to enquirers from the start. Practical Action Consulting was always heavily dependent upon external associates to do much of the actual research work it was commissioned to deliver. In the case of Practical Action Publishing, the external experts were the authors and editors commissioned to write books and articles for a wider audience of development practitioners and policymakers.

Both Practical Action Publishing and Practical Answers thus disseminate to an external audience brokered knowledge products that they have filtered and quality controlled through peer review processes to extend and leverage their roles and influence as knowledge sources for development practitioners and intermediaries. Furthermore, by not limiting either the subject matter of their knowledge work to that of the project work or the geographical regions of the parent organisation Practical Action, these knowledge brokering units helped to leverage the reputation and influence of Practical Action beyond its size as an operational INGO.

In the case of Practical Action Consulting and Practical Action Publishing, a further benefit to their establishment as quasi-independent companies was that the work was made extremely cost-effective, if never fully profitable, as the companies developed extensive external sales of services and products. As a service provider to others, Practical Action now also aims to offer advice on knowledge and to apply the same principles and skills as an intermediary broker and collaborative co-creator with other organisations as they do for the knowledge products they generate from their own project work.

3.2 Product development for external knowledge sharing

In 2014, following a restructuring of policy and practice management roles in the UK office, a new initiative was implemented: the Knowledge Portfolio Approach. Initially, this comprised a thematic review and stocktake of all the knowledge products and assets held by the organisation in the UK and abroad. While restricted to recent and relevant items, and aligned to the current policy change agendas, the review revealed a considerable overlap in some areas of work, gaps in others, and a general lack of awareness of what was available between parts of the organisation. A relatively new central repository for knowledge objects linked to the website was being significantly underused due partly to lack of capacity to manage it and partly to technical challenges in its implementation.

However, the Portfolio Approach has now also become a methodology for driving knowledge work, and the portfolio list is the focus of regular discussion with key stakeholders in each sector across the organisation. Matching the current knowledge products against forthcoming opportunities to influence on the global stage is leading to a more strategic approach to using knowledge assets by investing in new research to fill gaps and maximising opportunities to use or adapt existing items. To date the approach

has been mainly focused within the UK office with limited engagement from country offices, but this initiative is scheduled for organisation-wide roll-out in 2017.

This experience of a stocktake of knowledge assets and implementation of a refreshed way of considering future research and knowledge product needs, while both unsurprising and necessary, is also symptomatic of how capacity and enthusiasm for knowledge and learning work has waxed and waned within Practical Action with the availability of funding and according to managerial preferences or abilities. A generalised commitment to knowledge work has often been tempered by a need to cut cloth to fit the budget with the result that developments have sometimes proved fitful and short-lived, with questions of organisational structure and the personal preferences of senior managers influential in deciding direction.

Consistency in overall objective and mission has therefore not always been matched by a commitment to provide the required resources in practice or to agree the best way forward, with a sense that efforts in the past may not have been fully joined up in their planning or implementation. In addition, and as is common in many INGOs, staff without training in information and knowledge management or other relevant disciplines have frequently been required to manage knowledge work with the result that much learning on the job and reinvention of the wheel has taken place.

3.3 Internal knowledge management

One important realisation for Practical Action was that it could not hope to be a better knowledge sharer and broker until it ensured that its own internal knowledge management was enhanced. This was not just the need to put in place better systems for sharing knowledge but also to improve the overall understanding of staff about the importance of knowledge and how it could be better shared to improve the organisation's own learning culture. In an attempt to improve matters, a major investment was made from 2005 in a SharePoint system, which was intended to hold information to assist with the management of internally focused knowledge, for example, project and project funding information, key documents and diaries, and, more recently, staff performance reviews. In addition, more emphasis was placed upon knowledge sharing and learning in staff reviews, and prizes were awarded for conspicuous good practice.

It was increasingly recognised by senior management that what had been described as a silo culture, in which staff were principally focused on their own areas of work and rewarded for good performance for specific tasks, had to be broadened to include a more general spirit of togetherness and understanding of the importance of a whole organisation work ethic. In a wider INGO culture that has traditionally valued action over reflection, where staff may be hired from organisations with a very different history, and, in Practical Action's case, with a historical preponderance of engineering and technical staff backgrounds, this can be challenging to implement.

To what extent this effort to engender a learning culture will fully succeed cannot yet be assessed, but explicit recognition of the vital need for better internal learning has been crucial to making this intention a reality. An organisation in which knowledge sharing has been held to be central to purpose must understand that this can only be possible if a wider appreciation of the benefits of good knowledge management was instilled throughout the working culture.

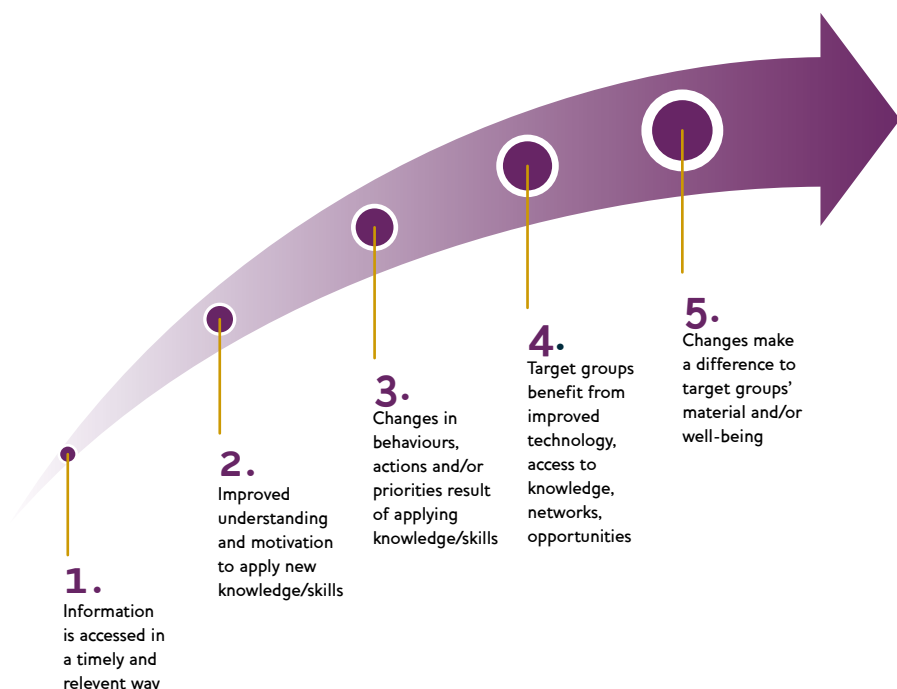
3.4 Knowledge work targets and evaluation

For the purposes of target setting and evaluation, if not for management, Practical Action has now grouped its knowledge services together in the UK. For internal reporting purposes it has been using a set of key performance indicators to assess its progress with knowledge, as for other areas of its work, against targets for the five years of its 2012–17 strategic plan. Included in these KPIs were also some considerations of how value for money may be assessed across Practical Action's programmes, including knowledge work.

It has also identified and confirmed its five key target audiences for its knowledge work – 'first mile' grassroots organisations, intermediary development practitioners, policymakers/decision-makers, academics/education (including secondary and tertiary education), and internal – and, through its knowledge services departments, it has adopted specific and relevant means of communicating and interacting with each of them. This approach is currently being used in the UK only and the challenge will be to try to make it consistent and the agreed approach across all offices around the world.

In a recent review of Practical Action's knowledge services, shorthand diagrammatic explanations of the impact process of its knowledge services work were developed representing 'change pathways' for all five of the knowledge services active in Practical Action (Vogel, O'Flynn, Brown and Currie 2014). It further reviewed how they might consider working together by combining efforts and developing a joint integrated change pathway for all the knowledge work of the organisation. An Access to Action Model was also developed based on the Practical Action's knowledge work (see Figure 1). Another significant contribution of this review was an outline consideration of how value for money assessments for knowledge work might be improved, but it was concluded that more work was required in gathering baseline data to make this viable. It remains to be seen to what extent these proposals will be put into practice, but they form a part of the current strategic planning process of which knowledge work is a part.

Figure 1 Practical Action knowledge Access to Action Model



Source: Vogel et al. 2014: Annex 1.

4. KNOWLEDGE WORK IMPACT EXAMPLES FOR PRACTICAL ACTION

After 50 years, Practical Action is now working on over 100 projects each year and has a wealth of knowledge and learning grounded in examples from its programme at its disposal. In this section we will examine examples of Practical Action's knowledge work deriving from its programme work research and experience. The first examines how Practical Action's long involvement in sustainable energy technology has helped it leverage influence in energy access policy at the highest levels and far beyond its size as an INGO. The second looks at the implementation of the long-running technical information and enquiries service, now known as Practical Answers, that delivers knowledge to the 'first mile' of development grassroots organisations.⁹ The third looks at Practical Action's work in Latin America that emphasises South-to-South learning, and the final example shows how all of this is brought together in Practical Action's latest campaign on Technology Justice.

4.1 Poor people's energy outlook

Almost uniquely among UK international development NGOs, Practical Action had from the start focused on energy as a crucial factor in improving poor people's lives. Schumacher's personal background with the National Coal Board and training as an economist helped to place power supply matters near the top of his agenda for economic development, and it has remained the organisation's best known area of project work. Small-scale energy production methodologies were a staple of ITDG's early consultancy work, and wind, solar, hydro turbine, bio-gas and other energy generating technologies were all researched in relation to their possible use in low-income community contexts. The emphasis in the early years was on power generation and less on the market for and access to power. Improved cook-stoves for energy efficiency was another area of work for which the organisation was well known in the 1980s and 1990s. From 2004, the 'Killer in the Kitchen' campaign promoted the largely unconsidered issue of the harmful effects of household smoke, especially for women's health.

By the 1990s, ITDG had set up a unit specifically to advocate and lobby for policy change. Energy policy was always a mainstay of this unit but had to take its place with other sectoral interests such as agriculture, construction, and water and sanitation. The move to substantially ramp up its policy work on energy access dated from 2010, when it was agreed by Practical Action management that it should become the prime focus of a policy work 'big bang'. Instead of spreading efforts more thinly over several areas of programme work, energy was to be given more resources and made the focus of attention for at least three years.

Unlike in agriculture and water and sanitation, there were no other INGOs making much of energy and, although not a specific target for the Millennium Development Goals (albeit arguably underpinning the achievement of most of them), in preparation for the UN Year of Sustainable Energy in 2012 (subsequently made into a decade) it was decided to allocate resources to enable the commissioning of a report, the *Poor People Energy Outlook (PPEO)*, to be used as a basis for energy policy lobbying (Practical Action 2010). The report was duly researched, written, reviewed by an expert panel of advisers and published in a full colour A4 format in print and digital versions and heavily promoted by the communications department and policy staff at the various energy policy forums. Launches were organised in London and abroad. The early results were considered promising and the success of the report and the lobbying it helped facilitate has ensured its continued regular publication since then.

Through the *PPEO*, Practical Action promoted its concept of Total Energy Access and, by using a thematic approach, the *PPEO* has since reviewed energy access for livelihoods and for community services, and national energy access planning to show the wider relevance and applicability of its policy positions. A series of Energy Policy Briefing Papers has also been produced to focus on various aspects of Practical Action's energy policy prescriptions, usually aimed at a specific target audience connected to a forthcoming international event or in partnership with other INGOs. The publication process has been given additional weight by the involvement of Practical

Action Publishing to ensure that all the necessary qualities and attributes of a formal publication were included. This helped ensure the visibility of the *PPEO* and other energy-access knowledge products to libraries and on bookselling websites such as Amazon, and helped to draw in a wider audience of interested people not immediately in the sights of Practical Action's policy staff by improving online discoverability.

Being able to draw on the long-standing energy programme project work at first hand was a vital aspect of the lobbying success of the *PPEO*, but, in addition to the internal resource deployed to research and write the reports, Practical Action has used its consultancy arm and local country staff to contract further research as needed to compile specific evidence on energy access, sometimes from outside the countries in which Practical Action has programme work experience. This has enabled the organisation both to use the depth of its first-hand experience in the *PPEO* reports and to broaden that with experiences from elsewhere to optimise the relevance of the research for its policy advocacy. Not entirely policy-based evidence-making but certainly research focused to achieve best policy impact.

The effect of this more concentrated focus on energy access policy knowledge products and the lobbying work they have facilitated has been remarkably successful. The *PPEO* reports themselves have been identified as a key catalyst in opening doors with energy professionals and policymakers worldwide. As is usual in these activities, being able to define clear direct causal linkage between the publication and promotion of the *PPEO* is hard, although there are several specific examples of its direct influence. Its publication as a formal but colourful and punchy report in digital and print formats with fully referenced sources and backed by independent expert reviewers was well aligned with its target audience of policymakers in a hurry. As a tangible reference point for Practical Action's policy work, it provided a calling card with which conversations could be started.

Equally, having a long track record of energy work gave Practical Action a credibility and entrée to expert departments within the multilateral agencies and international organisations that greatly facilitated energy access lobbying. Personal contacts could be mobilised and ex-staff members with inside knowledge could be deployed to push for access to events, attend launches, provide introductions to relevant officials and generally assist with Practical Action's energy access policy push. The personal involvement of the Chief Executive of Practical Action gave additional weight to these lobbying efforts.

The positive reception to the ideas in the *PPEO* series has led to the adoption of recommendations from Practical Action into the UN-created Sustainable Energy For All (SE4ALL) Global Tracking Framework 2015, a regular presence on the platform of the SE4ALL Forum, and membership of the SE4ALL Energy Access Committee by which means it is uniquely well-positioned to input from a civil society perspective to the UN Secretary General's strategies on ending global energy poverty. Further interest and acknowledgement of Practical Action's work on energy policy has come from the World Bank, the UK government and other INGOs that have sought to work with Practical Action on energy issues. The incorporation of clean energy access as Goal 7 of the Sustainable Development Goals agreed in

2015 has transformed the prospects for sustainable energy access for millions of poor people. The agreements of the Paris Climate Change Meeting in December 2015 also included provisions for an increased focus for sustainable energy access as a means of reducing carbon emissions.¹⁰

By employing a multi-channel advocacy approach based on the promotion of a crafted knowledge product, the *PPEO*, in a policy space where the interests of poor people had not been well-represented, Practical Action could leverage influence well above its size. In this way, Practical Action has played a leading role as representative of civil society organisations in shaping policy for a more sustainable and equitable global energy policy development at the highest levels.

4.2 Practical Answers

Practical Answers is the brand name of the Technical Information and Enquiry Service of Practical Action. Operated almost continuously since 1968 (with a short break in the 1980s), it provides information and a response service free to users from the Practical Action UK and country offices around the world. It is funded out of Practical Action's unrestricted funds and some restricted funds from other donors. The aim of the service is to enable poor people with little or no basic education to benefit from information materials available in electronic media and traditional libraries. It provides technical information to development practitioners across Asia, Africa and Latin America on a variety of technical topics, from fruit drying to water pumps and rainwater harvesting to solar energy. The information specialists in eight country offices answer more than 100,000 individual enquiries a year and the information materials (technical briefs, guides and manuals) are also available online (www.practicalanswers.org) (Cartridge, Noble and Mikolajuk 2008). Practical Answers is coordinated from the UK office of Practical Action and that office has hitherto also been largely responsible for the production of a series of Technical Briefs and for the management of the Practical Answers online platform. This central unit works with staff around the world who provide the local support and context for enquiries and information, including local language documents.

But Practical Answers is no simple document or response delivery service. It seeks to map demand for its services to better understand the knowledge market it serves and engages in qualitative surveys of users in coordination with local offices to assist its effectiveness and for the monitoring and evaluation of the service. It is therefore also considered an action research project that works to stimulate the market for knowledge products and to strengthen linkages between knowledge producers and users.

As has been noted, people's knowledge needs are complex and require a contextualised response and locally appropriate information. There is also a huge challenge with people not knowing what they don't know. Often people facing challenges and problems are unaware of the potential solutions (if they knew the solutions there would not be the same problem). Traditional Google-type searching for answers may not work and a more semantic approach is required. Practical Action has experimented in this area with the work it carries out in sharing knowledge at the first mile.

In Nepal, as one case study, the knowledge sharing model is based upon a group of community library and resource centres, managed by READ Nepal. Practical Action places a knowledge broker/social mobiliser into each library. The social mobilisers reach out to the community and organise focus group discussions on a regular basis with groups of clients. For example, they often work with the women who effectively head relatively poor rural households while their husbands work overseas. At the focus groups, there is a general discussion about people's problems and challenges and the mobiliser captures the questions that arise. They do not attempt to answer the questions in the meeting although help is often forthcoming from fellow members of the group. Where a particularly thorny issue is identified, the mobiliser will go back to their local 'knowledge committee' made up of the district agriculture officers, the local water and sanitation officers and other local authority employees. One of these will be invited to meet with the women at the next opportunity to discuss matters at an expert level. If the matter comes up consistently it may be captured into a 'flex paper' – a large poster that can be displayed in the library and copied for all the other libraries. In some cases, the discussions are repeated on a national radio station where national experts are invited to comment. Such programmes are recorded and replayed to the community group. This process helps to identify 'latent demand' – demand which people may not know they have, but which can be teased out through group interaction.

Because Practical Answers is so well established and involves staff from all offices around the world, it holds a central position in Practical Action's knowledge sharing programme. However, without a stream of earned income or reliable restricted funding for its work, it has had to claim substantial funds from the pot of unrestricted money Practical Action generates through its own public fundraising activity and its past core funding from DFID. This reliance on unrestricted funds has put it under pressure to justify its claim to this valuable pot of money, which is coveted by many other projects of Practical Action who find it hard to raise restricted funds (for example, policy research, internal learning, finance and administration systems improvements etc.) As a result, it has almost inevitably, and rightly, been the subject of two major reviews in the last ten years, with the first being conducted for DFID in 2006 (Rowley, Cranston, Mowles and Wallace 2006) and a subsequent internal review in 2014 (Vogel *et al.* 2014). On the latter occasion, Practical Answers was a part of the larger evaluative review of all Practical Action's knowledge service units referred to earlier in this chapter but which focused most attention on Practical Answers.

Both of these reviews provided generally positive assessments of the impact of Practical Answer's work but also acknowledged that it had been hard to develop and implement a business model that could provide true sustainability for the future. So, despite its historic role within Practical Action, when reliance on an uncertain funding stream is combined with perceived difficulties in proving impact it has rendered the programme vulnerable to questions about its future sustainability. These points, and further ways in which Practical Action has sought to incorporate more local experience into its knowledge provision activities, are the subject of the following examples of attempts to put in place cost-recovery elements for knowledge work and to diversify the funding base.

4.3 Practical Action and knowledge in Latin America

By linking Practical Answers responses to programme work, it has been possible to mobilise local staff and external experts to provide advice that may be relevant to other parts of the world and thus encourage South–South knowledge sharing. Practical Action’s Latin America Office (where it is known as Soluciones Prácticas) based in Lima, Peru, has led the way in several aspects of knowledge work and knowledge sharing. As well as having their own knowledge and research advisory committee to set research priorities, they have pioneered a great deal of Practical Action’s digital knowledge sharing work.¹¹ Initially growing out of a major dairy sector project involving participatory market systems development research and mapping, a sector-specific web portal, Infolactea.com, has been set up, which brings together a number of stakeholder groups in the dairy sector to share information. The portal was very successful and highly regarded and was soon followed by additional portals on the coffee sector, on forestry, on appropriate technologies more generally and on climate change. With this experience under their belt the local team were approached by other organisations wishing to establish their own portals.

One notable example of this impact was a portal on the grain crop quinoa established in 2013, the Peruvian Year of Quinoa, as part of an initiative led by Peru’s First Lady, Nadine Heredia. She noted:

The quinoa.pe portal is an example of technology in the service of rural productive development and shows the successful joint work of civil society, government, and international organizations. I salute Soluciones Prácticas’ 30 years of institutional life in Perú and this achievement in the use of information systems for rural production.¹²

Buoyed by this experience, the Latin America office has established several other digital platforms and learning environments, some of which offer simultaneous translation into English and Portuguese. Among its recent work is the provision of remote learning, and a recent course on rainwater harvesting was attended, virtually, by 20 paying development practitioners. The cost-recovery element of the course ensured its cost-effectiveness and also offered some tangible proof of its utility to participants.

Although web connectivity in Peru is much higher than in some of Practical Action’s other countries of operation, a challenge was levelled at the team that web services were not adequately reaching the poorest communities. For this reason, they have recently signed an agreement with the Peruvian government to supply government-operated rural information centres called TAMBOS, which provide information and access to services for remote communities in the higher altitudes, with technical information and a backstopping technical enquiries service.

With so much knowledge work in progress, and facing a challenging funding environment in which many major international donors are not prioritising Latin America, the regional office has recently sought to brand its knowledge work to increase visibility. A new identity, ‘Practis’, has been developed in a deliberate attempt to assist with marketing the work externally in order to win new business. At the time of writing the new brand had already been

successful in attracting funding from the Belgium Overseas Development Agency to support Practical Action's communications work in the region.

4.4 Bringing it together: Technology Justice

From 2012, Practical Action began to develop the concept of Technology Justice and subsequently invested in staff and budget to resource its development. Technology Justice is intended to be an organising principle and conceptual lens through which Practical Action defines its work, and which can bring together a movement of like-minded organisations and people to work on policy and practice change. Practical Action has announced and supported Technology Justice with a launching Forum held at University of Edinburgh in March 2016, the publication of a preliminary prospectus report *Technology Justice: A Call to Action* (Practical Action 2016), and a series of Technology Justice Briefing Papers (Casey 2016; Henderson and Casey 2015; McQuistan 2015; Meikle and Sugden 2015; Sugden 2015). For Practical Action a world with Technology Justice is defined (in Meikle and Sugden 2015) as one in which:

- Everyone has access to existing technologies that are essential to life; and
- The focus of efforts to innovate and develop new technologies is firmly centred on solving the great challenges the world faces today: ending poverty and providing a sustainable future for everyone on our planet (Meikle and Sugden 2015: 3).

and the three main technology injustices highlighted are:

- Inequitable access to existing technology
- Innovation ignoring the poor
- Unsustainable use of technology.

In 2016, Practical Action Publishing also published a book, *Rethink, Retool, Reboot: Technology as if People and Planet Mattered*, authored by former Chief Executive Simon Trace, which aimed to 'take a fresh look, through the lens of technology, at the twin problems of ending poverty and ensuring an environmentally sustainable future' (Trace 2016: 2). In echoing the sub-title of Schumacher's *Small is Beautiful*, Trace attempted to mark out the new concerns of Practical Action for a general audience with a broader and updated view on technology, poverty and environmental sustainability for the twenty-first century.

Technology Justice can thus be viewed as an update on the founding principle of Intermediate Technology that served the organisation well for many years but which ultimately came to be regarded as increasingly out of date and difficult to communicate. With a more inclusive and rights-based emphasis, it is hoped that Technology Justice can provide a frame of reference to attract new support and one that will resonate with other initiatives for open technology and freedom of access to information. For Practical Action, Technology Justice provides a lens through which to review its knowledge and learning work no less than its other operational programmes and

projects. A commitment to free sharing of knowledge through more open source and open access publications will have to be weighed in the balance with the more traditional strategy of developing products for sale and working on confidential assignments for consultancy clients.

5. REFLECTIONS ON DEVELOPMENT NGO RESEARCH KNOWLEDGE WORK IN PRACTICE

We have seen that among most development NGOs, and particularly among the UK development charities, Practical Action has had a distinctive approach to knowledge work; one rooted in its objectives, its history, its funding, its organisational structure and its working methods over the last 50 years. At a time when the pressure is on development organisations to show effectiveness, Practical Action can demonstrate a consistency of purpose and an adaptive methodology in its knowledge work. By developing a more nuanced and sophisticated appreciation of how best to understand and deliver on its knowledge work through specifically targeted research to create knowledge products tailored to their agreed purpose and actively encouraging feedback from its target recipients for knowledge sharing, it has helped maintain the effectiveness of this work. Further, its mix of business units and managerial involvement and support has helped it remain competitive in winning new streams of funding, in leveraging its policy impact and influence, and in remaining relevant to the changing needs of its knowledge partners and beneficiaries. It starts its second half-century of its knowledge work facing a more uncertain and complex world in which to work but with the valuable experience and learning of its first half-century to help it negotiate the challenges ahead.

5.1 Nine lessons from Practical Action's knowledge journey

1. *Effective knowledge work needs time and consistency but cannot be static*

Practical Action has been involved in knowledge work as central to its purpose since its start but has had to consistently adapt its research and knowledge work in the light of external environment changes (for example, digital media) and knowledge beneficiary feedback to maintain its relevance for policy and practice.

2. *Effective knowledge work needs to be contextualised and supported*

Top-down, push-out information knowledge sharing will not work in many contexts, especially at the first mile of grassroots development, and needs localising and contextualising to become actionable.

3. Effective knowledge work needs champions who can make the difference

In any INGO the importance of individual personalities is likely to be felt and in knowledge work a consistency of focus, management support and resource, the input of experienced staff, and the involvement of knowledge entrepreneurs and champions are vital assets.

4. Effective knowledge work needs wide organisational understanding and buy-in

To try to pursue knowledge work in an INGO that has its main priorities elsewhere is hard work and a wider appreciation of the value of knowledge and learning in any organisation will enhance the effectiveness of its knowledge work. Nevertheless, making the time for the development of a learning organisation culture may be difficult when under pressure to deliver on other aspects of work.

5. The practical implementation of agreed knowledge work principles may be problematic

Translating agreed understanding and action on knowledge work into best practice and knowledge management in the round within INGO programme work may be difficult in practice due to, for example, donor reporting requirements, established practices of programme evaluation and lack of continuity.

6. Knowledge and NGO cultures are fundamentally dissimilar

The language, processes and methodology of knowledge work are difficult to promote in any NGO culture. NGOs are, by their nature, the home of activists. The principles of knowledge and learning, which necessitate getting people to slow down and reflect, are often counter-cultural.

7. The problem of definition and jargon

The jargon of knowledge management is open to debate, confusion and misinterpretation. Whole books have been written around its definitions and within Practical Action there are different understandings and perceptions of knowledge work of which some are helpful and others not. The lack of clarity enhances misunderstanding and mistrust of purpose.

8. Networking in INGO knowledge work is beneficial

Because so many knowledge workers in NGOs work in comparative isolation, the benefit of networking for knowledge exchange about knowledge is particularly helpful.

9. The uncertainty of impact

The biggest point of all is still that of the uncertainty of impact and the ramifications for continued funding. Even in an INGO such as Practical Action where knowledge sharing has been a part of its lifeblood since the start, if the impact of its knowledge work cannot be satisfactorily proven or described, how long can it continue in a competitive funding environment where it must battle with other resource demands seemingly better able to prove effect and value for money?

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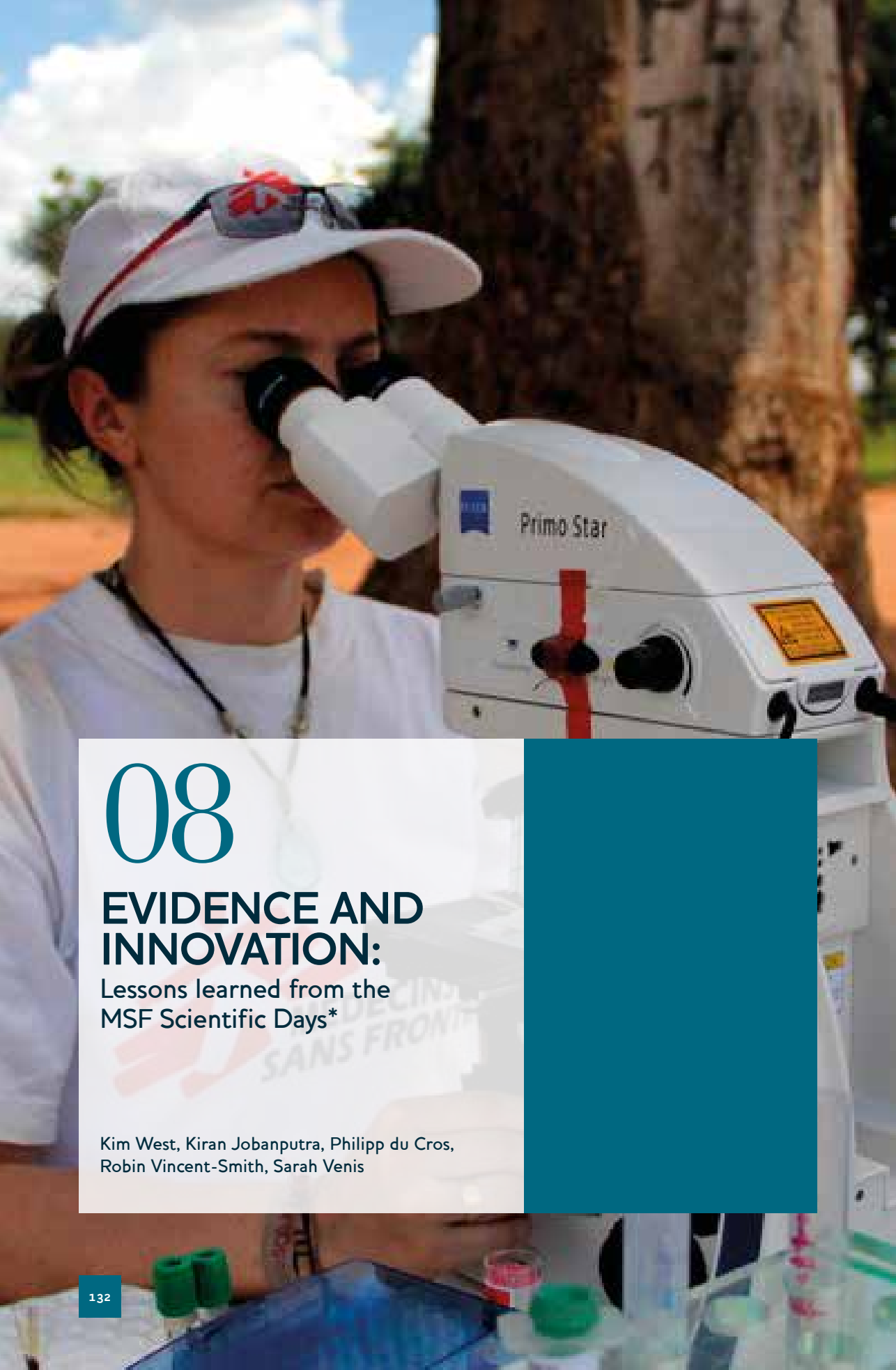
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ENDNOTES

- 1 For evidence and discussion of these trends see, for example, Agg (2006), Bebbington, Hickey and Mitlin (2008), and Wallace, Bornstein and Chapman (2006).
- 2 For an example of recent statements on the importance of knowledge work for UK INGOs see Bond (2015); for a recent examination of the importance and challenges of research evidence impact in development see Eyben, Guijt, Roche and Shutt (2015); for a recent review study of NGO knowledge work see Hayman, King, Kontinen and Narayanaswamy (2016); and for some more detailed workshop discussion of knowledge work in INGOs see Mansfield and Grunewald (2013).
- 3 Knowledge for Development, www.worldbank.org/wbi/k4d.
- 4 For evidence of and comment on these trends see, for example, Roche (1999).
- 5 The author worked at ITDG/Practical Action from 2001 to 2015 and has been assisted with the inclusion of recent developments by current staff of Practical Action, including Jonathan Casey (Technology and Innovation Policy Officer), Aaron Leopold (Global Energy Representative) and Sarah Begg (Knowledge Officer), and particularly Astrid Bourne Walker (Policy and Practice Director) and Robert Cartridge (Head of Global Knowledge).
- 6 <http://practicalaction.org/history>.
- 7 <http://practicalaction.org/history>.
- 8 Practical Action, <http://practicalaction.org/values-vision-mission>.
- 9 For reasons of space many other interesting Practical Action knowledge initiatives and projects have been omitted from this chapter. Practical Action's Publishing programme, its long-standing and innovative work on Participatory Market Systems Development (PMSD), and the recent consultancy-led South–South knowledge brokering project on Evidence and Lessons from Latin America (ELLA) are conspicuous examples, and many others from the organisation's work on agroecology, sanitation and disaster risk reduction could all have featured.
- 10 Further specific examples of influential energy policy bodies on which Practical Action staff are now represented include the Steering Groups of two World Bank initiatives: the SE4ALL Global Tracking Framework and the Readiness for Investment in Sustainable Energy (RISE). Additional active board memberships include the Green Climate Fund Private Sector Advisory Group (responsible for catalysing private climate finance in developing countries), the Board of Directors of the Alliance for Rural Electrification, the Advisory Board for the Safe Access to Fuel and Energy initiative of the Office of the UN High Commissioner on Refugees (providing expert advice to the UNHCR's energy team on the development of approaches to improving household, community and productive energy services to the world's 60 million displaced people), the Task Force on National Planning for the Technology Executive Committee of the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) (actively working to review and revise guidance on national climate change planning processes, specifically on Technology Needs Assessments and Technology Action Plans), the Steering Committee of the International Renewable Energy Agency Coalition for Action on Renewable Energy, Civil Society Organisation Observer Member to the Climate Investment Funds Scaling Up Renewable Energy in Low Income Countries Program (SREP), Founder Membership of the Alliance of CSOs on Energy Access (facilitated creation of an alliance of over 30 CSOs from developed and developing countries seeking to coordinate, facilitate and educate work on global and national energy policy advocacy).
- 11 www.solucionespracticas.org.pe.
- 12 Quotation provided in personal communication from a colleague.





08

EVIDENCE AND INNOVATION:

Lessons learned from the MSF Scientific Days*

Kim West, Kiran Jobanputra, Philipp du Cros,
Robin Vincent-Smith, Sarah Venis

ABSTRACT

We present learning from our experience of organising the MSF Scientific Days, a conference that includes both medical research and innovation. We discuss the learning opportunities between both worlds, differences in their cultures, and the challenges in agreeing what constitutes evidence of impact of innovation projects. We draw on the experiences of organising these events and in particular the juxtaposition of the medical research and innovation days to describe key lessons we have learned about what helps or hinders ideas turn into evidence and impact within MSF: the need for rigorous evaluation and communication of findings whether positive or negative; the need for ethics oversight; developing solid processes for uptake; and accountability and learning mechanisms.

KEYWORDS

innovation, Médecins sans Frontières, Doctors without Borders, MSF, research, ethics.

BIOGRAPHIES

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1. INTRODUCTION

Since 2004, Médecins sans Frontières/Doctors Without Borders (MSF) has hosted the MSF Scientific Days,² an open and free-to-attend annual conference at which medical and programmatic research from across MSF is presented to an audience largely composed of humanitarians, academics, medical, and non-governmental organisation (NGO) staff (Box 1). In 2015, to create a home for analyses of projects that did not fit into conventional medical research paradigms but that were undoubtedly relevant to medical programming, we added an 'Innovation Day'.

AIMS OF THE MSF SCIENTIFIC DAYS

The MSF Scientific Days has multiple aims. Initially it was set up to help raise the quality of research conducted by MSF, by creating a platform for academics and other NGO staff to critique the work presented, in addition to enabling knowledge sharing, promotion of networks and exchange of ideas. This expanded over time to include the aim of improving the quality of medical programming, through challenging MSF and other humanitarian organisations with evidence. In addition, two of the most important aims of the event are transparency and accountability. MSF has an ethical imperative to strive to ensure that the research we conduct and innovations we undertake deliver impact to our beneficiaries. Key to this is being transparent about our projects and where they have succeeded and failed. We use the MSF Scientific Days as a way to disseminate this information, both within MSF and importantly to viewers in the countries in which the research was conducted. In 2016, the event took place in London, New Delhi and Johannesburg, and through livestreaming technology more than 11,000 people participated from 125 countries. We also use surveys to follow up what happened next to the research and projects presented – whether they met their aims or had any impact. This information is presented back to the audience the following year, thus closing the accountability loop.

The addition of the Innovation Day raised multiple challenges in organisation. The dialogue between the research and innovation worlds was subject to miscommunication and misunderstanding. Determining what was research and what was innovation was not always straightforward. The cultures were often quite different, and structures and networks in place in the research world were not present in the innovation world and vice versa. A particular challenge was agreement on what constituted evidence of effect or outcome. The focus by the research world on evidence was initially a hard

sell to the innovation world. How this shift by innovators occurred from perceiving evidence as irrelevant to rather being a useful innovation tool forms part of this chapter. In addition, we discuss the limits of evidence alone and what the research world could learn from innovators. We draw on the experiences of organising these events and in particular the juxtaposition of the medical research and innovation days to describe key lessons we have learned about what helps or hinders ideas turn into evidence and impact within MSF.

2. INNOVATION IN MSF

Innovation is a word that is susceptible to hype, derived from the business world, and risks being so overused as to become meaningless. There is, of course, an artificial line between research and innovation, when in reality the two overlap. We focus in this article on disruptive innovation rather than quality improvement, and use innovation here to simply mean a new or a different way of doing things that creates value or has impact. Or, put more simply, it is something new that is useful.³ This could be a novel way of transporting biological samples (Chikwanha and Pujo 2015), or implementing a new model of patient care (Gunnarsson, Zughui, Tarwaneh and Altas 2015). Innovation is integral to the work of humanitarian organisations such as MSF since the emergency nature of our work means we must adapt rapidly to find new solutions to problems we see in the field. Innovators in MSF take many forms – doctors, logisticians, project coordinators – many of whom do not identify as innovators, nor recognise that they are doing something particularly novel. Additionally, MSF has over 400 projects in over 60 countries (MSF 2015a), which can make transferring knowledge between projects challenging. The MSF Innovation Day has showcased exciting innovations that potentially could have a big impact on MSF field programmes (MSF 2015b, 2016), but it has also highlighted many of the barriers that prevent an idea becoming something that leads to change.

3. CULTURAL CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES

The cultural exchange that happens between the innovation and research events at the MSF Scientific Days has been beneficial for each side. The lively presentation styles and ‘innovation pitch’ sessions (Vincent-Smith 2016) adopted by innovators have shown researchers more engaging ways to communicate their findings, and innovators have seen stronger means of evaluation from researchers. Surveys to determine the perceived impact of research and innovation presented at the MSF Scientific Days allowed insights into the inherent culture difference between the research and innovation communities around when and how to communicate about a project (Annex). Innovators tend to favour mainstream media communication whereas researchers usually wait for peer review before there is excitement and wider dissemination of findings. Innovation has a ‘sell’ culture, rooted in the need to sell the dream to get funding. An example of the difference in

media approach occurred at the height of the West Africa Ebola outbreak, when MSF collaborated with software developers from the Google Social Impact Team to create a product that would help to overcome some of the challenges of patient data management in our Ebola Management Centres. The solution was the 'Ebola tablet', which was to facilitate a real-time electronic medical record in an extreme biohazard environment. The tablet garnered much media attention (Metz 2015; Mudasad 2015). However, the impact on patients was minimal because delays in deployment meant that patient numbers had declined before it could be implemented (Jobanputra *et al.* 2016).

4. KEY LESSONS IN EVIDENCE IN INNOVATION

4.1 Rigorous evaluation and communication of findings – positive and negative

The Humanitarian Innovation Fund (ELRHA 2014) acknowledges that 'the effectiveness of humanitarian interventions is limited by the inability of the humanitarian system to create and harness successful innovations and learn from unsuccessful innovation trials'. It has also been suggested that the humanitarian sector values action over analysis and lacks the infrastructure to design effective evaluations (Proudlock and Ramalingam 2008). The excitement of innovative programmes can lack the rigour associated with biomedical research. In innovation abstracts submitted to the MSF Scientific Days, we have often seen a lack of evaluation and difficulty in understanding what constitutes evidence of impact. Given the time and resources invested in any innovation project, we have an obligation to rigorously evaluate innovations and to share both positive and negative outcomes, so we can learn from them and avoid repeating mistakes. Indeed, being prepared to 'fail forward and learn' was a key message delivered at MSF Scientific Days 2016 (Vincent-Smith 2016). To address the challenges faced by lack of evaluation of innovation projects, we are instigating a pairing of innovators with researchers in the Scientific Days editorial committee. The idea is that the researchers can offer mentorship and support to ensure innovations are properly assessed. This approach has been followed by the International Rescue Committee, which has described how it brings researchers together with innovators to strengthen both the design and the evaluation of interventions (Ramalingam and Bound 2016).

The abstracts submitted to MSF Scientific Days have also highlighted the lack of sound project management practice in many innovative initiatives. This practice should include building a solid business case including extensive stakeholder mapping and SWOT (strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, threats) analysis, launching proof of concepts before developing a complete project charter and plan and moving to execution, and the advantages and disadvantages of various project management methodologies, such as 'agile' approaches. The appearance of Project Management Office structures across MSF is an attempt to respond to this need.

Betts and Bloom define the process of humanitarian innovation in four stages: (1) defining a problem or identifying an opportunity; (2) finding potential solutions; (3) testing, adapting and implementing a solution; and (4) appropriately scaling the solution (Bloom and Betts 2013). The abstracts submitted to the MSF Scientific Days have shown challenges and solutions in how each of these stages have been managed, assessed or evaluated as we highlight in the examples below.

Defining a problem; finding potential solutions

Issues with the stage of problem identification were exemplified by a presentation at the 2016 MSF Scientific Days on the evaluation of the use of an electronic medical record for use in emergencies (EMR-E) (Marr 2016). The EMR-E was piloted in a nutrition emergency in Chad with the plan to move away from paper-based patient data management towards a tablet-based solution. However, the evaluation revealed that the EMR-E was not ready for deployment, as the software was not stable and the user interface needed more work to function safely. The key problem with this project was the lack of a rigorous situation analysis that preceded finding the potential solution. Paper turned out to be a complex technology to replace, and the proposed solution did not fit the identified problem.

Testing, adapting and implementing a solution

However, the EMR-E evaluation was rigorous and the presentation of the negative outcomes of the evaluation conveyed a strong message that was highly rated by the conference audience in the feedback forms. The importance was shown of being able to learn from a negative outcome and take action on the basis of robust evidence. The presentation was distinct from others because it was the only one submitted that showed negative findings. It was also the only one that was assessed by an independent evaluator. In view of the potential conflict of interests arising from evaluating one's own innovation, we would suggest innovation projects are evaluated by an external person where possible.

Appropriately scaling the solution

Innovations must ideally have strategies for wider implementation so they can be applied at scale. If they only benefit one small community they are much less useful than if they can be adapted for a range of settings. This issue of scalability has also been recognised by Oxfam (Ramalingam and Bound 2016) who, when analysing their own innovation culture, realised that the question should not be 'Is it innovative?' and instead should be 'Does it have potential to bring change at scale and what are the ways that impact can be increased?' For instance, at the 2016 Scientific Days, an innovation pitch was made for a dashboard application to aid disease surveillance. The dashboard aggregates epidemiological data from multiple sources (e.g. MSF, ministries of health, World Health Organization) in a visual display that 'turns data into information' (Ait Bouziad et al. 2016). The dashboard was developed with scalability in mind because the geography and dataset will be different for each setting in which it is implemented. It also used open source code so other institutions can benefit from this technology.

4.2 Ethics oversight

Once the problem has been analysed and a solution identified, the ethical implications of that intervention need careful consideration. MSF projects must align with core medical and humanitarian values to ensure we do not cause undue risk or exploitation of our patients. Our medical research is governed by an independent ethics review board⁴ and adheres to the principles of medical ethics, but innovation projects that do not involve human subjects do not fall under this system.

In 2015, the lack of ethical oversight of some of the projects presented at the Innovation Day was questioned by our audience. In addition, there was an artificial divide that we struggled with as organisers around material that potentially was suitable for presentation in either the research or the Innovation Day. All material in the research day required a statement about ethics oversight. It was clearly unsatisfactory to have a system where material required ethics oversight if accepted in one event but not the other. However, decreeing that the ethical procedures in place for research should be followed by innovators risks stifling innovation with heavy processes.

This tension led us to develop a light, parallel structure for the ethical guidance of MSF innovation projects – an ethics framework for innovation that innovators can self-apply to reflect on the potential harms or benefits to our patients (Box 2) (Sheather *et al.* 2016). It addresses many of the points on evaluation raised above. We plan to evaluate its utility through auditing the abstracts submitted to MSF Scientific Days and surveying authors.

A MÉDECINS SANS FRONTIÈRES ETHICS FRAMEWORK FOR HUMANITARIAN INNOVATION

This framework is intended to be used to guide work that does not directly involve human participants and does not lie within the purview of formal research ethics oversight.

- 1. Clearly identify the problem** you are seeking to address, and what benefit you expect the innovation to have. This step may seem obvious, so what is its ethical significance? When identifying the problem, there should be consideration of up-stream solutions that may address the problem in a holistic and sustainable way. For instance, rather than focusing on technocratic fixes, what are the sociopolitical determinants of the problem and the wider possibilities for solutions? Who has stakes in finding a solution and who may have interests in perpetuating the problem? Is the problem a moving target? Collaboration and cross-fertilisation with other disciplines should be considered in order to help to see the problem from various perspectives. In short, do not underestimate the importance of fully identifying the problem.
- 2. Ensure that the innovation shows respect for human dignity.** While this is a broad concept, it has practical implications. The focus of concern is respect for human beings, reminding us that the simplest or most direct solutions may not be ethically appropriate. Innovators must show due respect for the multiple and overlapping interests of those affected by the innovation. It extends beyond a concern for physical wellbeing to include psychological and cultural integrity. It also incorporates a concern for individual privacy and a respect for the confidentiality of individual, family and community-based data.
- 3. Clarify how you will involve the end user** from the start of the process. Innovation should be driven by the requirements of the user. The innovation cycle should be participatory, using methods to involve relevant individuals and communities. Innovators must be sensitive to power dynamics between and within cultures and power imbalances between aid workers and beneficiaries.
- 4. Identify and weigh harms and benefits.** When considering innovations, a critical first step is the identification, as far as is reasonably possible, of potential harms along with the anticipated benefits. The next step involves weighing these harms and benefits.
 - Where reasonably foreseeable harms outweigh the likely benefits, implementation will not be ethical. Potential harms include, but are not limited to, physical and psychological harms to individuals. There is also need to consider potential harm to communities.
 - Where innovation involves a favourable balance of benefits and harms, all reasonable steps must be taken to minimise (mitigate) the harms as far as possible. Unnecessary harms must be eliminated. Where harms are unavoidable, those affected should be informed of the nature and severity of the risks involved.
 - Conflicted partnerships or conflicts of interest may result in reputational harm to the organisation. If these are identified then oversight by an existing Ethics Review Board is recommended.

- 5. Describe the distribution of harms and benefits, and ensure that the risk of harm is not borne by those who do not stand to benefit.** Innovators need to give careful consideration to the distribution of benefits and harms associated with their projects. Do the risks or benefits fall unequally across groups? If so, is it appropriate to proceed, and how can these inequalities of distribution be addressed or mitigated? Equally, it is important that the innovation takes into account vulnerable groups; it may be ethically warranted to give particular attention to those who have particular needs. Just as we tend to give more health care to the unwell, so particular attention may need to be given to those who are vulnerable or who may not be able to protect their own interests. This is expressed in the humanitarian principle of impartiality. In addition, consider whether anyone is 'wronged' by the innovation. A 'wrong' is an infringement that is distinct from harm. For example, selecting one group for an innovation project over another may wrong the other group (as opposed to harming them).
- 6. Plan (and carry out) an evaluation that delivers the information needed for subsequent decisions to implement or scale up the innovation; and then ensure that the beneficiaries have access to the innovation.** Innovation requires an acceptance of the risk of failure – not all innovation projects will achieve their desired outcome. But in all cases, we can learn and apply these lessons in the future. Given the time, energy and resources that these projects require, rigorous evaluation and sharing of lessons is itself a moral obligation. Therefore, consideration should be given to dissemination of findings, since it may be important to avoid further exposure to potential harm by sharing findings, whether these are positive or negative. Likewise, there should be a willingness and strategy for wider implementation of the innovation if found to be successful, and a commitment to ensure beneficiaries – at least in the communities where it was tested and ideally in similar communities affected by humanitarian crises – have access to the innovation subsequently.

4.3 Developing solid processes for uptake

Even if innovations are of a high quality, robustness doesn't always lead to an impact on patients. Implementing change is arguably the most important stage of any research or innovation project and often the most neglected.

At MSF Scientific Days 2015, a study demonstrated that instead of having to be kept refrigerated to a temperature below 8°C, insulin can stay thermostable for up to four weeks at temperatures seen in tropical settings (Kaufmann 2015). The potential impact on our diabetic patients could be huge – for people without refrigerators, instead of needing to visit a clinic twice per day to receive insulin, patients could visit once per month and store their medication at home. However, the presentation and dissemination of the findings was not sufficient to enact change. A year later, the only projects in MSF that had changed policy were those where a staff member involved with the study had actively lobbied for change. The reasons for this could be many, but often who is responsible for translating results into impact is not clear. In the innovation world there are lots of labs or incubator concepts that nurture the earlier stages of innovation, but for the later stages there is a lack of definition of who makes sure something happens.

4.4 Accountability and learning

We have recognised the need to develop processes and systems that will embed impact into our research and innovation culture. First, at the point a research or innovation project is conceived we ask project staff to be explicit about their plans for dissemination and impact. This increases the amount of thinking at the early stages of a project about how work will be translated and to identify where more support can be given to ensuring this happens. Second, we have new initiatives such as the MSF Sapling Nursery⁵ and the Transformational Investment Capacity (TIC) Fund,⁶ where MSF staff or members of our association can submit proposals for funding to develop their innovative projects. The Sapling Nursery is an incubator that is for disruptive and field-driven innovations. It encourages innovation by offering funding of up to €50,000 to 'plant seeds' and providing a safe space to pilot and evaluate projects. If they are successful they can apply for further funding to scale up. The TIC is an initiative that invests funds, intellectual capital and human resources in larger-scale projects that can transform MSF's abilities to meet the needs of our patients. Third, we are starting to critically analyse the factors that determine the uptake of innovations. With this aim, we have developed ReMIT (Research Management & Impact Tool),⁷ an open source web application that tracks the research process, and captures where findings have been disseminated and any impacts on patients, policies, or programmes. There are plans to adapt this for application to our innovative projects so we can further understand what approaches do or do not work for the knowledge translation or impact.

5.1 CONCLUSION

The joint venture of the MSF Scientific Days between the innovation and research worlds has been fruitful for both. The MSF Scientific Days in itself acts as an integral part of the system to help in sharing and scalability across MSF as well as to external organisations, and this type of joint venture between disparate fields of work is highly recommended. The juxtaposition of these worlds revealed gaps in the innovation structure that were needed to ensure delivery of robust, useful and ethical projects. Although the focus of this chapter has been on evidence in innovation projects, the problems of scale up and dissemination of use are also highly relevant to research (Annex). The experience has also revealed the need for better communication and presentation of research material, as well as the need to avoid making the mistakes of the research world through introducing burdensome bureaucracy to the innovation process.

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Annex:

Impact of research and innovation projects presented at the MSF Scientific Days 2015

Questionnaires were sent to all authors of oral presentations 9 months after their presentation. The questions differed slightly between the research and innovation days. The response rate for the research day was 94 per cent (15/16) and for the innovation day it was 86 per cent (12/14).

MSF Scientific Day – Research results

	Yes	No	Ongoing
Did your study have an effect on:			
patients?	3	8	4
programmes?	9	6	-
policies?	7	8	-
other effects?	8	7	-
Was your study:			
published in a scientific journal?	6	5	4
presented at another conference?	13	2	-
discussed in a blog or news-story?	2	13	-
disseminated another way?	4	11	-

Summary

Measuring a direct effect on patients is hard, and answers to this question were variable and degree of direct effect uncertain: 47 per cent of studies had either had or expected shortly to have an effect on patients; of the remainder some did not know as they had no data and some had presented project descriptions so the research itself did not have a direct effect. Effect on programmes was clearer, with 60 per cent able to describe an effect on operations. Effects on policies were described by 47 per cent of authors, with some others noting that policies were already in place but poorly implemented or that they would not know if this had happened. Of the 53 per cent that had had other effects, many of these were further research studies: 73 per cent had either been published in a scientific journal or publication was planned or in progress; most (87 per cent) had been presented at other conferences or meetings. However, 87 per cent had not been discussed in news media or blogs and only 27 per cent disseminated in other ways (internal documents, reports).

MSF Scientific Day – Innovation results

	Yes	No	Ongoing
Has your project:			
achieved its original aims?	5	2	5
been replicated in MSF or externally?	5	7	-
led to another project being launched?	6	6	-
Did your project have an effect on:			
programmes?	8	3	1
policies?	2	10	-
other effects?	5	7	-
Was your project:			
helped by being presented at the MSF Scientific Day?	9	3	-
published in a scientific journal?	0	7	5
presented at another conference?	9	3	-
discussed in a blog or news-story?	7	5	-
disseminated another way?	6	6	-

Summary

Forty per cent of presenters said their projects had reached their original aims, but the same amount described their work as ongoing or were unsure. Both projects that had not fully reached their aims had taken place in the Ebola outbreak and piloting had been cut short by the end of the outbreak. Most (60 per cent) of projects had not been replicated, but classification was difficult for some, including cases where projects were services rather than products. Half the projects had led directly to the launch of another project.

Two-thirds of the projects had had effects on programmes, and 40 per cent had other effects such as creation of collaborations, inclusion in training or creation of working groups. Only two had had effect on policies, and two had had no impacts on programmes or policies, or other effects.

Seventy-five per cent said that presenting at the MSF Scientific Day had helped their project, many citing increased MSF buy-in to their work, with two of the three who said it hadn't specifically helped noting, however, that the increased visibility was useful. sixty per cent had not been published in a journal; 40 per cent had ongoing or planned publication; one project noted that journal publication would not be relevant. Seventy-five per cent had also been presented at other MSF and external conferences. Sixty per cent had received media coverage, with 50 per cent disseminated at other meetings, training, or via YouTube; only two had not been disseminated in any other fora.

ENDNOTES

- * We thank all members of the MSF Scientific Day editorial committees as well as the presenters and field staff involved in preparing and presenting their research and projects at the events.
- 2 MSF Scientific Days, MSF UK, www.msf.org.uk/content/msf-scientific-days.
- 3 MSF OCA Sapling Nursery Innovation Process, MSF UK, www.msf.org.uk/msf-oca-sapling-nursery-innovation-process.
- 4 MSF Ethics Review Board, MSF International, www.msf.org/en/msf-ethics-review-board
- 5 MSF OCA Sapling Nursery Innovation Process | MSF UK, www.msf.org.uk/msf-oca-sapling-nursery-innovation-process.
- 6 MSF, Transformational Investment Capacity, <http://msf-transformation.org>.
- 7 MSF, Research Management and Impact Tool (REMIT), <http://remit.oca.msf.org>.





09

SUPPORTING IMPACT

across a multi-dimensional research programme*

Louise Shaxson

ABSTRACT

The Evidence and Policy Group of the DFID-ESRC Growth Research Programme helps academic researchers improve the impact of their work on policy and practice; influencing their understanding of how impact happens and providing opportunities for them to engage with policymakers and practitioners. The research programme is multidimensional, and the chapter outlines the implications for how a facilitating organisation such as the Evidence and Policy Group can act most effectively. The key is 'strategic opportunism': the group works by setting a general direction rather than specific objectives and responding to opportunities for impact as they arise. This means a flexible approach to planning and budgeting that encourages innovation and building relationships to create opportunities.

KEYWORDS

research impact, types of impact, evidence, policy, practice, strategic opportunism.

BIOGRAPHIES

Louise Shaxson is a senior Research Fellow at the Overseas Development Institute, UK. She has 25 years' experience as a researcher, research manager and management consultant in the UK and internationally. For the past 13 years she has focused on what 'evidence-informed policymaking' means in practice, working with researchers, knowledge intermediaries and government departments. Louise leads the DEGRP Evidence and Policy Group.

1.1 INTRODUCTION

The DFID-ESRC Growth Research Programme (DEGRP) contributes to evidence-informed policymaking for inclusive and sustainable growth in low-income countries. A jointly funded initiative launched in 2011 by the Department for International Development (DFID) and the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC), it has funds of £20.9m spread over four themes: agriculture, finance, innovation and the relationships between China and the African continent. The programme funds 44 different projects: 19 focusing on agriculture, 11 on innovation, nine on finance and five on China–Africa relationships.

The DEGRP Evidence and Policy Group (EPG) was set up in 2012 to support researchers in achieving impact. An interdisciplinary team from the Overseas Development Institute (ODI) was contracted to help the programme and its individual projects maximise their profile and the uptake and likely impact of the research. With a budget of £1.4m over four years, this is a substantial investment by its two funders, and a significant attempt to enhance the impact of their social science research. This chapter reflects on some of the lessons the EPG has learned. It focuses on how the EPG has influenced research projects' thinking about impact, not the impacts they have subsequently had on policy and practice. As such, we hope it offers ideas for organisations such as donors or universities who want to increase the likelihood of impact from the research they fund.

Understanding the role of the EPG and what it is able to achieve means understanding how the programme was set up. DFID and the ESRC jointly oversee the DEGRP programme: the ESRC is responsible for ensuring the research is academically robust, and DFID for ensuring that it focuses on the needs of the poor in low-income countries. The programme thus has a dual remit. It needs to promote world-class, cutting-edge research, pushing the boundaries of knowledge and creating public goods in the form of new datasets, models or approaches. But it also needs to ensure that this research influences processes and policies for inclusive and sustainable economic growth. Like other similar programmes, it strives to deliver 'engaged excellence', as James Georgalakis so neatly puts it (Georgalakis 2016).

2.1 DIFFERENT TYPES OF IMPACT

Early in the life of the EPG we challenged ourselves to consider how to frame our own impacts; how we would assess our influence on the research process. Drawing on the definitions of impact outlined by the ESRC,² we describe the EPG's impacts as:

- *Instrumental*: impacts on the policies and practices of researchers, on how they go about the process of achieving impact;
- *Conceptual*: contributing to understanding, influencing knowledge about and attitudes towards impact;
- *Capacity building*: strengthening the ability of researchers to work towards impact.

However, research does not happen in isolation: building networks of people and organisations able to understand the research and make use of it is part and parcel of achieving broad-based impact, which takes on a life of its own after the project has ended. We added a fourth category:

- *Connectivity*: improving relationships between researchers, policymakers and practitioners so that they can develop their own networks in future.

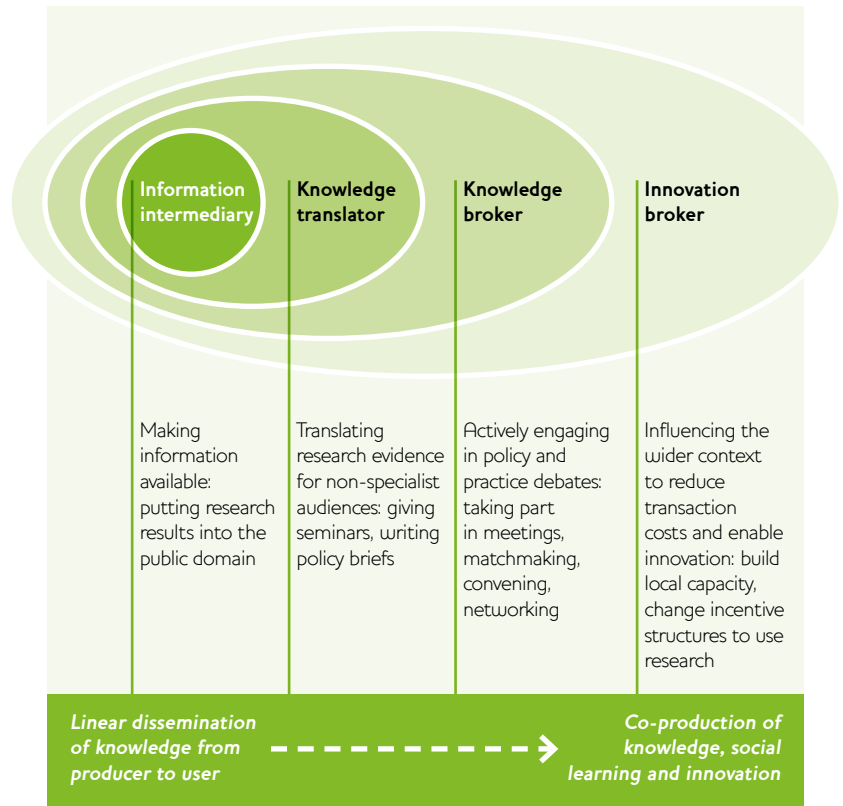
Within each type of impact we can also consider what role we played. We identify three possible causal roles, examples of which are given throughout the chapter in boxes 1–3 (and see, for example, the work of the International Food Policy Research Institute [IFPRI] on the impact of policy research in Place and Hazell 2015; see also Pasanen and Shaxson 2016: 24).

- *Direct, attributable impacts*: where it is possible to claim that without the EPG's intervention the researchers would not have changed their approach to impact (see Box 1);
- *Plausible and distinct contributions to sustainable change*: we can plausibly claim to have contributed to how the research was able to achieve impact, and can distinguish what we did from contributions made by others or from external factors (see Box 2);
- *Influencing context*: where what we did was part of a wider push for impact. It may be difficult to identify our specific contribution, but what we did helped shape the context within which the project worked (see Box 3).

3. THE EPG AS A KNOWLEDGE INTERMEDIARY

So, what do we actually do? The EPG's role has evolved over time, partly in response to changing governance arrangements and partly as the full complexity of the programme has emerged. Our overall approach can be described using the K* framework for knowledge interaction, set out in Figure 1, which distinguishes four broad types of knowledge function (the K* framework is described in Harvey, Lewin and Fisher 2012; Shaxson, Bielak et al. 2012).

Figure 1 The K* framework, setting out the different functions of a knowledge intermediary



Source: Shaxson, Bielak et al. (2012).

As an *information intermediary* we host information provided by the research projects, making their research available via the DEGRP website. As a *knowledge translator* we produce policy briefs and policy-focused research syntheses; as a *knowledge broker* we engage in current policy debates; and as an *innovation broker* we provide the wherewithal for researchers to engage with policymakers and practitioners by improving their opportunities to meet. The balance between the four roles is described and assessed in section 4.4, but what is important to know is that it changes constantly, depending on the demand from researchers and on what we jointly believe could make the most difference to their work.

4. TRANSLATING, BROKERING AND FACILITATING IN MULTIPLE DIMENSIONS

Over time, the EPG's approach to being a knowledge intermediary has become more reactive than proactive; less planned and more responsive to current events. Understanding why means considering the different dimensions of the programme.

The ESRC procurement process is an open call, though its boundaries are set by the call specification document that was developed by the two funding agencies with technical support from international advisers.³ This process encourages a broad response from researchers, but means that links between individual projects are serendipitous rather than planned. This gives rise to a programme that varies across multiple dimensions.

4.1 First dimension: thematic

While there are four research themes—agriculture, finance, innovation and China-Africa relationships—these are broadly defined. Within each it has (just about) been possible to identify technical sub-themes such as irrigation, financial regulation, or where innovation happens. However, the openness of the commissioning process means that these sub-themes are baskets of reasonably similar projects rather than strands of work that can be synthesised to draw lessons. There is no regional theme – most projects are in Africa but the programme covers 20 countries. Nor is it possible to distinguish a thematic approach to end users: some projects work directly with smallholder farmers or small businesses, some with medium-sized or international businesses/producers and some with representatives of global organisations. Many work across two of those categories.

DIRECT AND ATTRIBUTABLE IMPACTS: USING THE EPG IMPACT GUIDANCE

Following the DEGRP impact guidance (Shaxson 2016) prompted one project to radically change its approach to impact. The researchers originally described a somewhat passive methodology that relied on uptake of their findings by transnational development agencies, bilateral donors and philanthropists. Policymakers would be reached via a research organisation with greater field presence.

The DEGRP impact guidance sets out four steps: mapping stakeholders, developing a theory of change, understanding the team's role as knowledge intermediaries (using the K* spectrum outlined in Fig. 1) and developing their communication and engagement strategy. Using the DEGRP guidance encouraged the team to map their stakeholders, consider what changes would be likely and what knowledge intermediary role they could play. In doing this they realised that they had insufficient knowledge of Ugandan policy processes and that this would be key to developing actionable recommendations.

The revised impact pathway set out an innovative approach to turning complex research findings on farmers' attitudes to risk into policy recommendations. Initial findings were discussed with the project's stakeholders and turned into a locally informed policy brief. This was updated via a series of interviews with a wide range of national stakeholders, before being discussed at a final workshop in Kampala that involved senior policy officials as well as representatives from non-governmental organisations (NGOs), farmer organisations, donors and the private sector.

The EPG supported the team as they implemented their plan, offering advice on what issues to prioritise for different audiences and how to write for policymakers and practitioners. Two EPG staff helped facilitate the final workshop. The process is described in a report and infographic (Verschoor 2015).

The EPG can claim to have had played a direct, attributable role in achieving conceptual, instrumental and capacity building impacts on the research team; and to have made a plausible and distinct contribution to change in the project's connectivity – the project made the connections, but the EPG impact guidance provided the impetus.

4.2 Second dimension: researchers' individual characteristics

The individual characteristics of the principal investigators (PIs) and their research teams vary widely. They differ according to:

- The range and depth of existing personal connections to policymakers and practitioners. Some had already built close relationships with the people and organisations they were hoping to influence, such as local manufacturers, central bank governors or senior policy officials. Others had good connections to local research organisations but limited connections to policymakers or practitioners.
- The different appetites for public engagement. Some are happy to work closely with policy officials around preliminary findings, but others have little interest in engaging until after peer-reviewed reports and articles have been published.
- The different appetites for the impact agenda. Projects based at UK institutions were already familiar with the requirements of the Research Excellence Framework for an impact focus; projects at non-UK universities were less so. However, the *a priori* appetite for the impact agenda seems to be more personal than institutional.
- Their existing communication skills. Crafting policy- and practice-relevant messages came more naturally to some than to others. This is not necessarily a question of writing skills or style, more of being able to identify what issues from their research would be most likely to interest their audiences.
- The institutional support available from their home institutions. Some projects crafted their own detailed websites, which were hosted by their universities and linked to wider programmes of work. Others operated on a more individual basis, with less institutional backup.

4.3 Third dimension: the nature of the research approach

Some projects aim to inform specific policy questions; some are less targeted and more conceptual in nature. Most work with large quantitative datasets, but some have an explicit focus on mixed methods, and a few involve social anthropologists as well as economists. Most are cross-sectional analyses, though some have a longitudinal component as well (one is primarily a longitudinal analysis). The focus on cross-cutting issues (such as gender) varies, as do the methods for data collection and analysis; both qualitative and quantitative.

A PLAUSIBLE AND DISTINCT CONTRIBUTION TO CHANGE: CATALYSING CONNECTIVITY

Three projects in the DEGRP portfolio are working on irrigation issues in East Africa (see Harrison 2015; Meinzen-Dick 2015; Woodhouse 2015): one that had already ended and two that had recently begun. They had been commissioned entirely separately and were unaware of each other's existence.

The EPG brought the projects together at a workshop that specifically sought to encourage interaction between all projects within each theme. The two ongoing projects developed joint plans for outreach, but when one built good relationships with an irrigation authority in one East African country this developed into a joint policy workshop that also involved the earlier project that had ended. The EPG topped up project budgets to facilitate the workshop (funding flights for two researchers who had not already planned to be in the region). The longer-term impacts of this have yet to be realised, but a longer series of collaborative events have been planned.

The projects might have learned about each other through ongoing programme-level communications, and the first policy workshop was the direct result of connections made by one of the PIs. However, the EPG made a *plausible and distinct contribution to connectivity*: catalysing relationships that will influence how the projects relate to each other and to policymakers in the region.

4.4 The EPG's role in a multidimensional programme

This multidimensionality means that there are no blueprints for how to achieve impact. We have had to think carefully about our role as a knowledge intermediary.

It has been straightforward to operate as an *information intermediary*, ensuring that information from each of the projects is easily accessible via the website. Our work as a *knowledge translator* has also been relatively uncomplicated; synthesising the research messages, crafting and carefully targeting short briefing notes. The audiences for EPG outputs are mainly national policymakers and practitioners, though for some projects it has been important to engage at a global level. The EPG has supported this translation function where the project's host university has limited skills or experience, or where specific opportunities have been identified – for example in regional or national media – and the PI's contacts are limited. A recent addition to our translation function is the Research In Context series, where the EPG lead sets a piece of DEGRP research in the wider policy context (see, for example, DEGRP 2016).

However, our anticipated role as a *knowledge broker* has been more limited. Knowledge brokers actively engage in policy debates, but although the EPG's technical leads work as knowledge brokers in their ODI jobs, it became apparent early on that policy officials did not want to hear what the EPG

thought the research was saying: they wanted to hear it directly from the researchers themselves. Instead, we play a stronger role as an *innovation broker*, improving opportunities for engagement and uptake by ensuring that the PIs can present their research in person. We have done this in three ways.

First, we have provided light-touch guidance to improve policy engagement and influence of research. While it is important to think about research impact early on, ideas about how to achieve impact change with the context and as emerging findings provide nuance to messages that were envisaged earlier (see ODI 2014). The EPG provided a half-day workshop for all researchers to discuss how to consider impact, then left them alone for a year to develop their understanding of the context of their research before asking them to update their pathways to impact. We provided guidance but no template for their revised plan. Because we could provide tailored support to each project, we wanted to encourage as much innovation as possible in approaches to achieving impact. This flexible approach paid off: some projects produced relatively simple plans, which they then followed closely. Some provided new ideas for conceptualising and planning for impact, which were shared more widely. And as Box 1 notes, one project completely revised its approach.

Second, our three technical leads have extensive networks of policymakers and practitioners; nationally, regionally and globally. As a result, DEGRP researchers have shared panels and co-presented with senior policy officials and people from international organisations, raising their own profile and that of their research. Collaborating with well-respected local research organisations such as the African Economic Research Consortium (Nairobi), the Science and Technology Policy Research Institute (Accra), the African Center for Economic Transformation (Accra), the South African Institute for International Affairs (Johannesburg) and the Centre for Policy Dialogue (Dhaka) further enhanced those networks, particularly with national policymakers and national media. These national events have been balanced with smaller panel-type events that have taken advantage of key international researchers and policymakers who happened to pass through London, ODI's live-streaming facilities and its broad international audience.

Third, we have a large budget for events. Along with maintaining the website, events have become the EPG's major focus. Much of our work involves planning, facilitating and wrapping up engagements of one form or another – from small four-person panels to large conferences of over 100 people – and finalising the publications that result. The events are relatively simple to put on and host, and instead of lengthy event reports we ask presenters for two-page policy-relevant essays that are collated into a single document and prefaced with an editorial by the EPG research lead (see, for example, the report from the event co-hosted with the South African Institute of International Affairs, DEGRP 2016).

CONTEXTUAL IMPACTS: FOSTERING DEBATE

Most DEGRP projects focus on Africa, but the EPG and funders were keen to hold an event in Asia to raise the programme's profile there as much as possible. Early findings from a project on training female supervisors in the Bangladeshi garment industry (Woodruff 2015) provided the kernel of an EPG-funded workshop that brought together senior policymakers and researchers from across the region to address issues around innovation policy. The workshop (Centre for Policy Dialogue 2014) was co-hosted with a local thinktank, the Centre for Policy Dialogue, whose connections ensured attendance by high-level policy officials from both Bangladesh and Pakistan. The EPG funded the attendance of a senior United Nations Industrial Development Organization (UNIDO) official from Mauritius to speak about the lessons that could be drawn for Bangladesh from the history of transformation in the Mauritian garment sector. The DEGRP project was then still at a relatively early stage so had no findings to communicate, though the PI was well known and had worked on similar issues previously. However, the presence of very senior policymakers at the event meant that there was intense interest from the region: over one thousand people watched the event online.

It was culturally inappropriate to ask for feedback from those who attended the event, so it is impossible to analyse what effects it might have had on the project's impact. We are not sure whether the main impacts of the workshop were conceptual, instrumental, capacity building or connectivity. However, we would claim that the EPG helped shape the context within which future project results would be disseminated.

5.1 PRACTICAL LESSONS

There is an increasing amount of experience from the sharp end of work to improve research impact (see DFID 2016; Reed 2016), but to our knowledge the EPG is still an innovative attempt to manage this at a programme level. Four lessons stand out from the past four years.

5.1 Be strategically opportunistic

In such a multidimensional programme a prescriptive approach to supporting impact will not work. We describe our approach as ‘strategic opportunism’: setting a general direction and then responding to specific opportunities (see Isenberg 1987). This means we need to be flexible: helping facilitate workshops, advising on writing op-eds or opinion pieces, producing short films, or funding a workshop that was not in the initial project budget but will make an important contribution to impact. The price PIs pay for this tailored support is an output for every input such as a blog piece, a short essay, a case study or a set of short films we can publicise to raise the profile of their research and of the programme.

There are no firm criteria for selecting which projects are supported in what ways: it is an ongoing discussion within the EPG team that draws on their knowledge of upcoming events, requests from PIs for specific types of support, emerging findings, and innovative ideas about how we could present projects and their work.

5.2 Plan for the short term, but fund for the long term

This need for flexibility means that we can only construct detailed work plans three to four months in advance. Opportunities arise at short notice – even regular events organised by international organisations might be cancelled or shift their focus. Our planning and reporting cycle has evolved over time: a detailed annual work plan became a six-monthly work plan, which ultimately became a quarterly work plan with a six-month forward look. This is only possible because the EPG’s funding is not tightly prescribed. Outputs are reported annually against the logical framework, but within broad budget lines (events, tailored support to projects, programme communications, reimbursable) there is considerable flexibility. We have an agreed annual budget envelope and an agreed number of deliverables of different types, but within those limits we work with the researchers to decide what is appropriate.

5.3 Relationships, relationships, relationships

Flexible funding is important, but the excellent relationships between DFID, ESRC and the EPG are the foundation of our strategically opportunistic approach. Early, lengthy discussions about the purpose of the programme (via the wording of the outcome statement in the logical framework) was time well spent. As with any programme there have been glitches, but maintaining a focus on what being a ‘centre of excellence’ means for DEGRP has helped overcome them.

The main task of the EPG's technical leads is to build relationships with each research project, so they can offer advice on how to maximise the likelihood of impact. A good deal of effort goes into maintaining these individual contacts, and the time is well funded. The technical leads' professional networks are very valuable, particularly for early-career researchers who have not yet developed a good range or depth of contacts.

5.4 Facilitate but do not interpolate

Defining 'connectivity' as an impact the EPG can have has encouraged us to concentrate on our knowledge translation and innovation brokering functions, rather than setting the EPG up as a knowledge broker. Instead of interpolating in the debates, the focus has instead been on building researchers' own knowledge brokering capabilities, helping them become more comfortable with the concept and building their networks. Some were already experienced brokers; others have needed support. This has been an effective strategy, as the early achievements set out in section 2 demonstrate. Improving connectivity and supporting mutual learning between grantees has become increasingly important (see Box 2), through dedicated grant-holder workshops and in-country events.

6. | FINAL REFLECTIONS

6.1 We've made our own luck

The EPG has been a successful experiment: a great deal has been learned on all sides about how to improve the likelihood of impact. Chief among these is that strategic opportunism is only really possible if you are well networked and able to act quickly and flexibly (as the Roman philosopher Seneca is reported to have said, luck is what happens when preparation meets opportunity). This means taking time to build and maintain strong relationships, but using those to build researchers' connectivity and supporting their engagement in the debate as soon as opportunities arise. The EPG uses its technical expertise to facilitate knowledge brokering for project impact but our technical leads are not themselves active brokers in policy debates.

6.2 We haven't always got it right

Most projects wish they could have done some things better and the EPG is no exception. There have been the usual project management challenges (no matter how far in advance we plan it is never far enough), but there is a wider issue about how we have balanced local and global impacts. While our focus on providing tailored support to projects may have helped them achieve good local impact, we could perhaps have done more to help them embed their messages within wider global debates.

6.3 But it's still a supply-side approach

As projects engage with the impact agenda, they want to run workshops to connect with policymakers and practitioners. Although the EPG has wide networks, the same people keep turning up on our invitation lists. If all projects continue to hold early project engagement workshops at the beginning and end of their work, in much-studied countries like Tanzania or Bangladesh, a back-of-the-envelope calculation is that some diligent officials would need to spend an average of two days a week in such meetings, all year round. Is there an alternative? Could government departments be encouraged to be more proactive in setting the questions they really want answered and inviting researchers to engage with them? The DFID-funded Building Capacity to Use Research Evidence (BCURE) programme is beginning to address this issue, but something more systematic needs to happen to prevent policymakers being overloaded. Could funders commit to supporting intermittent research afternoons for clusters of public agencies at which all PIs from new and reporting studies come together to present their work? The next era of work on uptake must be about strengthening and systematising the demand for research.

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ENDNOTES

- * The EPG is a team effort and this chapter is the product of four years of discussion with my colleagues Louise Ball, Natalie Brighty, Caroline Cassidy, Sarah Turner, Dirk Willem te Velde and Steve Wiggins. I am also grateful for helpful comments on previous drafts from James Georgalakis, Tiina Pasanen, Paul Sanderson and an anonymous reviewer.
- 2 See www.esrc.ac.uk/research/impact-toolkit/what-is-impact/ (accessed 3 December 2016).
- 3 See the call specification and policy relevant questions at www.esrc.ac.uk/funding/funding-opportunities/dfid-esrc-growth-research-programme-degrp-call-3/ (accessed 3 December 2016).



10

COMPLEXITIES OF KNOWLEDGE TRANSLATION:

Reflections from REACH-PI Uganda's
rapid response mechanism

Rhona Mijumbi-Deve, Marie-Gloriose Ingabire and Nelson K. Sewankambo

ABSTRACT

Two decades ago, in 1997, the International Development Research Centre (IDRC) partnered with researchers in East Africa to explore and promote the concept of knowledge translation (KT) in low- and middle-income countries (LMICs). This chapter, informed by practical experiences, focuses on the complexities of practising effective KT in LMICs and unconventional approaches to mitigating challenges encountered. Critical to the lessons learned was an understanding that effective KT often requires individual and institutional cultural and behavioural changes. This therefore begs for sustained investment and long-term relationships between the funders, the producers, the brokers, and the users of evidence, among other things. The chapter argues that for effective KT, there is a need for advocacy, long-term investment and explicit support for KT science and mechanisms from all key stakeholders as part of research for development, coupled with an understanding of the local contexts, roles for partnerships and networks, and ensuring quality processes. Furthermore, the usual or conventional approaches to the challenges this introduces are necessary but may not be sufficient to move evidence into policy and practice.

KEYWORDS

knowledge translation, Uganda, rapid response mechanism, community health, East Africa, REACH-PI.

BIOGRAPHIES

Rhona Mijumbi-Deve is a health systems and policy researcher based at Makerere University in Uganda. A trained medical doctor, Rhona holds two masters – in clinical epidemiology and biostatistics, and in international public health – and is currently a health policy doctoral candidate.

Marie-Gloriose Ingabire is a Senior Program Specialist at Canada's International Development Research Centre. Her research and capacity strengthening interests include women and child health, health financing, human resources for health, health policy evaluation, and knowledge translation. Dr Ingabire is a member of the Evidence-Informed Policy Networks Global Steering Group.

Nelson K. Sewankambo, a Professor of Medicine, researches on using evidence to inform policies and practice. He participated in the Supporting Use of Research Evidence (SURE) for Policy in African Health Systems project, which developed Uganda's rapid response mechanism to meet policymakers' urgent needs. He holds the IDRC's International Research Chair in Evidence-Informed Health Policies and Systems.

1.1 KNOWLEDGE TRANSLATION

Research has the potential to drive national development. Many low- or middle-income countries (LMICs) have progressed to middle- or high-income status respectively partly as a result of their sustained significant investments in research and use of research for development (Nicolaidis 2014; OECD 2012). Research not used represents wasted resources (Chalmers *et al.* 2014). Increasingly in the last 20 years there have been unprecedented efforts promoting the use of research evidence in policy- and decision-making for health systems (WHO 2005, 2008). One such example results from the Tanzanian Essential Health Intervention Project (TEHIP), which showed that the allocation of health resources guided by evidence generated in the health system led to marked improvements in health outcomes at low cost (de Savigny *et al.* 2004). Other countries such as Ghana and Nigeria are adapting and scaling up the TEHIP experiences and approaches (Awoonor-Williams 2013; IDRC 2014), emphasising the generation and use of evidence on what works and how to make it work in different contexts.

In 2005, building on the TEHIP experience and with external funding mainly from Canada's International Development Research Centre (IDRC), a funder of research for development, the Regional East African Community Health Policy Initiative (REACH-PI), a knowledge translation (KT) platform, was created in an effort to support effective KT in Burundi, Kenya, Rwanda, Tanzania and Uganda (East African Community Health Sector *n.d.*).¹

2.1 REACH VISION

The REACH-PI Uganda country node based at Makerere University was formed with the aim of acting as an institutional knowledge broker, bridging the gap between producers and users of research, addressing barriers identified in the KT process (Lavis *et al.* 2005; Oliver *et al.* 2014). It has been at the forefront of testing and evaluating mechanisms and tools to improve the uptake of research into policy and action (Mijumbi *et al.* 2014).² This includes the appropriate design and structural content of policy briefs and engagement, systematic and rapid reviews, and rapid response services.

3.1 EXPERIENCE WITH A RAPID RESPONSE MECHANISM

The use of the various KT tools and mechanisms has resulted in varied levels of success for effective KT in different contexts and circumstances. One of the KT strategies tested by REACH-PI Uganda to address issues of timeliness and relevance of evidence and to improve its uptake is a rapid response mechanism (RRM) aimed at providing policy- and decision-makers with relevant research evidence to support decisions, policies and action in a timely manner.

The policy- or decision-makers in government, parliament, non-governmental organisations, civil society or the media who urgently need to communicate on a key issue are central to the RRM process. The process is as follows:

1. Evidence users pose a question or questions to REACH-PI Uganda regarding a key challenge on which evidence is urgently required within days or weeks.
2. This causes the RRM to begin a cascade of processes that should lead to identifying high-quality and appropriate local and global evidence, synthesising it efficiently and getting it peer reviewed and packaged for the policymaker or decision-maker in an easily understood manner.

The mechanism has had the intended influence on national health policymaking in Uganda. For example, the RRM was instrumental in providing synthesised evidence to support the policymaking process of the current mandatory food fortification policy enacted in the country in 2011. The RRM is now being piloted and scaled up in other countries (Burkina Faso, Cameroon, Malawi, Zambia, Lebanon, Brazil and Canada) (Mijumbi *et al.* 2016), which will increase our understanding of the conditions under which the mechanism catalyses the use of evidence in decision-making.

With RRM, researchers on the REACH-PI platform are introducing evidence on the functionality and success of RRM in LMICs (Mijumbi *et al.* 2014). However, this raises a larger question – does the RRM have an impact on development process at all? One wonders whether, aside from impacts on decisions made in ‘urgent situations’ and contributions to smaller decisions within the longer policy processes, RRM might be a way in which research entrepreneurs influence policymakers to demand more research for decisions. In this regard policymakers may not only demand research relevant to them but also develop and institutionalise a culture and behaviour that demands evidence generally. This is a change that may start with individuals but when sustained would become an institutional and societal norm. When policymakers greatly value the RRM because it helps them out of critically urgent situations, they will be more likely to be very strong advocates for allocation of resources required for research and speak for the need to have evidence inform all important decisions and policies.

This mechanism continues to get major support from IDRC through KT-specific projects with a long-term commitment to strengthen individual and institutional capacity of producers and users of evidence as well as support their behavioural change for sustained and at-scale implementation of KT mechanisms. Concurrently, efforts are deployed to mainstream ongoing engagement between researchers and policymakers as part of the entire research process while continuing to invest in understanding the drivers of effective KT and the development of tools and methods to support it.

4.1 KEY CONSIDERATIONS

Several questions remain in the midst of what has so far been a successful and promising intervention to improve timeliness of access to research evidence for development. Several countries involved in piloting and scaling up RRM are fully aware of the need to institutionalise these mechanisms but grapple with how best to do it. Part of this institutionalisation is deciding on the appropriate location. So far, the RRM being piloted in the above-mentioned countries are located in different places including academic institutions, departments or ministries of health, and semi-autonomous or non-governmental institutions. Health system researchers are yet to articulate how the different locations affect policymakers' use of the RRM. Aspects such as location affect trust and perceived credibility of the mechanism, which are vital for its functionality.

Resources for many of these mechanisms are indeed another point of concern. It requires adequate sustained and committed domestic (national) investment supplemented by external investments to do several things. These include growing a sustained pool of human and financial resources. Furthermore, they include growing a sustained capacity of policymakers to engage meaningfully and have a great national and/or regional sense of ownership of the KT process. Whereas external funding to get such an initiative started and showing results is critical, LMICs need to start investing significantly their own resources to bridge the gap in research capacity, generate relevant knowledge and stimulate the use of research evidence including data generated from health systems.

Although LMICs need sustained long-term external funding there needs to be recognition that it is not always easy for donors to make commitments because of their own country's different and changing interests and obligations. It is desirable that there should be a gradual increase in domestic investments that run parallel to the improvements in the country's economy. In addition to external funding, LMICs need to consider investing early in research and knowledge as the drivers of sustained economic development. It is clear from several experiences that without sustained external funding to LMICs many promising projects fizzle away and are not scaled up (de Jongh *et al.* 2014). In addition, it should be emphasised that these resources and support are targeted not only towards the technical features of KT alone but also towards the often poorly defined non-technical aspects that ensure changes in the general climate of KT, in behaviour and attitudes through building trust and relationships to facilitate the technical KT aspects. Behaviour change that is necessary for the adoption of KT takes time and steady commitment to take root.

Strategic partnerships both North–South and South–South are essential. The former brings on board among other things the much-needed technical expertise and benefits from bi-directional learning. The South learns from Northern experiences while the North also learns from the South. Indeed with RRM the North has learned and adopted some RRM experiences from Uganda.³ Different partners may be able to provide different resources

at different times. For example, REACH-PI began with the IDRC as one of its funding partners. When the RRM was being piloted, the European Union was a major funding partner; however, IDRC continued its support to REACH-PI through its continued funding for the Evidence-Informed Policy Network (EVIPNet), and for the establishment of the Africa Center for Systematic Reviews and Knowledge Translation and the Research Chair in Evidence-Informed Health Policies and Systems both at Makerere University, Uganda. To ensure scale-up of the piloted RRM, IDRC is also providing support to the REACH team to collaborate with KT teams in Lebanon and Zambia as well. There have also been non-funding partners providing or improving different factors necessary for success and efficiency. For example, partnerships also play a vital role in the peer review processes for the RRM, as it is difficult to get all expertise on any subject in one institution or one LMIC.

Quality assurance in what RRM do, managing the expectations of potential users, and the capacity to deliver quality results, will be a deciding factor for their survival and how they become embraced in their respective countries. Since RRM's work is in the context of rapidity in a bid to meet urgent needs for research evidence, there may be a danger of compromising processes and therefore quality. This is a constant challenge and yet there is a need to ensure the RRM becomes the go-to place if it can sustain the production of quality products. An additional challenge exists when in some cases the available evidence may not provide a clear and straightforward answer for the decision-makers.

5.1 CONCLUSION

We have presented some challenges that create a platform for reflection and debate on the way forward. Through the REACH-PI and RRM example, we ascertain that for effective KT we need advocacy, long-term investment and explicit support for KT science and mechanisms from all key stakeholders as part of research for development, with an understanding of the local contexts, roles for partnerships and networks, and ensuring quality processes. KT for lasting positive impact is not a linear process and it requires specific skills and continuous engagement between researchers and various stakeholders at global, national and local levels. Continued and sustained investment into KT, and especially into building both supply-side and demand-side capacity for it and continued efforts to increase its profile and understanding are crucial moving forward.

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ENDNOTES

- 1 We acknowledge that the term knowledge translation has several interpretations but we use it to mean a phenomenon that involves different actors and activities geared towards incorporating research evidence into decisions, policy and practice, in a systematic and transparent manner.
- 2 See also Africa Center for Systematic Reviews and Knowledge Translation, <http://chs.mak.ac.ug/afcen>; WHO Evidence-informed Policy-making, 'REACH-Uganda Evidence Briefs for Policy', www.who.int/evidence/resources/country_reports/africa/en/index5.html; WHO Evidence-informed Policy-making, EVIPNet in Action, www.who.int/evidence/resources/publication/en.
- 3 Anecdotal evidence from Canada's McMaster Health Forum.

AIDS HELPLINE C

BE AIDS WISE
WE CAN MAKE
A DIFFERENCE.

TALK ABOUT
SAFE SEX. E

11

USING KNOWLEDGE BROKERAGE

to strengthen African voices in global
decision-making on HIV and AIDS*

Danielle Doughman, Kathy Kantengwa and Ida Hakizinka

ABSTRACT

Understanding the role of evidence or when evidence counts in global development efforts seeking to address issues largely affecting the poor cannot be complete without an understanding of the voices of the affected countries in these processes. The role of global actors in tackling HIV/AIDS in developing countries provides an interesting case to understand how voices of affected countries inform the decisions made by global response efforts. The 47 countries of sub-Saharan Africa hold two seats on the Board of the Global Fund to Fight AIDS, Tuberculosis and Malaria. Collectively, the countries have been recipients of more than 65 per cent of Global Fund cumulative investment, making their input into the governance and decision-making by the Board critical to the Global Fund's success. Language differences, a sub-par process for selection of leadership and a lack of technical support have inhibited meaningful participation. To address these challenges, stakeholders developed a governance framework and established an Africa Constituencies Bureau to improve evidence-informed decision-making, build cohesion among the diversity of countries and improve the quality of input. This chapter documents the process by which the constituencies improved their evidence use in decision-making in order to share some lessons with other actors working in related processes.

KEYWORDS

Global Fund; Africa; evidence use; knowledge brokering.

BIOGRAPHIES

Danielle Doughman is the Policy Outreach Manager at the African Population and Health Research Center. She has more than 15 years of experience in health policy and advocacy. She earned a Master of Science in Public Health from the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, Gillings School of Global Public Health.

Kathy Kantengwa held senior positions as a professional health planner and manager for public health programmes for more than 25 years. She is currently based in Geneva providing technical support to the Global Fund teams in charge of political and civil society advocacy for increased domestic funding for health.

Ida Hakizinka is the Executive Director of AIDSPAN. Previously, she was the Rwanda Country Coordinating Permanent Secretary for the Global Fund to Fight AIDS, Tuberculosis and Malaria. She was the communication focal point for the Eastern and Southern African delegation to the Global Fund Board and task force coordinator for Africa Constituencies Bureau.

1.1 INTRODUCTION

Understanding the role of evidence or when evidence counts in global development efforts seeking to address issues largely affecting the poor cannot be complete without an understanding of the voices of the affected countries in these processes. The role of global actors in tackling the HIV/AIDS, tuberculosis and malaria epidemics in developing countries provides an interesting case to understand how evidence, specifically voices of affected countries, informs the decisions made by global response efforts. There are some case studies in the literature documenting success using knowledge brokering for health policymaking in Africa (Van Kammen, de Savigny and Sewankambo 2006). There is, however, inadequate understanding of how knowledge brokerage could shape the engagement of developing countries within global decision-making processes.

This chapter discusses a case study of how African constituencies have engaged the Global Fund to Fight AIDS, Tuberculosis and Malaria (Global Fund). The case looks at how technical assistance, which is a brokerage function in the ecosystem of evidence use, was used to respond to the challenges that African constituencies faced in effectively engaging the Global Fund's decision-making processes. We document the process by which the African constituencies improved their ability to use evidence in decision-making in order to share some lessons with other actors working within related processes.

The authors used document review, observations, interviews and personal reflections to inform the discussion, derived largely from their own experiences in actively helping to improve the use of evidence and to formalise the processes described. Danielle Doughman coordinates a team that provides technical support including evidence analysis and synthesis to the African constituencies engaged with the Global Fund; Kathy Kantengwa advises the constituencies from the Global Fund Secretariat; and, until recently, Ida Hakizinka chaired the task force charged with formalising the technical support mandate underpinning a coordinating bureau, and managed multi-country communications as the intermediary between the Global Fund and African constituencies.

2.1 CHALLENGES TO MEANINGFUL PARTICIPATION

The Global Fund was established in 2002 as a global war chest to pool and mobilise resources to respond to the three most prominent disease epidemics wreaking havoc across the developing world. Its governance structure comprises 20 voting Board seats, two of which are allocated to the constituencies of sub-Saharan Africa (SSA): one seat each for the East and Southern Africa (ESA) constituency and the West and Central Africa (WCA) constituency. Implementing countries from other regions hold a total of five additional seats.² The two Africa constituencies represent the 47 countries designated as SSA, and have, collectively, received more than 65 per cent of

the more than \$30 billion (Global Fund 2016) invested by the Global Fund since its inception. This means that their input into the governance and decision-making of the Board is critical to the Global Fund's success.

Given the diversity of the countries that make up the ESA and WCA regions, their Board representatives routinely confront challenges that impede meaningful participation and engagement with the Global Fund Board, including a lack of adequate technical capacity, time and resources among Board or committee members. These challenges are enumerated in greater detail below.

First, the Africa constituencies' governance framework requires that Board and committee members allocate 20–25 per cent of their time or roughly ten hours per week to Global Fund work.³ This is a huge time requirement on the members of the African constituencies who have full-time jobs in their countries.

Second, language diversity presents a considerable barrier to effective communication within and across the constituencies. Official languages across the constituencies include English, French, Portuguese and Swahili, not to mention the array of national languages spoken by each member of the constituencies. Delegations comprising as many as ten people have varying degrees of proficiency in each of the official languages of the Global Fund: English, French and Spanish. Board documents are produced in English and French, but there is often a time lag between the release of the English-language and French-language documents, which presents its own set of challenges to multiple delegations, including the ones representing SSA.

Third, the Africa constituencies often confront hurdles with respect to the technical content in the thousands of pages of documents released by the Global Fund Secretariat ahead of Board and committee meetings. While many of them are highly skilled technocrats in their own right, representatives of government or non-governmental organisations or professionals with advanced degrees, the lack of synthesis of the many voluminous documents sent just before the Board or committee meetings reduces their ability to engage effectively in discussions and ultimately limits their influence on Board or committee decision-making (Garmaise 2012).

Fourth, efforts to ensure equitability in the choice of delegates and the appointment of Board and committee members, while laudable, have also unintentionally compromised the ability of the SSA delegates to contribute. Selection had previously been based on an alphabetical rotation of countries, rather than on interest, competency and capacity. According to a report from a 2012 Joint Constituency meeting, Board and committee members 'often have limited knowledge or experience with the Global Fund', and were 'poorly prepared to participate meaningfully' (Hoover 2012). Important Board decisions were made without adequate engagement of SSA representatives who, in some instances, voted against their constituency's interests.

In a bid to address these challenges, the 2012 meeting provided impetus for a new way of working for the two constituencies, which resulted in the development and adoption of a joint governance framework in early 2013. This framework outlines selection processes for delegates and

provides guidance for improved communication and more effective Global Fund participation in Board processes for the constituencies.⁴ Driving the development of this framework was the considered belief that good governance would increase meaningful participation and engagement of the constituencies in Board discussions, leading to smarter and evidence-informed investments in health in the region that would optimise impact in the eradication of the three disease epidemics.

The framework also establishes an Africa Constituencies Bureau (ACB): a technical resource centre able to provide support to delegates and constituencies as a whole to enhance participation in ensuing discussions at the Board and committee level and shape the development of policies and decisions by the Board itself for the Secretariat to implement. The mandate of the ACB is explicitly to identify 'regional issues of relevance and significance... [and] support Global Fund document synthesis' to improve understanding, and 'review the implication[s] of Global Fund policy and strategies on Africa'.⁵

Though not explicitly stated in the framework, a founding principle of these aims is to improve use of evidence as the basis for decision-making. This understanding has been borne out in the execution of the mandate, as African leaders steadily increase their requests for evidence related to Global Fund Board and committee decisions.

The adoption of the framework led to the establishment of a task force to lead the operationalisation of the ACB. The task force is composed of current and former delegates to the two constituencies and has received ad hoc support from a variety of sources, including the designated representative from the Global Fund Secretariat, the Ethiopian Public Health Association (charged with setting up a permanent ACB in Addis Ababa) and the African Population and Health Research Center (APHRC). Once the ACB is inaugurated, the task force will be dissolved.

3. | A VIRTUAL BUREAU IN THE INTERIM

In anticipation of the inauguration of the permanent, legal and physical ACB, and under the oversight of the task force, the APHRC was commissioned in 2014, first by the New Venture Fund and subsequently by the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, to provide technical support to the Africa constituencies in order to support meaningful engagement by delegates to the various Board and committee meetings each year. This tripartite arrangement between the task force, the Global Fund, and the APHRC is henceforward referred to as the Bureau.

By mutual agreement with the donor and constituency representatives, the Bureau develops briefing notes prior to Board and committee meetings;⁶ coordinates consensus positions and talking points for debate and discussion on voting and non-voting issues; and assesses the potential impact of Board decisions on SSA. Complementary analyses are generated at the request

of constituency leadership in response to important emerging topics. The Bureau helps to shape the focus and scope of analyses when needed.

The Bureau supports briefings of the constituencies prior to the twice-annual Board meetings, which also provide a space for delegates to deliberate about common positions on voting and non-voting issues at Board level. In addition, since 2015 the constituencies have convened twice to review the evidence and develop consensus positions on strategic and operational priorities for the Board meetings and other Global Fund engagement, such as the 2015 regional Partnership Forum, input from which shaped the 2017–2022 Global Fund Strategic Plan.

4. | EXAMPLES OF EVIDENCE-INFORMED INPUT AND DECISION-MAKING

There are almost unlimited opportunities to bring evidence and analysis to bear in Global Fund decision-making. Part of the challenge is determining what evidence is essential to informed decision-making, and to what degree to scale the information. Board and committee members are already inundated with information from the Secretariat. In an effort to alleviate some of the burden, the Bureau has focused on signature issues that concern most constituency countries. Signature issues, for the purpose of this chapter, meet three criteria: they are under discussion at either committee or Board level, and they have the potential for significant impact or resonate with current political or social realities. Three examples of evidence use for informed decision-making on signature issues follow.

4.1 Delineating and communicating African priorities

In May 2015, the Africa constituencies convened a first-ever meeting to develop a joint position on issues of strategic importance, aiming to identify ways to optimise engagement by African delegations in the decision-making processes at the Global Fund Board. The consultation emphasised both operational and strategic approaches to this improved engagement, specifically related to the ongoing consultations around the development of the Global Fund's own new strategy. The consultation was part of a series of global opportunities called Partnership Forums that were afforded to constituencies to contribute to discussions around the new strategy for the upcoming strategic period (2017–2022). In addition to erecting the meeting architecture, the Bureau provided a wealth of technical support, including real-time synthesis of information for feedback and thought leadership on areas of importance and diversity of opinion.

The statement that resulted from the consultative session was a watershed: a first nuanced and comprehensive articulation of joint African priorities and the rationale that led to them.⁷ The statement was used to structure inputs from the African delegations to the Partnership Forum and, subsequently, to discussions about necessary revisions to the Global Fund's strategy.

The statement asserted the issues of strategic importance to the Africa Constituencies as including the:

1. Need for investments into stronger and more resilient health systems.
2. Importance of programming that specifically targets women and girls.
3. Need for a differentiated approach that responds to challenging operating environments.
4. Imperative for countries to increase their own domestic financing of integrated, rather than vertical, disease-specific programming.
5. Modifications to the Global Fund's allocation methodology to ensure that the countries with the highest burden of disease and least ability to pay received the lion's share of investments.
6. Responsibility of a managed transition away from substantive assistance to countries improving their financial position as they become middle-income countries.
7. Support for, and revisions to, the development of the concept notes, or proposals, resulting in investment.

Informal reports shared with the Bureau from the delegates indicated that the statement was well received in the context of the African Partnership Forum.

Ultimately, the unanimous approval of the 2017–2022 Global Fund Strategy at the 35th Board meeting incorporated five of the Africa constituencies' seven strategic priorities. (The other two priorities were largely operational issues and addressed through other mechanisms). While the unanimous passage of the strategy demonstrates broad agreement across all constituencies that the priorities were the right ones for the Global Fund at this juncture, as well as the strong leadership by the Strategy, Investment and Impact Committee that led its development over the course of a year, the Africa constituencies were among the first to explicitly identify them. The re-centring of the Global Fund strategy on health systems and women and girls, it is hoped, will lead to dramatic improvements in health and wellbeing even beyond the three diseases, and beyond SSA, over the course of the next six-year strategic period.

Convenings such as the one that catalysed the creation of the priorities statement are a part of the governance framework. It dictates that the ACB shall provide 'a forum for Africa constituencies to debate and discuss... and reach consensus' on Global Fund topics and issues and to '[identify] regional issues of relevance and significance to countries to develop positions'.⁸ The second such convening was held in November 2016 and the priorities have been updated to reflect changing conditions:

1. Strengthening Country Coordinating Mechanisms.
2. Improving procurement and supply chain management cycle.

3. Improving performance in high-risk environments.
4. Building local capacity for greater sustainability.
5. Improving country absorption capacity.
6. Maximising Catalytic Funding for resilient and sustainable systems for health.

4.2 Using evidence to inform an African position on hepatitis C

The Global Fund Secretariat is mandated to provide background information about items that appear on the Board agenda. In 2014, the Strategy, Investment and Impact Committee was asked to consider whether the Global Fund should invest in hepatitis C treatment because of high rates of co-infection with HIV, particularly among people who inject drugs. The impetus for the request was driven largely by harm reduction activists working primarily in Eastern Europe and Central Asia, where hepatitis C treatment is seen as a central component of any response to HIV. At the time, investments in hepatitis C treatment were considered to be beyond the scope of the Global Fund mandate, even though it was indubitable that addressing co-infection of the two diseases could potentially reinforce gains in the response to HIV.

To inform the Africa constituencies' position, the APHRC conducted a desk review to assess regional prevalence of hepatitis C. From the limited literature available at the time (Hanafiah, Groeger, Flaxman and Wiersma 2013),⁹ prevalence was low compared to other regions, at between 1.5 and 3.5 per cent. Additionally, since the primary method of transmission of HIV in SSA is heterosexual contact, the level of co-infection is low; in other regions, where the primary method of HIV transmission is through the sharing of used needles among people who use drugs, rates are substantially higher – at up to 7 per cent of people living with HIV. Treatment for hepatitis C is expensive and time-intensive, and could further strain already weak health systems. Concurrent treatment of hepatitis C has been associated with poor adherence to and drop-out of HIV treatment programmes.

The evidence generated by the desk review determined that without commensurate investment in strengthening a health system's capacity to effectively manage and monitor co-infection, investments in hepatitis C treatment programmes were expensive and would not yield an effective response. It further underscored the necessity of greater investment in health systems in the region – many of which were struggling to scale up coverage for testing and treatment, including prevention of mother-to-child transmission, and voluntary medical male circumcision.

The input from the African and other constituencies prompted the Board to defer its decision, in order to consider a wider mandate for contextual responses to a range of co-morbidities. The evidence-based position of the Africa constituencies in turn helped to influence the thinking of the committee and the Board to use epidemiological and clinical data to inform future decisions to expand investment in co-infections or not.

4.3 Analysis on country absorptive capacity

The problem of poor absorptive capacity plagues many countries in the region – in West Africa in particular. It should be noted that absorption is not a problem unique to the Global Fund or to Africa, but a problem common to development aid. An analysis by the Secretariat found grant absorption rates, or the percentage of actual expenditures compared to grant budget, to be 67 per cent over the course of 2015 in 11 francophone countries from West and Central Africa (Kampoer 2016). These countries were therefore convened to discuss their problems and develop solutions to improve absorption. Shared concerns from the Global Fund Secretariat and Africa Board members about poor grant performance, slow implementation and low absorptive capacity of grant funds prompted the Global Fund to host a forum in 2015, co-facilitated by the Bureau.

Ahead of the meeting, and in response to issues raised during the Partnership Forum, the Bureau conducted an online survey to understand the specifics of grant implementation in those countries. Results informed discussions around how to address the greatest country-specific bottlenecks in improving absorptive capacity. Countries then developed action plans to respond to their specific absorption bottlenecks.

The Bureau was asked to conduct a rapid assessment of the 11 countries for a follow-up meeting a year later, in June 2016, to assess country progress and troubleshoot any remaining challenges. The Bureau conducted key informant interviews with country representatives and a simple analysis to provide a status update on the implementation of the action plans and any residual challenges towards which more efforts should be directed, and shared the results at the second meeting in Dakar, Senegal. In tandem with these efforts, the Bureau completed a quantitative and qualitative analysis of expenditure data publicly available from the Global Fund to assess country absorptive capacity along with a qualitative analysis from two case study countries: Zambia and Burkina Faso.

Because absorption is such a critical issue for the Africa constituencies, the analyses have been ongoing over the course of 12 months and may be ongoing as constituency leadership raises new questions that need careful consideration. While the three analyses complement each other to form a more complete picture of absorption challenges, potential solutions and the state of implementation, gathering information has not been easy, and results have not been conclusive. One reason for difficulty in securing key informant interviews may be fatigue; 18 constituency countries are also participating in a Global Fund special initiative to, in part, alleviate absorption bottlenecks, and over the same time period. Another reason may be that constituency leadership who are requesting the analyses are unaware that their country representatives may be hesitant or refuse to speak with the Bureau about challenges, even confidentially. Such difficulties resulted in small sample sizes and the inability to draw definitive conclusions that have wide applicability to similar country contexts. However, the first online survey on absorption conducted in mid-2015 received 80 responses, signalling that confidentiality worries may be limiting the amount and quality of information derived from key informant interviews.

Despite the challenges, Africa is setting the tone not just for how the evidence is being used, but also for how it is being directed towards finding a coordinated solution to absorption that the Global Fund itself has not yet been able to fully address. Africa is generating and using its own evidence to develop its own, differentiated solutions.

5. | SO WHAT? EVIDENCE OF INITIAL IMPACT

To help measure its effectiveness and draw lessons for improvement, the Bureau conducted a survey and key informant interviews. These captured feedback on technical support and on progress from key informants on observed changes in the voice and perceived influence of the constituencies at the board level. Though the sample sizes were small, they indicate that the support provided by the Bureau is having the intended outcome. Time will tell how that translates into sustained, meaningful impact.

The survey¹⁰ assessed the effectiveness and outcomes of technical assistance provided over the course of four Board meetings, November 2014 to April 2016. All respondents agreed that their needs had been met well or very well for information synthesis, talking points and position statements for both Board and committee meetings. Some 86 per cent said their needs had been met well or very well for evidence generation; 20 per cent indicated a need for even more evidence on risk factors and disease trends and epidemiology. So evidence needs are being better met, but gaps remain.

Using the 35th Global Fund Board meeting held in April 2016 as a reference point, some 90 per cent of African delegates reported having a 'good understanding' of the most important issues to the Africa constituencies. However, only 67 per cent reported they had sufficient evidence to ably contribute to discussions occurring during the Global Fund Board meeting and related side meetings with other delegations, constituencies and members of Global Fund leadership; there is a need and a desire for more evidence. In the end, 70 per cent believe that the Africa constituencies were influential during the Board meeting; specific areas of influence cited were related to the allocation methodology, the strategic plan and governance structure.

The survey also asked how technical support affected their personal engagement with the Global Fund board. More than half of respondents said they felt better prepared to execute their responsibilities as a member of the ACB (50 per cent), better understood the complexities in the Global Fund's policies and operations (80 per cent), witnessed increased participation by African constituents during Board and/or committee meetings (70 per cent), or personally contributed to shaping talking points and/or positions (70 per cent). While no baseline is available for comparison, the open-ended comments were generally positive or indicated a desire for even more evidence and consensus-building activities in the future. We believe these results demonstrate a positive change in the demand for and expectation of evidence use, and that technical support provided by the Bureau has enabled delegates to better use the evidence provided.

5.1 Anecdotal evidence of increased engagement

High-level Global Fund leadership and a senior official from a top donor country expressed pleasure separately at the growth in engagement of the Africa constituencies during the 34th and 35th Board meetings held in late 2015 and early 2016, respectively. In addition, in response to a position paper on proposed changes to the allocation methodology, a senior donor country official commented to the Strategy, Investment and Impact Committee in early 2016:

As we move forward to our final deliberations on the allocation methodology, I am delighted that we have such a clear steer from the African constituencies. The success of the Global Fund in tackling the epidemics will largely depend on the response in Africa, where disease burdens are generally highest, where countries have the least ability to pay, and where there are a number of states affected by conflict and fragility... To date the voice of the African constituencies has often not come through so strongly and I feel that decisions have often been taken 'on behalf' of African constituencies rather than by these constituencies – and this, of course, leads to sub-optimal implementation and impact. (emphasis added),¹¹

In mid-2016, a number of individuals centrally involved in the development of the Bureau since 2012, both donors and African leaders, offered their reflections on the process and progress to date. There was broad agreement that 'many Global Fund stakeholders have long wanted the African constituencies to have stronger voices commensurate with their large percentages of total Global Fund grants' (Key informant, interview, July 2016). A former committee leader recalled:

At my first Board Meeting in 2012 [as a member of the ESA delegation, prior to becoming a Board Member], I very clearly remember little was prepared in advance, which was overwhelming considering the volume of content. It so happened that I was asked to sit in the Board Member's seat in their absence. With last minute preparation, as the ESA delegation present, we were left to say what we agreed was the best position for the constituency. Each of us made the best contributions possible under the circumstances. Much earlier and better structured consultations within the constituency would have permitted a wider and richer representation of the entire constituency rather than one limited to the members of delegation present at that board meeting. (Key informant, interview, August 2016).

At the November 2016 Board meeting, an African Board member announced to the Board that now, 'Africa speaks with one voice', regardless of the ESA or WCA affiliation. A former Communications Focal Point observed:

In the past, the two constituencies were working in silos, and sometimes in opposition to one another. There was no unity of purpose. Recently, interactions between the constituencies

have improved, and I've seen an increase in engagement and understanding by our Board Members
(Key informant, interview, August 2016).

A long-time technical manager who supported the development of the governance framework acknowledged the key role especially of ESA leadership in particular who 'walked the talk' of the framework, which was crucial to set it in motion.

While all stakeholders acknowledged the constituencies are not there yet in terms of maximising the potential of their influence and participation, they noted improvements – with a few exceptions – in attendance, planning, coordination between constituencies and sub-constituencies, preparation and meeting participation. A former committee chair noted how these changes have manifested, saying, 'We are working actively ahead of time, participating in committee meetings leading up to Board meetings. There have also been big improvements in the quality of participation.' However, she cautioned, 'We still need to get much better – to be much more proactive in setting the agenda in addition to reacting to it' (Key informant, interview, August 2016). This sentiment was echoed by other leaders. One stakeholder noted that there should be a balance between using the abilities of the current generation while developing the expertise of the new generation.

6. | ENABLING FACTORS

6.1 Strong African leadership

No progress would have been possible without leadership from the constituencies that identified the problems and spearheaded the calls for change, with support from the governance team at the Global Fund Secretariat. Sustained, active leadership that values and uses evidence to develop its positions is central to the proposition of the ACB. Driving these efforts was a multinational task force, originally under the vision and leadership of the late Rangarirai Chiteure and past Board chair; past Board Vice-Chair Mphu Ramatlapeng, past Strategy, Investment, and Impact committee Vice-Chair Anita Asiimwe, and other members of the task force who shepherded the process of the formation of the ACB since that time, along with many others. Their collective leadership has been essential to the process.

There has also been a willingness among leadership for the two constituencies to increasingly speak with one voice. In the past, national representatives would at times put the needs of their own country ahead of the best interest of the wider constituency. The nature of the technical assistance provided by a neutral broker lessens the chance for evidence to be used selectively. A broad commitment to consensus building allows for all parties to review the evidence and agree on positions that balance the needs of all countries, in advance of decision-making.

6.2 A supportive network of global partners

The Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation and the United States government provided funds to support the development of a Bureau and the framework.

The Global Fund itself has pledged its support for additional resources. Many diverse partners have recognised that a strong, united African voice is crucial to the Global Fund's success and have demonstrated a willingness to fund the work needed to strengthen and sustain that voice.

7. | CHALLENGES

7.1 The APHRC's learning curve

Technical expertise and relationships take time to cultivate. When the APHRC was selected to provide technical assistance on behalf of the Bureau in late 2014, its team experienced a steep learning curve related to the complexities of the Global Fund. At the first Board meeting for which it provided technical support, briefs and analysis received a lukewarm reception from Board and committee members. The APHRC had to quickly ramp up the sophistication of its understanding of Global Fund complexities and its particular culture and vocabulary, and also recognise the type of tailored technical support African representatives to the Board appreciated. As the APHRC's relationships with Board and committee members evolve over time, so does its expertise and depth of understanding about anticipating and addressing their evidence needs. Knowledge brokering is (at least) a two-way process, and is neither 'push' nor 'pull' alone (Van Kammen *et al.* 2006).

7.2 Delays in establishing the permanent Bureau

Initially, there were no means, financial or otherwise, to set up the ACB; it was only an idea on paper. Financing the establishment of the ACB, as well as the interim Bureau, took approximately 18 months from the time the framework was signed in early 2013 to the time APHRC started providing technical support in late 2014. Selection of country host for the permanent Bureau was open and transparent; however, countries expressed dissatisfaction with the selection process after it was concluded. Transparency is important, but it is useless unless it is effectively communicated (see more on the challenges of communication below). Establishing the ACB as a legal entity – a process that experienced a year of delays – then enabled the hiring and establishing a physical office space to move forward. Since that time, there have been unanticipated bureaucratic and procedural delays in establishing the permanent legal entity of the ACB that will be housed in Ethiopia, which in turn has caused delays in hiring an executive director to lead the Bureau.

7.3 Intra- and inter-constituency communications

As referenced earlier, the constituencies include 47 countries and many languages. Communication is an ongoing challenge, especially in efforts towards consensus building in very short time frames between the release of committee and Board materials and the meetings themselves. It was a necessity to arrange for translation during formal meetings and briefing materials for delegations, and to earmark funding to make it possible.

There is often only a period of a few days from when all documentation is received – let alone digested and analysed—before the meetings themselves

take place. Developing informed consensus positions across languages, time zones and country contexts is next to impossible. Even within each constituency, it is difficult to arrange for feedback and dialogue. Too often, position statements are not truly reflective of the input of all stakeholders. The Bureau uses teleconferences, email, individual phone calls, text messaging and in-person meetings to build consensus over time to develop overarching positions, rather than case-by-case decision-making. An improved transparent process for soliciting and using country feedback to develop true consensus is imperative for the ACB to take forward in the future.

7.4 Board and committee leadership turnover

The 2013 ACB governance framework brought dramatic improvements in the selection process of its representatives to the Board, and leadership turnover is expected every two years. While the task force has provided some institutional memory in recent years, it is not intended to serve that function. There have been informal discussions that an amendment to the framework could ease leadership transition by staggering when new Board members and alternates start or by extending board member terms from two to three years. Such changes would help mitigate the learning curve of incoming leadership and improve institutional memory. Institutional memory, consensus building and a focus on evidence synthesis and its use are key functions that the ACB will provide. The Africa constituencies are addressing these needs via a physical office with professional staff and dedicated functions. It should be noted that this may not be the only way to do so.

8.1 CONCLUSION

This case study has illustrated the critical role of knowledge brokerage – in this case, synthesis of volumes of information and distilling it into concise and easy to understand formats – in enabling increased use of evidence in decision-making. It was not enough to include the Africa constituencies in the decision-making structures of the Global Fund because without technical support these constituencies were unable to effectively contribute to the Fund's decisions and programmes. The case study shows that with the technical support, the African constituencies have slowly but steadily requested and used evidence to support their informed participation in Global Fund governance and decision-making. Technical assistance provided to African constituencies helped mobilise knowledge and strengthen their voices in Global Fund decision-making, resulting in meaningful engagement by these constituencies in global decision-making structures. It is hoped that the use of evidence for Global Fund decision-making may have some positive spill-over into other arenas of multilateral or national decision making.

As of late 2016, an executive director has been selected to lead the ACB into its next phase. In addition to continuing and expanding the technical support and consensus building work of the past two years, the ACB will explore opportunities to build alliances with other constituencies outside of Africa. Ultimately, none of this is about a Bureau; it is a means to an end. It is about supporting decision-makers to make use of information provided to them

for better and more effective decisions and programmes. More importantly, it is about making the smartest, evidence-informed investments to end HIV/AIDS, tuberculosis and malaria everywhere. In time, it is hoped that a permanent Bureau will help to deliver on this promise.

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ENDNOTES

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- 7 The strategy documents are available in English (Africa Bureau 2015) and French <http://bit.ly/1OUUJmr>.
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- 9 Since that time, new evidence (Mora *et al.* 2016; Rao *et al.* 2015) showed high hepatitis C virus prevalence in sub-Saharan Africa. This would have had little impact on the constituencies' initial decision, though it would certainly factor into the board's future broad discussion.
- 10 The survey was conducted in French and English; n=10 of a possible 25 respondents. Responses were anonymous.
- 11 Position paper and comments available only for the Board.





12

THE PURSUIT OF IMPACT THROUGH EXCELLENCE:

The value of social science for development, a funder's perspective

Craig Bardsley

ABSTRACT

Reflecting on ten years of collaborative research funding between ESRC and DFID, and looking forward to the challenges and opportunities presented by the Global Challenges Research Fund (GCRF), this chapter considers the relationship between research excellence and positive development impacts. There is much to be achieved in strengthening and sharing good practices to get evidence into use. However, to maximise the potential benefits of research, and social sciences in particular, we also need to broaden our perspectives on the value that research brings to development endeavours. Excellent research not only provides robust evidence to answer questions that policymakers and practitioners pose, it can also transform the nature of policy debates and identify new ways to address long-standing challenges. Appreciating the breadth of contributions that social science research can make to development can unlock new pathways to impact, while stimulating the advancement of fundamental social science knowledge.

KEYWORDS

pathways to impact, GCRF, research funding, ESRC, DFID, research excellence, REF, research uptake, social science.

BIOGRAPHIES

Craig Bardsley has been head of International Development research at the Economic and Social Research Council since 2013. In this role he leads ESRC's strategic collaboration with the UK Department for International Development as well as ESRC's participation in the Global Challenges Research Fund. Craig has been at ESRC for ten years and previously worked within the international strategy team. In 2010 he led the pilot office to establish Science Europe, which represents the interests of more than 50 European national research funding and performing organisations. Prior to joining ESRC, Craig completed a PhD in Archaeology from the University of Reading.

1. | INTRODUCTION

Ten years ago, the UK Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC), along with the six other councils that make up Research Councils UK, was in the early stages of pursuing the ‘impact agenda’: an effort to adjust research funding policies to maximise the broader social value and relevance of the research we support. At the same time, the Department for International Development (DFID) was moving towards greater emphasis on the importance of research and evidence to inform decisions about aid funding and delivery. The rationale for working together was obvious: ESRC could assist DFID in identifying and supporting the highest quality research, while DFID could help ESRC to translate research into application in development contexts. Additionally, DFID spending is unrestricted by geographical region, which enabled us to open joint research programmes to academics from anywhere in the world, including low- and middle-income countries. This enhanced a broadening international engagement strategy for ESRC. In this context the ESRC-DFID Joint Fund for Poverty Alleviation Research was established.

In this chapter, I will address ESRC’s experience with development-oriented research through this partnership. It has been a considerable success in several ways, but particularly in its leadership role to enhance the role of social science research in the aid and development sectors. This has improved development processes, strengthened monitoring and evaluation for better understanding of outcomes, and ultimately supported improved social and economic change in a wide range of contexts.¹

Our partnership continues to thrive.² Beyond just the quantity of research funded, ESRC and DFID have developed a much richer understanding of the role of social science research in development, and the complexities and challenges around efforts to achieve impact. For the ESRC, it is clear that delivering impact is not only about building pipelines to get evidence into use, but also about supporting an ecosystem and culture in which research excellence is engaged and embedded within wider society. This is true for the social sciences in general, but development poses particular challenges to achieving this aim.

2. | TWO UNDERSTANDINGS OF RESEARCH QUALITY: RIGOUR AND EXCELLENCE

When I assumed responsibility for ESRC’s collaboration with DFID in 2013, my main task was to better identify and articulate the unique strategic contribution that ESRC made to the development research sphere. On the one hand, some in the UK research community questioned why ESRC invested its limited resources in an area to which DFID was already providing substantial funding. On the other, some colleagues within DFID gave the distinct impression that ESRC’s principal value was in the scale and reach of its commissioning mechanisms, while the scope, framing and assessment of the value of research programmes for development was best undertaken by DFID.

My response to this challenge was to reflect on two distinct types of research quality: rigour and excellence. Rigour is generally recognised as essential to the production of good-quality research and evidence for development. It implies the application of robust research methods by appropriate experts to generate reliable evidence. It is widely accepted that rigorous evidence is desirable and beneficial to inform effective development policy, and a number of organisations, such as the International Initiative for Impact Evaluation (3ie) and Innovations for Poverty Action (IPA), exist to generate and promote its use.

Excellence means something different. For ESRC, excellence entails a competitive process based on open and transparent peer review. Consequently, it may not be sufficient for a research project just to apply robust methods to address an important development question. ESRC expects the research it funds to break new ground in terms of theory and methods.

This pursuit of excellence is the central value that ESRC brings to the development research landscape. ESRC funding for development research aims to represent the higher-risk, potentially higher-reward end of the research spectrum. For other funders, particularly those also engaged directly in development work or aid funding, it may be sensible to support incremental research if the evidence gathered has strong potential to save lives or improve livelihoods. In seeking to fund more scientifically groundbreaking work, ESRC recognises the impact of that work may be more uncertain and difficult to predict in advance. Furthermore, practitioners may bemoan the perception that the processes of academic research can conceal relevant findings behind disciplinary jargon and journal paywalls. The challenge, which we have learned a great deal about through our long collaboration with DFID, is to ensure that a commitment to excellence is aligned with efforts to maximise potential impact. Each collaborative programme and call specification results from careful negotiation to achieve a balance between directing researchers to address practical challenges, while providing sufficient room for unanticipated approaches and novel insights.

3.1 FOUR ROUTES TO ACHIEVING IMPACT THROUGH EXCELLENCE

Balancing the aspirations of scientific progress with practical relevance is not a simple task. To begin with, though, we can dispense with the notion that research exists in a continuum from curiosity-driven, scientifically groundbreaking work at one end point to more incremental applied, outcome-oriented work at the other. Considerations of potential use are an equally plausible source to inspire scientific breakthroughs as intellectual curiosity, as articulated by Donald Stokes's idea of *Pasteur's Quadrant* (1997).

It follows from this that research planning and design should focus on the various ways in which the pursuit of scientific excellence can enhance the potential for research impact. Rather than viewing the impact agenda as imposing a limit on the range of valued research outputs, it should inspire creativity in considering the ways in which research can benefit society.

I can identify at least four ways in which researchers, by seeking to push the boundaries of social scientific understanding, can provide unique insights and benefits to development processes. First, is to investigate and problematise the ways in which research evidence is collected, disseminated, absorbed and used. Second, is to interrogate and reframe the concepts and assumptions that underpin development efforts. Third, is to seek out and solve novel problems and puzzles. Finally, there is the potential for research to contribute to capacity building, which enables it to progressively regenerate itself, producing sustainable value.

4.1 UNPACKING THE GENERATION AND USE OF EVIDENCE

As noted above, the most widely understood aspect of social science's value is its capacity to generate robust, rigorous evidence. Policymakers and practitioners look to research for an objective assessment of 'what works'. However, the idea that researchers can authoritatively tell policymakers, 'do this' or 'don't do that', while seductive, carries significant risks. The level of uncertainty attached to such pronouncements is more difficult to communicate than the headline messages. Just because an intervention works in one place and one time does not conclusively predict that it will work universally, or in any other particular place. To make more reliable recommendations, it is essential for research to also seek to unravel why things work, in what contexts, and for whom.

4.1 Construction of authority and co-production of research

This is not news to most social scientists, or even many development practitioners, but it is important for critical social science to continue to engage with 'what works' agendas, to seek out new ways to communicate, in a constructive manner, the complexity and uncertainty surrounding the advice that research can offer to wider society. Somewhere between the mechanistic construction of 'evidence' and the unproductive admission that it is all down to context lies a sweet spot that researchers should focus landing upon. Central to this is the need for research to generate authoritative, policy-relevant syntheses of bodies of evidence. However, the best ways to go about synthesising diverse, cross-disciplinary research findings in an accessible manner could be better understood. Also, critical questions arise when asking who determines whether a body of evidence is authoritative. As the Ebola crisis revealed, authoritative pronouncements from medical experts did not always translate into effective interventions on the ground (Fairhead, forthcoming).

The construction of authority is just one illustration of how the process by which research is used is a complex social process worthy of cutting-edge research in itself. Understanding the demand side of the research into policy equation is far from straightforward (Newman, Fisher and Shaxson 2012). For example, Sultan Barakat's research funded by ESRC and DFID illustrates the various contexts that influence the use of state-building research by the UK government (Waldman, Barakat and Varisco 2014). Emma Crewe's current

research on parliamentary effectiveness,³ also funded by ESRC and DFID, demonstrates the wealth of questions that arise when researchers seek to unpack the details of how the actions of policymakers influence poverty alleviation efforts.

For social scientists, therefore, stakeholder engagement should rarely, if ever, be considered as something to be tacked on to the end of a research project. The social systems and context in which research may be applied are of central importance, and researchers should seek to bring in those with the relevant expertise into their teams. Co-design and co-production of research is not just a means to enhance dissemination and relevance; in many cases, it may be integral to providing a more holistic scientific picture of the social processes under investigation.

4.2 New understandings and frameworks

The second way in which social science research provides benefits to development is through its capacity to fundamentally reframe the way we think about processes of development, to challenge assumptions and offer alternatives. These conceptual impacts may be perceived to flow more readily than instrumental change from the excellent science that ESRC aims to support, and the impact evaluation of the Joint Fund for Poverty Alleviation confirmed that conceptual impacts are the most common form (France 2016). The significance of these is sometimes downplayed as the results may be less tangible and difficult to attribute reliably. However, conceptual impact is often a necessary precursor to instrumental change. Furthermore, while policymakers may be reluctant to act instrumentally on the basis of evidence if a policy change would be difficult politically or financially, exposure to relevant research may initiate a more gradual shift in thinking and perspectives that over time may deliver substantial change. The challenge lies in how to articulate conceptual changes in a manner with which research users can engage. Consideration must be given to how new ways of thinking can be presented to be relevant, accessible, potentially actionable and timely.

A good example of this is the work by Sabina Alkire and colleagues on multi-dimensional poverty indices, partly funded by the ESRC-DFID Joint Fund for Poverty Alleviation.⁴ By providing a series of concrete, quantitative measures of multidimensional poverty, the Alkire Foster method provides policymakers with a scalable and adaptable tool to engage with, and act upon, a broader conceptualisation of poverty than is possible simply by looking at income. It is no wonder it has been taken up and adapted by countries around the world. Of course, no measure is comprehensive, and there is certainly room to debate the populations and types of poverty that the method may not capture and is at risk of leaving behind. But it has certainly enriched the nature of policy debates and made complex notions of the nature of poverty stemming from academia more accessible.

4.3 Seeking out novel problems

Third, often ignored in considerations of impact, is the tendency for academic researchers to seek out and attempt to solve novel puzzles. Consider the work of Rob Hope, at Oxford University, funded through multiple research council schemes and DFID.⁵ The origin of much of Hope's work lies in

'smart water pumps'. Essentially, this involves fitting a mobile phone with an accelerometer to the hand-driven water pumps that provide water in many rural parts of the global South. These smart water pumps send a text message when they stop working, which has reduced the average repair time from thirty days to two.

Whereas a private company may try to develop a business model to sell the pumps at profit, or an NGO may focus solely on trying to scale up the distribution, a researcher is motivated to ask, 'what other problems can this innovation solve; what else can I do with it?' In this case, Hope sought to utilise the data from the hand pumps to strengthen national maintenance systems, hold donors to account and monitor the effectiveness of investment in water systems. Following this, he used the data to catalyse development of a hand pump insurance market, so the costs of maintenance could be managed sustainably by the communities themselves. Most recently, Hope and his colleagues are running the accelerometer data through big data analytic software. The weak signals identified can tell whether water is being pumped by a man, woman or child, and the level of effort required to pump water can even reveal the depth of the aquifer. Suddenly, this simple innovation may be able to answer questions about whether children are pumping water when they should be in school, and help natural scientists to better understand groundwater dynamics in rural Africa.

Thus, the pressures of academia to come up with something novel for the next grant application or journal paper incentivise innovations in a different manner than for other development actors. This stresses the need for funders to remain open and responsive in the types of research proposals they are willing to consider, but equally researchers must remain focused as much on the novel practical, as well as intellectual, challenges their work can address. The pressure to achieve research excellence should encourage researchers to reach across disciplinary boundaries, within and beyond the social sciences. Technical experts should work more with social sciences to understand the structures in which innovation may be embedded and the potential for unanticipated impacts, particularly on marginalised populations. Equally, social scientists should seek to understand the ways which rapidly advancing technology, as well as insights from natural sciences, can help to address long-standing social challenges.

4.4 Capacity building

Finally, we must recognise the fundamental importance of capacity building to generate impact sustainably. In ESRC-DFID programmes, we have always recognised the importance of capacity building, and encouraged it in projects, but it has been up to this point clearly noted as a secondary criterion to scientific excellence.

Going forward, we must acknowledge that at a strategic level, support for excellence and building research capabilities must be more closely intertwined. As noted above, scientific excellence in social science research requires intellectual leadership from Southern researchers. But we must go further to ensure project-level capacity-strengthening efforts are situated in a wider systemic context. Participation in research projects is of limited value to Southern researchers if they are based in an institution that is unable to

provide them with the time, resources and support to develop their own research agendas. We should be seeking to move towards reducing the 'donor dependency' of development research agendas, and supporting low- and middle-income countries to develop their own social science research funding capacities, strategic priorities and infrastructure. In the long term, the greatest impact that development research funding from the UK could achieve would be to support the development of independent knowledge systems in low- and middle-income countries that can adapt and deliver on their own changing research priorities in perpetuity. It should be recognised that these knowledge systems are wider than just academic institutions; expert research-relevant capacity resides, and should be strengthened, in governments, civil society, the private sector and among the general public.

5. | IMPACT AND EXCELLENCE IN THE GLOBAL CHALLENGES RESEARCH FUND

ESRC aims to embed this thinking in its approach to supporting research under the Global Challenges Research Fund (GCRF).⁶ This £1.5bn fund for disciplinary and interdisciplinary research is administered by the UK research councils and academies and forms part of the UK's official development assistance commitment. Underpinning the development of our strategic approach to GCRF, therefore, are three key principles concerning the value of research in development: research **for** development, research **as** development and research **on** development.

Research for development refers to what is most traditionally understood as the role of research. It provides evidence and insights that can inform better policies and better decisions to reduce poverty, enhance economic growth, sustain environment resources and improve health and wellbeing. Such knowledge is vital, and we must continue to ensure we support it with a clear understanding of the demands for research identified by relevant stakeholders, while remaining conscious of the potential for social science to unearth novel solutions and reframe how we think about problems.

Research as development encapsulates the fundamental importance of capacity strengthening. In the UK, ESRC prides itself on the value that the research it supports delivers to UK society. UK social science delivers a myriad of benefits to government, the private sector, civil society and public life in general. We consider a vibrant and engaged social science community to be an essential component for a prosperous, democratic society. It can be argued that this research capacity should be part of any country's ambitions for development. In the past, higher education and research capacity were downplayed as development priorities in favour of more basic provisions such as primary education, agricultural development and basic health care. More recently, there is increasing recognition that research capacities may serve as enablers for other aspects of development, and should be prioritised, rather than considered as a luxury that low-income countries cannot yet afford (see, for example, Owusu, Kalipeni and Kiru 2014). UK research funders, research

organisations and individual researchers should consider in more detail how their contribution to such efforts can extend beyond the outputs of individual research projects. I would suggest we can extend the old adage that says if you give someone a fish, you feed them for a day, if you teach them to fish, you feed them for a lifetime. If you instead work with them to build an Institute of Advanced Fisheries, they could feed their whole village and sustainably manage their local lake far better than you ever could. Moreover, we can seek to support the building of research cultures and institutions that are more integrated with wider society than may be the case with many universities in the North. Rather than simply replicating our own models, we can share knowledge and experience to assist countries in the South to build institutions that are more effective and responsive engines of development and prosperity.

For the ESRC, *research on development* acknowledges that we have a almost unique position in the development research sphere in that we are not also an aid donor or delivery agent. We are not constrained by a need to evaluate or demonstrate the effectiveness of particular aid interventions. As such ESRC is freer to support the important research that analyses, critiques and deconstructs particular aid agendas and uncovers unintended consequences of development policy. This is a task the development research community has engaged in for many years. Going forward, we must find more ways to ensure that this critical lens is brought to bear in ways that do not just echo through the halls of academia, but engage constructively with development actors at all levels and provide pathways to better practice. We should seek to move away from treating failures of development as awkward examples to be polished over, hidden away or disingenuously presented as successes. These should be held up as opportunities for expanding knowledge, identifying new puzzles to be solved, and rethinking underpinning assumptions. For research funders, it means finding new ways to ensure our commissioning process have an appropriate appetite for risk.

6.1 CONCLUSION

To conclude, as the 'impact agenda' and the role of high-quality social science research in development continues to evolve and expand, we should seek to broaden our understanding of the processes and opportunities for research to deliver wider societal benefit. Aspirations for impact should not diminish the value and breadth of academic activity, but should refine and sharpen it to ensure the widest possible spectrum of society, both in the UK and internationally, is engaged and invested in it. Through ten years of collaboration, ESRC and DFID have explored and refined our efforts to enhance the synergies between research excellence and development impact. In the end, social science represents a society's reflexive capacity to reshape its norms, institutions, economy, relationships and priorities. Its role in development is thus much more than instrumental or advisory; it is foundational.

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ENDNOTES

- 1 Many of the impacts from research funded under the ESRC-DFID Joint Fund are described in the 2016 Impact Evaluation of the programme (see France et al. 2016).
- 2 The original Joint Fund for Poverty Alleviation is now nearing the end of its third major phase of funding, ESRC-DFID bilateral collaboration has been extended to include the DFID-ESRC Growth Research Programme (DEGRP) and the Raising Learning Outcomes in Education Systems Programme (RLO). ESRC and DFID also collaborate with other Research Councils on Ecosystem Services for Poverty Alleviation (ESPA), Unlocking the Potential for Groundwater in Africa (UPGro), Zoonoses and Emerging Livestock Systems (ZELS) and the Joint Health Systems Research Initiative (JHSRI).
- 3 Emma Crewe, Principal Investigator, 'Parliamentary Effectiveness: Public Engagement for Poverty Reduction in Bangladesh and Ethiopia', ESRC Grant Reference: ES/L005409/1, <http://gtr.rcuk.ac.uk/projects?ref=ES%2FL005409%2F1>.
- 4 Sabina Alkire, Principal Investigator 'Multidimensional Poverty: Enriching Methodologies of Measurement & Policy Analysis', <http://gtr.rcuk.ac.uk/projects?ref=ES/1032827/1>.
- 5 For example, Robert Hope, Principal Investigator, 'Insuring against Rural Water Risk in Africa', <http://gtr.rcuk.ac.uk/project/96E78FAA-ABB4-4DEC-9997-7486990BD9F9>.
- 6 www.rcuk.ac.uk/funding/gcrf.



PHOTO CREDITS

Impact Initiative Image

Addressing child marriage in Ethiopia

This young girl got married when she was 15. Ethiopia has one of the highest rates of early marriage in sub-Saharan Africa. In partnership with the Government of Ethiopia, DFID-funded Finote Hiwot is helping at least 37,500 adolescent girls, and indirectly many more, to avoid child marriage in Ethiopia.

Photo credit: Jessica Lea/Department for International Development

Chapter 1

Vietnamese school children.

Photo credit: Keren Su/Getty Images

Chapter 2

Nigeria, Borno State

Representatives of three aid agencies – Oxfam, Save the Children and International Rescue Committee – who have entered into a partnership in north-east Nigeria, stand beside a water well at an IDP camp.

Photo credit: Sven Torfinn/Panos

Chapter 3

India – Health pentavalent vaccine

An Indian mother with her baby waits for the administration of the pentavalent vaccine during the launch of the immunisation programme in Hyderabad, India in 2015.

Photo credit: Noah Seelam/AFP/Getty Images

Chapter 4

Kenya, Dadaab refugee camp

A girl, 16, pictured in class at the Ifo Secondary School in Dadaab refugee camp.

Photo credit: Tommy Trenchard/Panos

Chapter 5

Paediatric care centre in Sierra Leone

Women and their children are seen waiting for HIV/AIDS volunteer testing and counselling in Binkolo, Sierra Leone.

Photo credit: Marco Di Lauro/Edit by Getty Image

Chapter 6

Kenya health-care clinic

Community Health Action Day, people attend free health clinic.

Photo credit: Wendy Stone/Corbis via Getty Images

Chapter 7

Bangladesh, Kishargonj

A young farmer with the agricultural machine he was given by a government NGO.

Photo credit: G.M.B. Akash/Panos

Chapter 8

MSF Science Day.

Photo credit: Corinne Baker/MSF

Chapter 9

Agribusiness in Vietnam

Rice of SRI (system of rice intensification) farming in Dai Nghia Commune, Chuong My District, Ha Tay Province.

Photo credit: Chau Doan/UNIDO

Chapter 10

Research in Tanzania

A laboratory technician prepares a sample from a volunteer for genotyping at the government-run Ifakara Health Institute in Bagamoyo, Tanzania.

Photo credit: Tony Karumba/AFP/Getty Images

Chapter 11

South Africa leads world in HIV/AIDS cases

A mural displays a public service announcement about HIV and AIDS, 16 June 2000, in a residential area in Thokosa, a township outside Johannesburg, South Africa.

Photo credit: Per-Anders Pettersson/Getty Images

Chapter 12

Za'atari refugee camp, Jordan

Syrian refugee holds a kite which she made herself. On the kite she has written a message of peace for her country.

Photo credit: Chris de Bode/Panos



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