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THE PURSUIT OF IMPACT THROUGH EXCELLENCE:

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

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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.

