Maximising the Impact of Global Development Research
A New Approach to Knowledge Brokering

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Summary

This report, by the Impact Initiative for International Development Research, provides an approach for brokering evidence across large research investments. It is based on six years of work undertaken by the Institute of Development Studies (IDS) and the Research for Equitable Access and Learning (REAL) Centre based at the University of Cambridge, engaging with over 200 research projects funded by the Economic and Social Research Council–Foreign, Commonwealth & Development Office (ESRC-FCDO) Strategic Partnership. It provides lessons and recommended practices for all those funding and designing social science research for development and seeking to maximise its impact beyond academia. It is focused on the value of working across multiple research projects, spanning topics and geographies, and how this collective approach supports learning and impact.

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Notes on Contributors

Vivienne Benson is the Communications and Impact Manager at IDS. She leads the communications for a portfolio of international development research projects and manages a team of research communications specialists. She has worked on a range of issues within the sector including health and nutrition, child labour, and gender equality with a focus on translating evidence and knowledge into accessible and engaging communications to achieve sustainable impact. As part of the Impact Initiative communications team, she has helped shape the impact storytelling process, led high-level policy events, and developed cross-synthesis policy papers.

Louise Clark is the Monitoring Evaluation and Learning (MEL) Manager at IDS and has been mapping social networks for over 15 years to visualise how different groups interact and collaborate and how these relational structures facilitate knowledge exchange and support positive development outcomes. Her work involves all stages in the MEL cycle, from the strategic design of MEL frameworks and approaches, creating MEL processes and products, supporting monitoring and reporting to managing evaluations and facilitating spaces for reflection and learning. She has a particular interest in Theory of Change as a tool to support stakeholder engagement and build shared ownership of project outcomes to deliver strategies that promote behaviour change. Her facilitation supports projects to explore causal pathways and challenge assumptions about how change happens to promote reflection, learning, and improvement. She has a PhD in Rural Sociology from Imperial College London and has previously worked for Oxfam America, Action Aid International, and as an independent evaluator.

James Georgalakis is the Director of Communications and Impact at IDS and Co-Director of the ESRC-FCDO Impact Initiative for International Development Research. He also leads the International Development Research Centre's (IDRC's) Covid-19 knowledge translation programme. He is completing a professional doctorate in policy research and practice at the University of Bath. His research interests relate to social network analysis of the interactive processes that shape the production and use of evidence in global health policy. Previous to joining IDS he delivered a range of policy communications and advocacy roles in non-governmental organisations.

Grace Lyn Higdon is a monitoring, evaluation, and learning (MEL) specialist with over ten years of experience exploring how participatory methods can enhance organisational effectiveness during research, design, monitoring, and evaluation of social change programmes. She is deeply interested in building bridges between traditional social change actors and new entrants such as impact investors and technologists. Grace is inspired by organisational learning and accountability initiatives that offer more opportunities for decisions to be influenced by the people whose lives are most directly affected by an intervention. She is a proud former student of the MA Participation, Power and Social Change programme at IDS.

Julia Kemp is Deputy Director of the Research Department at FCDO. Part of the Research and Evidence Directorate, the Department leads FCDO's portfolio of mission-driven global public goods research and technologies that address complex international development challenges. Her career in FCDO (formerly DFID) has spanned establishing FCDO's East Africa Research Hub in Nairobi and, as Senior Health Adviser, leading bilateral health portfolios in Myanmar and Malawi. Prior to DFID, Julia was a Senior Research Fellow with the Liverpool School of Tropical Medicine and was awarded her PhD in Public Health and Sociology from the University of Liverpool in 2000.

Pamela Mason is the Strategic Lead for International Development at ESRC. As a result of a particular interest in interdisciplinary research, her career at UK Research and Innovation (UKRI) has spanned several Research Councils, including the Engineering and Physical Sciences Research Council, Arts and Humanities Research Council and the Medical Research Council. With overall responsibility for the ESRC's Official Development Assistance activity, she leads the Strategic Partnership between FCDO and ESRC and the Global Challenges Research Fund. A key aim is to support high-quality research to produce meaningful evidence for policymakers and other users of research outputs. Pamela received a PhD in Chemistry from the University of Nottingham in 2005.

Pauline Rose joined the University of Cambridge in February 2014 as Professor of International Education, where she is Director of the Research for

Equitable Access and Learning (REAL) Centre in the Faculty of Education. She is Co-Director of the Impact Initiative and leads the education strand of the ESRC-FCDO Impact Initiative and was Principal Investigator of the ESRC-FCDO Raising Learning Outcomes project: 'Teaching Effectively All Children in India and Pakistan' (TEACh). Prior to joining Cambridge, Pauline was Director of UNESCO's Education for All Global Monitoring Report. Pauline's research focuses on issues of educational policy and practice in international development settings, including in relation to inequality and financing and governance.

Kelly Shephard is Head of Knowledge, Impact and Policy at IDS. Kelly is a storyteller. Her prime interest lies in gender equality and the use of technology to share and shape information. After spending 16 years working for BBC World Service, she transferred her journalistic skills to the world of international development. Kelly's move to IDS in May 2011 was led by a desire to be as much involved in the process as in the product. Her journalistic skills, which were shaped in a multimedia environment, enable her to see clarity in complex material and present it in compelling and relevant ways. In her current role, Kelly oversees a talented team who have responsibility for delivering impact-oriented communications, policy engagement activities, and developing mutual learning across a broad portfolio of projects. She provides strategic leadership to ensure effective processes for developing and delivering high-quality and impactful knowledge programmes in collaboration with partners around the world.

Elizabeth Tofaris joined the Research for Equitable Access and Learning (REAL) Centre in the Faculty of Education, University of Cambridge, as a Communications Specialist in January 2017. Since completing her MPhil in Development Studies in 2005, she has worked in the third sector. Prior to joining the Impact Initiative, she spent seven years working for the international children's organisation SOS Children's Villages where she was responsible for overseeing UK publications, media and public relations.

Forewords

The world around us is constantly changing and, now more than ever, investment in research and development is critical to understanding the sources of, and devising solutions for, major global challenges. Global development progress depends on robust science and evidence to produce informed policy and effect meaningful, long-lasting change, ensuring that all parts of our global society have a voice.

Individual research projects increase knowledge and have the potential to produce impacts. However, no project can act in isolation from what has gone before, what comes after, or the work that surrounds it. The ESRC-FCDO Strategic Partnership has ensured that diverse portfolios of research are able to come together to become far more than the sum of their parts.

The knowledge brokering provided by the Impact Initiative has enabled networks of research and researchers to identify both structured and opportunistic pathways to enhance knowledge for development, ensuring that the best, high-quality, robust evidence is highlighted. Likewise, synthesising research that combines around a common theme can greatly enhance its potential to be heard, understood, and acted on. The volume, quality, and accessibility of the impact stories generated out of the ESRC-FCDO partnership is testament to its success.

This report is a celebration of the research, researchers, and research brokers, as well as an opportunity for reflection on what has been learned. For me, the take-home message is that we can do more, and do it better, when we do it together in partnership – researchers, policymakers, knowledge managers, brokers, and funders.

Pamela Mason
Head of International Development,
Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC)

The last year has provided a stark reminder of the complex, changing and interconnected challenges that we face as a global community, and the vital role that rigorous research, scientific innovation and new knowledge plays in allowing us to meet them. Investment in research and development is a critical enabler for evidence-based policymaking. To ensure research translates into impact on policy and practice we need to better understand how to deliver robust evidence to the right actors, at the right time and in the right way.

This report is an important guide for those involved in the generation and use of evidence. It documents the pathways that individual researchers and research projects have taken to achieve impact; how research programmes and knowledge managers can build networks, broker knowledge and synthesise evidence; and how bodies of research have been brought together to ensure that the impacts of individual research programmes are greater than the sum of their parts.

The report demonstrates the value of the ESRC-FCDO Strategic Partnership and the important contribution of the Impact Initiative. This combination of a strong drive for policy-relevance and academic rigour with innovative approaches to networking, synthesis and case studies has demonstrated not only direct impact on policy and practice, but also important lessons on 'how' this can be achieved that can be built upon.

Julia Kemp
Deputy Director of the Research Department,
Foreign, Commonwealth & Development Office (FCDO)

Acknowledgements

Acronyms

APPG	All-Party Parliamentary Group
CIES	Comparative and International Education Society
DFID	Department for International Development
ESRC	Economic and Social Research Council
FCDO	Foreign, Commonwealth & Development Office
GCACP	Global Coalition Against Child Poverty
HSR	Health Systems Research
ICS	impact case studies
IDS	Institute of Development Studies
INGO	international non-governmental organisation
Norad	Norwegian Agency for Development Cooperation
R4PP	Research for Policy and Practice
REAL	Research for Equitable Access and Learning Centre
REF	Research Excellence Framework
RLO	Raising Learning Outcomes in Education Systems Research Programme
SCAFFOLD	Stakeholder Convergence for Focus on Learner Disadvantage
SDGs	Sustainable Development Goals
SNA	social network analysis
UKCDR	UK Collaborative on Development Research
UKRI	UK Research and Innovation
UNCSW	United Nations Commission on the Status of Women
UNECA	United Nations Economic Commission for Africa
YOURS	Youth Uncertainty Rights World Research

The Power of the Collective and Global Knowledge Brokering

James Georgalakis and Pauline Rose

Summary

This report highlights experience of the Impact Initiative for International Development Research on brokering evidence across large social science research programmes in international development settings. The supported projects, funded by the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC) and the Foreign, Commonwealth & Development Office (FCDO) (formerly Department for International Development – DFID) Strategic Partnership, aim to provide rigorous research on issues related to poverty alleviation and education. Our learning is based on six years of work undertaken by the Institute of Development Studies (IDS) and the Research for Equitable Access and Learning (REAL) Centre at the University of Cambridge, engaging with over 200 research projects. The report provides reflections on this experience, along with lessons and recommended practices for all those funding and designing social science research for development and seeking to maximise its impact beyond academia. The report identifies the value of working across multiple research projects on related topics and in common geographies to bring together collective learning from the evidence.

1.1 Introduction

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Each section of the report explores a different aspect of knowledge brokerage. In Section 2, Georgalakis identifies some of the opportunities and risks around particular pathways to impact. Section 3 highlights a network-based approach, for which Clark and Higdon provide a methodology that supports a relational approach to supporting impact. Section 4, by Shephard and Tofaris, outlines the design and use of meso-level synthesis in short briefing papers that bring groups of projects on common themes together in an accessible format to offer policy-relevant learning. In the final section, Shephard and Benson set out the Impact Initiative's approach to evidencing impact and creating compelling impact stories. We hope this publication will be of relevance to a cross-section of knowledge-brokerage and communications practitioners, evidence and policy scholars, and research donors.

We summarise here some of the key issues that cut across the sections of the report and provide the core learning we feel is essential for the design and implementation of multi-project, programme-level research engagement initiatives. The Annexe at the end of this report provides impact narratives that highlight examples of how the Impact Initiative created opportunities to connect researchers with policymakers and practitioners to present evidence and influence policy conversations. These impact narratives were developed for annual funder reporting of the Impact Initiative's goal-level achievements.

The map on pages 14 and 15 shows the reach of the supported projects, funded by the ESRC-FCDO Strategic Partnership, on issues related to poverty alleviation and education.

1.2 Taking a collective approach to knowledge brokerage

From the very outset, the Impact Initiative was designed to identify and operationalise the added value of working across projects spanning geographies and topics. These covered a range of cross-cutting issues, including: raising learning outcomes, disability, the gender dimensions of social exclusion, child and youth poverty, conflict, and reforming health systems. Our concern was that there would have to be a trade-off between the breadth of our coverage of projects versus the depth of our engagement in particular contexts. However, we discovered that contextualising research for policy and practice can be directly supported by a collective approach. This grew from our engagement in a variety of ways with grantholders and policy actors working in related areas across the 172 projects (6 of which were awarded additional funding) in the Joint Fund for Poverty Alleviation Programme and 30 projects (10 of which were awarded additional funding) in the Raising Learning Outcomes in Education Systems Programme over the six years. Such engagement included workshops, major conferences, and events including in the UK, Ethiopia, India, and South Africa, as well as more informally encouraging connections through networking social events, virtual exchanges, and other ongoing communications. It was further supported by our use of social network analysis, both to identify opportunities for further engagement and relationship building and to demonstrate the impact of our brokering role (Section 3).

All too often research is produced in niche disciplinary spaces and framed for very specific audiences. A networked approach helped generate a more inclusive process that sustained the interaction between groups of researchers and potential research users. This research engagement process focuses on identifying complementary bodies of evidence. By synthesising research learning across projects that were ostensibly quite different but spoke to a coherent policy area, we were able to connect researchers and policy actors who might otherwise have remained in their respective silos. The Impact Initiative's series of 12 cross-cutting synthesis reports, entitled Research, Policy and

Practice reports, united different types of knowledge and broke down barriers between different disciplines and policy or technical areas and provided policymakers and practitioners with concrete recommendations (Section 4). This cross-project learning frequently challenged preconceptions about what kind of evidence was relevant to particular policy dilemmas and produced rich and compelling evidence-based arguments for new approaches.

We used this collective approach to support cohorts of researchers and support their connections with knowledge intermediaries such as advocacy organisations and policy actors (Section 2). Although these approaches differ from more comprehensive and systematic reviews of evidence, given that our focus was on research that has been enabled by two specific programmes, the collective approach responds to the demand by policy actors for wider bodies of knowledge. It produced a body of evidence that was able to widen the reach and so have the potential to be more influential than a focus on single studies, and it facilitated a collective voice for promoting the research. It also created greater opportunities for the cross-pollination of ideas and learning across researchers using a range of methodologies to tackle a related research question. It also offered a motivational and creative environment. For example, through using social network mapping at events to encourage networking and provide a real-time visualisation of conversations, interactions between participants can be enhanced (Section 3). Another approach we used was the adaptation of the TV show format of *Dragons' Den* (also known as *Shark Tank*). This enabled small groups of projects to come together around a key policy area and plan joint engagement work with the support of the Impact Initiative (Section 4). This influenced the policy discourse and the use of evidence on issues such as child poverty and urbanisation in Africa, and low and unequal learning outcomes in India. Through researchers joining together on issues of common concern, they were able to develop sustainable relationships among themselves as well as with policy actors that will far outlive the Impact Initiative itself.

1.3 Research impact as learning

Another key area of our approach has been around valuing differing types of impact and the learning around research engagement in all its forms. The Impact Initiative has been in a unique position to convene conversations about what is meant by impact and strategies for achieving it. Far from being abstract and theoretical, this dialogue provided practical tools for maximising impact. Early on in the programme, in close consultation with the funders (ESRC and FCDO) and grantholders of the research projects, we developed an articulation of types of research impact (Georgalakis and Rose 2019). This largely corresponded with UK Research and Innovation's (UKRI's) definitions of conceptual, capacity, and instrumental impacts, with additional emphasis on changes to networks and relationships.

Our studies of different pathways to achieving impact and research policy partnerships have highlighted the importance of developing a shared understanding of how change happens as part of impact planning processes (Section 2). We have also collaborated with grantholders to identify the ways in which a variety of approaches to partnerships between researchers, policy actors, and practitioners can lead to different forms of impact (Georgalakis and Rose 2019). These processes have produced valuable learning for a wider audience but also concretely enhanced planning for impact (Sections 2, 3, and 4).

By conceptualising research impact as a process rather than purely as an instrumental effect on policy, and by working across multiple projects, we were able to capture a range of ways in which research influences change. We recognised that impact can take time, and many researchers identified the common constraint of limited project life cycles. By working collaboratively to identify incremental changes and impacts, we were able to identify unintended consequences and smaller moments of change. This is reflected in our approach to the production of impact case studies, many of which identify micro impacts that build up into a body of learning (Section 5). These approaches enabled us to identify impact as learning, rather than purely a reporting tool or the validation of research quality and outcomes.

The key learning here for knowledge-brokering programmes is that impact, in all its forms, should be valued. In addition, approaches for identifying the audiences for research, the channels through which they intend to engage with these audiences and, crucially, why, are central to the delivery of research that is applicable to policy. The report provides examples of approaches for mining research proposals for impact pathways, engaging researchers and policy actors to identify synergies between projects' approaches to engagement, and analysing networks to understand critical gaps that might hinder uptake (Sections 2, 3, and 4). We would recommend the adaptation and embedding of these in knowledge-brokering initiatives. Additionally, programme-level brokering functions offer a valuable opportunity to improve our understanding of impact processes, to develop strategies for building capacity in this area, and for producing evidence of impacts achieved.

1.4 Making the case for development research

Finally, we want to emphasise the key role knowledge-brokering programmes have in making the case for social science research for international development. Each section of the report relates in some way to our role as the broker in creating narratives that support the investment in social science research in development settings. The Impact Initiative team worked with projects individually on the identification and production of short impact stories (Section 5). We knew that it would take time to build trust and develop relationships so that we could have honest discussions. We therefore started from a belief in the need to work collaboratively with researchers. The co-production of these impact stories with grantholders produced rich learning and reflection as well as the accessible outputs themselves. The engagement with

research partners, government officials, civil society organisations, and campaigners that is needed to shape these provides further opportunities for relationship building. We believe this format and the process for generating the case studies could easily be adapted by other brokers and funders. Given that building relationships is at the heart of successful processes that lead to meaningful change, the fact that the Impact Initiative was funded over four years initially, extended to six years in total, is also an important lesson for funders of future programmes of this kind.

Our work has shown that identifying compelling narratives is an essential part of synthesising and framing research for policy and practice and planning for impact (Sections 2 and 4). Throughout its existence, the Impact Initiative has paid attention to the production of a range of outputs including

multimedia, journal articles, opinion pieces published in global media outlets, illustrations, reports, book chapters, and blogs that seek to engage both researchers and the stakeholders they hope to influence with the evidence. This is not so much about knowledge management or knowledge translation as representing dialogue and two-way communication. The broker's responsibility extends beyond supporting individual projects to working in close partnership with researchers and expanding networks of intermediaries and influencers to make the case for rigorous social science (Section 3). The narratives we have developed in our synthesis products, events, reports, and impact stories include diverse voices that seek to address global challenges, with particular attention to voices from the global South as well as from often marginalised participants such as people with disabilities and young people.

1.5 Conclusions

The Impact Initiative offers an exciting model for brokering knowledge and connecting research with policy and practice. In delivering a comprehensive programme over a six-year period, we did not regard ourselves as pure service providers, waiting in the wings for requests for support from individual projects. Instead, our approach was to work proactively, across diverse projects and places, seeking synergies and areas of collaboration. We believe this enabled us to add real value beyond the aims of individual projects, ensuring that impact was promoted through an

approach that enabled projects to be more than the sum of their parts. Such a collective network-based approach that values broad definitions of impact and concentrates on both promoting the use of research and capturing the learning that these processes generate has important lessons for other large research programmes. We hope the tools and ideas presented in this report will inspire others to invest in knowledge-brokering programmes that enable rich portfolios of international development research to promote transformational change where it is most needed.

References

Georgalakis, J. and Rose, P. (2019) 'Introduction: Identifying the Qualities of Research–Policy Partnerships in International Development – a New Analytical Framework', *IDS Bulletin* 50.1: 1–20, DOI: 10.19088/1968-2019.103 (accessed 30 November 2020)

Endnotes

ESRC-FCDO Strategic Partnership

Research enabled through the UK's Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC) and the Foreign, Commonwealth & Development Office (FCDO) from the Joint Fund for Poverty Alleviation Research and the Raising Learning Outcomes in Education Systems Research Programme.

14

Norway 1

United Kingdom 2

Germany 1

Morocco 1 1

Global Projects 4

Burkina Faso 3

Mali 2

Senegal 4

Benin 1

Mexico 3

Honduras 1 3

Cape Verde 1

Guinea 2

El Salvador 2

Colombia 5

Sierra Leone 7 1

Liberia 6 1

Ivory Coast 1

Ghana 13 4

Peru 4

Brazil 4

Bolivia 1

Paraguay 1

Chile 3

Argentina 1
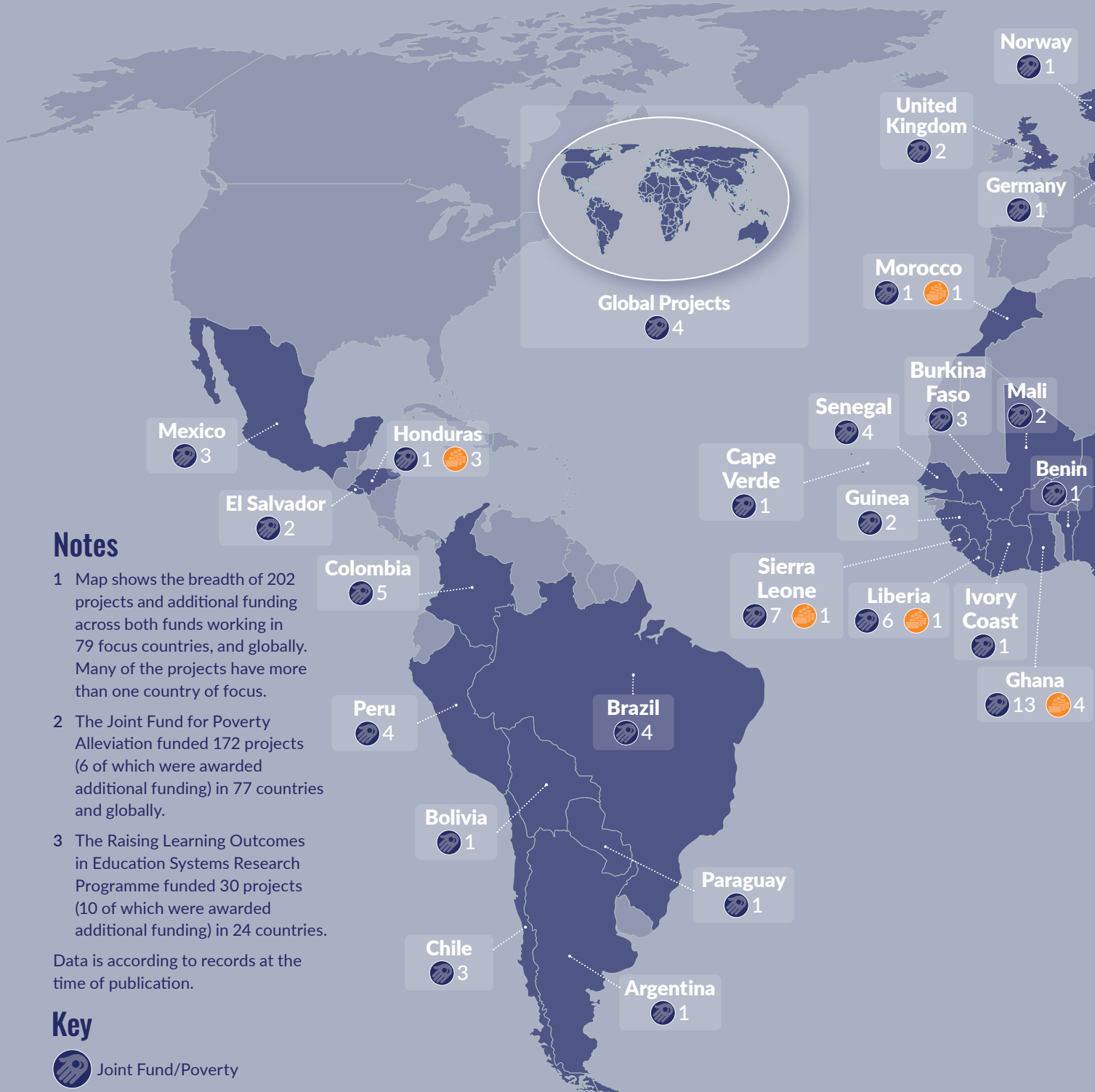
Notes

1   Map shows the breadth of 202 projects and additional funding across both funds working in 79 focus countries, and globally. Many of the projects have more than one country of focus.

2   The Joint Fund for Poverty Alleviation funded 172 projects (6 of which were awarded additional funding) in 77 countries and globally.

3   The Raising Learning Outcomes in Education Systems Research Programme funded 30 projects (10 of which were awarded additional funding) in 24 countries.

Data is according to records at the time of publication.

Key

Joint Fund/Poverty

RLO Education

Source: Impact Initiative 2021

Moldova
1

Armenia
1

Azerbaijan
1

Tajikistan
1

Kyrgystan
1

Georgia
1

Uzbekistan
1

Turkey
1

Afghanistan
3   2

Nepal
22   3

China
13

South Korea
1

Lebanon
2

Tunisia
1

Jordan
1

Pakistan
6   4

India
28   13

Bangladesh
22   1

Vietnam
6

Philippines
2

Egypt
3

Yemen
1

Myanmar
2

Laos
2

Niger
2   3

Sudan
4   1

Somaliland
2

Cambodia
7

Papua
New Guinea
1

Nigeria
4

South Sudan
1

Ethiopia
13   1

Somalia
1

Sri Lanka
5

Cameroon
1

DR
Congo
1
1

Uganda
12   5

Maldives
2

Indonesia
1

Kenya
22   2

Angola
1

Tanzania
14

Rwanda
6   1

Timor-Leste
2

Solomon
Islands
1

Zambia
11

Namibia
1

Zimbabwe
7

Malawi
13   2

Fiji
1

Mozambique
3

Botswana
1   2

Eswatini
1

South Africa
9   6

Lesotho
3   2

15

Assessing Alternative Pathways to Maximising the Impact of Development Research

James Georgalakis

Summary

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

2.1 Introduction

The purpose of this section is to set out some of the key challenges faced by researchers who are attempting to contribute to societal impact and successful strategies for overcoming these. This learning is firmly located in relation to pathways to impact that focus research engagement on particular policy spaces or groups of potential beneficiaries. The Impact Initiative team, based at the Institute of Development Studies (IDS) and the Research for Equitable Access and Learning (REAL) Centre at the University of Cambridge, have been in a unique position to learn about diverse approaches to engaging research with non-academic audiences and achieving impact. Over the course of the past six years we have facilitated multiple events with researchers, policy actors, practitioners and donors, to capture this learning and published 24 impact case studies across two programmes funded by the UK's Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC) and the Foreign, Commonwealth & Development Office (FCDO): the Joint Fund for Poverty Alleviation Research and the Raising Learning Outcomes in Education Systems Research Programme. We 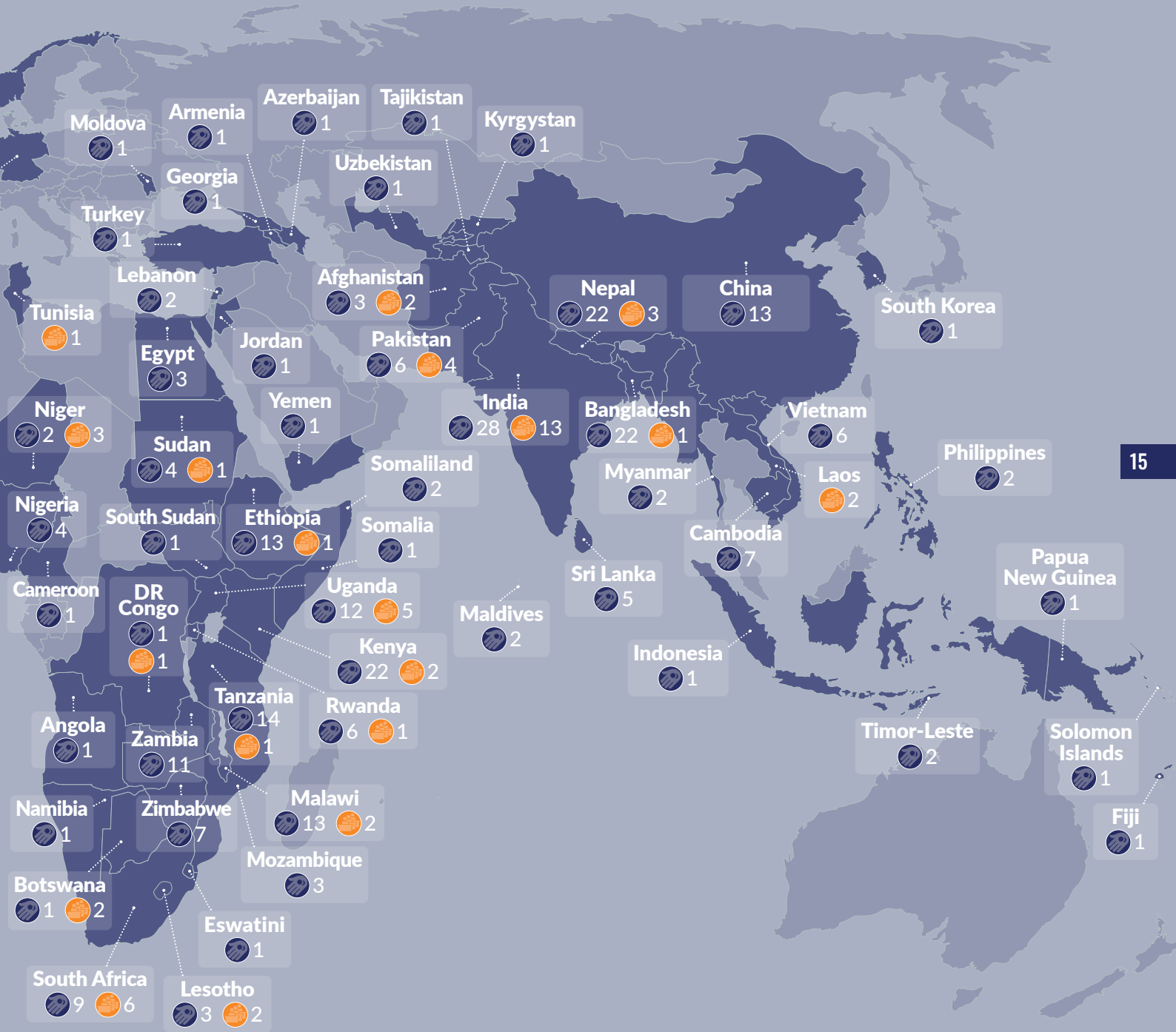revisit some of the frameworks we have developed with our partners on definitions of impact and effective research policy partnerships and consider how these relate to the pathways taken to engage research beyond academia. We explore some of the challenges and opportunities relating to: (1) engaging research in global advocacy movements; (2) engaging communities in national policy formulation; and (3) informing international policy processes with evidence. We set out actionable learning for practitioners and researchers in development that has important implications for the design and implementation of programme-level knowledge-brokering services.

2.2 Contributions to learning on pathways to impact

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

2.3.1 Engagement with global advocacy movements (child poverty)

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

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

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

we focus on and what we talk about. The Coalition's individual members are highly influenced, I think, by the research they're hearing about.
(Roelen and Shephard 2020: 2)

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

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

2.3.3 Engaging with global policy processes (disability and education)

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

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International Disability Alliance. An Impact Initiative-facilitated event at the REAL Centre, University of Cambridge, in late April 2018 provided the opportunity for researchers to engage directly with FCDO, INGOs and multilateral officials to inform preparation for the Summit that was due to take place just three months later. The workshop was successful in creating an opportunity for multiple stakeholder groups to discuss common issues from different perspectives around inclusive education. The 42 participants (including seven ESRC-FCDO grantholders, along with key policy and civil society actors across a range of organisations) developed a Statement of Action on Inclusive Education, which emphasised the importance of better evidence and data to inform policy and practice. The collaboration also resulted in engagement with the framing of a new FCDO, Norwegian Agency for Development Cooperation (Norad), and World Bank Inclusive Education Initiative, which was launched at the Global Disability Summit with an emphasis on the importance of better evidence and data to inform policy and practice (Singal 2020).

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

2.4.1 Overcoming the barriers to connecting research with its potential users

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

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

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

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

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

This brings us right back to one of the central challenges in supporting evidence use. Rigorous, inclusive evidence does not always provide the simple or politically viable answers that global advocates, international policy actors, or national governments seek. This is not solely a communication or framing problem; it relates to a deeper set of issues around the design of research and the anticipated outcomes. Take, for example, how the current Covid-19 crisis is creating acute tension between the demand to base public health interventions on evidence and the political realities of making difficult decisions around public health measures.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

2.4.3 The power dimensions and causal assumptions underpinning pathways to impact

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

2.5 Conclusions and recommendations

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

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

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

- Those seeking to exploit policy windows nationally and internationally need to balance the opportunity for high-level engagement with attempting to influence the policy frames of powerful actors. This can be achieved through an inclusive iterative planning process that identifies mutual objectives, considers power dynamics, and sustains continuous interaction between research and policy partners.

- Those focused on engaging global movements need to ensure they are committed to seeking to influence the influencers over the longer term, rather than engaging directly with decision makers on specific issues. Establish with your partners whether you share a similar understanding of how change happens and what success looks like and be prepared to play the long game.

- Engaging community perspectives in policy processes provides great opportunities for the empowerment of the marginalised. Consider the degree to which the process may be more impactful than any specific policy outcome and how you can overcome the barriers in your context to inclusivity and equity.

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

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Endnotes

1 Webinars focused on each of the three discreet pathways were held between April and September 2020. Each workshop was tailored to address issues relating to the specific pathway being scrutinised. They were also designed to address in equal measure questions around: (1) The barriers to engaging research with potential users; (2) The added value of working across multiple research projects and partners; (3) The benefits and risks of the specific pathway.

A Network-based Approach to Brokering Research Evidence for Impact

Louise Clark and Grace Lyn Higdon

Summary

This section outlines the Impact Initiative's approach and learning on strengthening relationships and networks across an epistemic community of researchers funded by the UK's Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC) and Foreign, Commonwealth & Development Office (FCDO) (formerly Department for International Development – DFID). A key element of the Impact Initiative's strategy to maximise the impact of a diverse portfolio of research was to act as a broker to create connections and build networks between researchers and with policy audiences. Social network analysis (SNA) was used throughout the programme to monitor and generate evidence of how Impact Initiative activities strengthened connections and networks and to reflect and learn about our different strategies to broker research evidence. This section is structured around a series of different examples of how SNA was applied to explore this concept of brokerage to share our learning on:

- Identifying synergies and connecting bodies of knowledge by building relationships across research communities

- Facilitating spaces that promote engagement between researchers and policy audiences and creating opportunities to discuss and interact around evidence findings

- Supporting repeat engagement and furthering our understanding of the concept of sustained interactivity as a key element of effective research–policy partnerships.

3.1 The Impact Initiative's brokering approach

A key element of the Impact Initiative's strategy to maximise the impact of a diverse portfolio of research was to act as a broker to create connections and build networks between researchers and with policy audiences. This section outlines the Impact Initiative's approach and learning on strengthening relationships and networks across an epistemic community of over 200 projects funded by the ESRC and FCDO to connect communities of researchers, practitioners, and policy professionals and to generate insights into how research evidence informs decision making. We have used social network analysis (SNA) to visualise and analyse the network structures created by building relationships among research projects and facilitating their access to policy conversations and spaces. This visual approach provides a valuable perspective to demonstrate the concept of brokerage, defined as strengthening relationships to support the effective use of evidence in policy contexts.

> **A key element of the Impact Initiative's strategy to maximise the impact of a diverse portfolio of research was to act as a broker to create connections and build networks between researchers and with policy audiences.**

The Impact Initiative's approach to brokering aimed to strengthen relationships and support networks at a portfolio level to demonstrate the whole as more than the sum of its parts. Our theory of change was based upon the assumption that a networked approach could add value to the evidence, building upon a body

of evidence that suggests the 'impact of evidence on development policy and practice is a social and interactive process built on personal relationships and social networks' (Georgalakis *et al.* 2017: 17). Our emphasis on establishing and strengthening relationships demanded taking a systemic approach that would create more effective channels to support research uptake than by focusing on single projects and would position grantholders to supply research evidence and respond to emerging policy opportunities.

This strategy emphasised the brokerage role of the Impact Initiative through two pathways:

1) The first brokerage pathway was to build networks and strengthen relationships within an epistemic community of researchers across two ESRC-FCDO (formerly DFID) grant portfolios – the Joint Fund for Poverty Alleviation (Joint Fund) and the Raising Learning Outcomes in Education Systems Research Programme (RLO). This involved navigating and exploring synergies across a large and complex portfolio of research, including grants of different durations, thematic focus, methodologies, and scale, to identify complementary bodies of knowledge and opportunities for cohesion around key messages.

2) The second brokerage pathway involved understanding the wider context that the research could be situated in and creating opportunities and facilitating spaces to connect researchers to relevant policy and practitioner conversations in order to use this evidence base to offer diverse methodological and thematic perspectives and solutions to development challenges.

An emerging dimension of our brokerage approach was our growing awareness of the importance of sustained interactivity. This concept emerged from Impact Initiative work (Georgalakis and Rose 2019a)[1] to reflect on the qualities and challenges of establishing effective partnerships that informed an analytical framework that identifies three key qualities: sustained interactivity, bounded mutuality, and policy adaptability. Georgalakis and Rose (2019b) explore the interactivity of these concepts and argue that an assessment of partnerships intended to increase the use of evidence in policymaking must look beyond shared agendas and analyse 'sustained interactivity' between members of the partnerships, concluding that 'sustained interactivity that strengthens networks and results in changes in relationships appear equally important to promoting evidence use' (p. 7).

> **An emerging dimension of our brokerage approach was our growing awareness of the importance of sustained interactivity.**

Our work explored the potential of SNA to demonstrate how the Impact Initiative was linking bodies of knowledge within and across research portfolios through its synthesis publications and engagement events. These data were used both for accountability as part of our annual funder reporting and to inform our own learning and reflections on how effective our different outputs, events, and activities were in delivering our outcome goal of quality engagement that would bridge academic, policy, and practitioner communities. The section will share our learning on three different ways that SNA has been used to inform our thinking and reporting on our brokerage role to contribute to:

1 **Building relationships and supporting synergies across evidence findings.** Sub-section 3.3.1 outlines our learning and reflections on how effective our communications and engagement activities were in establishing connections and strengthening relationships amongst researchers.
2 **Sustained engagement to promote effective research–policy partnerships.** Sub-section 3.3.2 discusses the data generated from tracking researchers, policy, and practitioner engagement over multiple years that supported our learning on sustained interaction as an essential component of brokering research evidence for impact.
3 **Creating spaces to facilitate engagement and linkages between converging sectors.** Sub-section 3.3.3 presents the application of SNA to proactively promote networking between researchers, policymakers, and practitioners to identify new opportunities to collaborate across diverse thematic areas and geographies.

Social network analysis is an established methodology within the social sciences that is used to understand the actors or nodes within a network, the relationships that exist between them within a specific space or domain, and the network structure that is created through these interactions. There is a significant

literature that explores how these social structures can explain power, influence, and access to resources within social groups. Metrics are often used to identify key network positions that link otherwise disconnected segments of the network, creating both possible entry points to access new information and connections and potential bottlenecks that can control the flow of information between clusters of connected actors. A lesser explored area of SNA is the use of two-mode or bipartite networks (Borgatti and Everett 1997), which can demonstrate patterns created by interactions between people and events as used by Davis *et al.* (1941) in their influential study on social class relationships. Two-mode networks are not direct social connections between individuals or organisations but proxies of a relationship based on a mutual connection through an event or collaboration on a publication.

This section presents examples of how two-mode network mapping was used to demonstrate programme-level knowledge brokering across a diverse global portfolio of research. These network maps were used to visualise collaborations among research projects to deliver outputs and activities as well as the interactions between researchers and policymakers at multiple events and spaces that created opportunities for policy engagement. This network-based approach has potential value for similar initiatives that wish to maximise the impact of evidence across research portfolios. Our experience also provides insights into the challenges of establishing connections across thematically and geographically diverse research grants and building relationships that can provide policy actors with timely and relevant research evidence.

3.2 Applying social network analysis to explore the different dimensions of brokerage in research–policy linkages

Our approach is grounded in a wide body of literature that explores the complexity and non-linearity of the research to policy interface that invariably emphasises the importance of building long-term relationships and networks as a way to gain insights into policy problems and build credibility within the policy arena to eventually gain access to opportunities to shape policy agendas (Oliver and Cairney 2019; Mayne *et al.* 2018; Cairney and Kwiatkowski 2017; Jessani, Kennedy and Bennett 2017; Tilley *et al.* 2017). Establishing trust is repeatedly mentioned as a key prerequisite for effective research to policy relationships with strong emphasis on building relationships with policymakers, as well as potential allies and advocates, as a necessary investment in creating future opportunities to influence policy (Cairney and Kwiatkowski 2017; Kingdon 2003; Mayne *et al.* 2018).

This advice to researchers also converges with a growing literature that describes how SNA has been used to explore the concept of brokerage and to demonstrate the relational dynamics of pathways to policy impact (Jessani *et al.* 2018; Jessani, Boulay

and Bennett 2016; Cvitanovic *et al.* 2017; Shearer *et al.* 2018). The ability of SNA to visualise networks can create opportunities to proactively leverage relationships and network structures and better understand the role of informal networks to improve knowledge flows and strengthen efficiency (Jessani *et al.* 2017; Serrat 2017). Network data can reveal inherent power dynamics and vested interests creating an imperative to manage partnerships sensitively to avoid exacerbating existing asymmetries (Faul 2016). A study by Shearer *et al.* (2018) looked at how network structures affect the use of research evidence by three health policy networks in Burkina Faso and the resulting innovativeness of the policies made. They determine that:

> ...heterogeneous networks are more likely to be exposed to new ideas, and thus to use research evidence and adopt innovative policies. High levels of centralised control and power may support innovation when the new ideas are consistent with the dominant network paradigms; otherwise, new ideas may receive less traction.
> (Shearer *et al.* 2018)

These power dynamics exist both within and between communities of researchers and policymakers and practitioners and create an additional dimension for brokers to navigate to bring together epistemic communities and connect them to policy conversations.

The Impact Initiative's brokerage approach had two key dimensions: firstly building alliances among researchers with similar agendas, and secondly connecting them to policy conversations. The first dimension is supported by evidence that indicates that connected epistemic communities can be key to influencing policy outcomes as their shared common values, beliefs, and concern for validity give their expertise credibility and increases their ability to make authoritative claims in political spaces (Haas 1992). Furthermore, it has been argued that 'the more internally cohesive an epistemic community, the more likely it will achieve a high degree of influence on policy outcomes' (Cross 2013: 138). We also noted the counter argument that highlights the limitations of homogeneous epistemic communities and their potential for failure in the policy space (Dunlop 2017; Löblová 2017). Thus, working with such a diverse portfolio of research we needed to explore the complementarities of the epistemic communities and their bodies of research and navigate the diverse perspectives to identify the points of cohesion around key policy questions.

The second dimension is based upon broad consensus that academic institutions and government agencies should nurture a variety of relationships to span the boundaries of research production and policy formulation in order to foster an interactive process in which research is informed by policy conversations and research findings are made more relevant to policymakers (van Kammen, de Savigny and Sewankambo 2006; Jessani *et al.* 2016, 2018). This boundary-spanning function is contingent upon observing overlapping networks to bridge the research policy divide and act as conduits to enhance engaged scholarship and promote informed decision making. Further value is added through sustained engagement plus a strong understanding of audiences and how they access and consume evidence. A 'focus on facilitating knowledge exchange means that they assess how different actors understand and process information, and aim to cultivate meaningful, trusted and sometimes sustained relationships among those involved' (Bednarek *et al.* 2018: 1179).

SNA is a valuable tool to understand research to policy linkages but there is acknowledgement that further work is needed to understand their evolution and how these relationships and the network structures they create can be strengthened over time (Jessani *et al.* 2016, 2018). Moreover, there is space for greater sharing of lessons from the evidence for the policy and practice community to explore ways to embed a brokerage function into the design of research systems and to bring together experiences across disciplines to address knowledge gaps about evidence production and use (Oliver and Boaz 2019). There is strong potential for SNA to provide a representation of pathways to policy impact by identifying key stakeholders and their relationships to visualise social structures and reveal informal relations and complex networks. However, there are limitations to effectively capturing knowledge flows and interpreting causation between network structures and outcomes. The insights generated by SNA are substantially strengthened when supplemented with qualitative data to explore the quality of the conversations that result from those connections and how they may or may not support evidence-informed policymaking (Reed, Bryce and Machen 2018; Jessani *et al.* 2017; Popelier 2018).

The literature discussed in this section primarily focuses on communities and samples of interactions that are much more specific than the Impact Initiative's

Throughout the Impact Initiative we have constantly pursued a balance between breadth of engagement, identifying opportunities and connections across the thematic scope of the multidimensional aspects of poverty alleviation, while supporting sustained interactivity that establishes trust between groups and identifies synergies around complementary agendas.

work to deliver brokerage at the breadth and scale of a global research portfolio that involved engagement across multiple themes, geographies, and levels, from local to national to regional. There are no definable boundaries to the potential policy and practitioner audiences for the scope of the evidence generated by the RLO and Joint Fund portfolios, which is a key factor in our efforts to both deliver

and map brokerage. Throughout the Impact Initiative we have constantly pursued a balance between breadth of engagement, identifying opportunities and connections across the thematic scope of the multidimensional aspects of poverty alleviation, while supporting sustained interactivity that establishes trust between groups and identifies synergies around complementary agendas.

3.3 Applications of SNA by the Impact Initiative

3.3.1 Building relationships and supporting synergies across evidence findings

Our first example is the application of SNA to demonstrate brokerage across clusters of ESRC-FCDO grantholders, using two-mode network maps to demonstrate how grantholders in the research portfolio engaged with the Impact Initiative through their involvement in the production of outputs or participation at events to generate insights into what brokerage across the portfolio looked like. The maps only included activities that involved more than one grant. As such, outputs that only involved individual grants, such as impact stories (see Section 5 of this report) were not included.

Each year of the Impact Initiative, these data demonstrated the evolution of the brokerage strategy to bring together bodies of knowledge within the portfolios we were supporting. In its first year the Impact Initiative was very much in a scoping phase, characterised by events and outputs that tried to engage with large sections of the portfolio and identify common areas for engagement. The emphasis was on understanding the scope of the portfolio and building relationships with grantholders, delivered through a flagship event in Pretoria to celebrate ten years of the Joint Fund,[2] as well as working on a number of evidence synthesis products around themes such as gender, children and youth, and health and development. There were also more targeted events, such as one focused on disability working with both Joint Fund and RLO researchers and non-academic partners, including from the South. This provided initial insights into the value of identifying and working across smaller clusters of research grants.

As the Impact Initiative moved into its second year, efforts to strengthen relationships among grantholders and to integrate the RLO and Joint Fund projects began to take shape. This resulted in grantholders' participation in a range of thematically focused outputs and events connecting grants and incorporating learning from multiple studies. These were a combination of Impact Initiative convened events,[3] for example on children and poverty research or research focusing on Bangladesh, and facilitating grantholders' participation at broader sectoral events such as the UK Digital Development Summit. The brokerage strategy was still in its infancy, and for the most part repeat interaction across grants was limited, although a small number of researchers began to interact with the Impact Initiative across a number of outputs, events, and

> As relationships were strengthened between the Impact Initiative and grantholders, brokerage within the portfolio was characterised by many grants engaging with multiple events and outputs and the emergence of different thematic sub-groups around issues such as health, gender, children and youth, and further developing work on education.

themes, connecting different areas of work and creating a cohesive network structure that suggested common threads across the diverse bodies of knowledge.

As relationships were strengthened between the Impact Initiative and grantholders, brokerage within the portfolio was characterised by many grants engaging with multiple events and outputs and the emergence of different thematic sub-groups around issues such as health, gender, children and youth, and further developing work on education. Group activities included Impact Initiative convened events such as Putting Children First[4] held in Ethiopia, and facilitating grantholders' participation at the Universal Health Care symposium[5] held in the UK and the United Nations Commission for the Status of Women (UNCSW)[6] event focusing on social protection held in the USA. These events also created spaces to hear directly from Southern researchers as an integral part of the strategy to connect and support researchers to profile their research and explore the nexus within and across thematic areas.

A key innovation in the Impact Initiative model at this point is the introduction of Research for Policy and Practice papers (R4PPs)[7] that bring together the evidence of a small group of grants on a specific policy theme (see Section 4 in this report). The SNA data (see, for example, Figure 3.1) demonstrate how R4PPs were frequently distributed at specific events that brought grantholders together to discuss their evidence with each other and with policy and practitioner audiences on panels or at other networking opportunities. For example, at a side panel session at the 62nd UNCSW entitled 'How can we improve the life choices for women in rural Africa?' two grantholders discussed their research with a leading international advocacy NGO (Georgalakis 2018). The R4PP *Women's Life Choices* was distributed at the event (Benson and Shephard 2018). The Zambia Minister for Gender, Auxilia Bupe Ponga, who attended the event, reflected on the value and utility of the evidence presented:

> *You can have policies and government programmes but ordinary people look to traditional leaders and communities for advice so when research is community based such as the ESRC-DFID research it is very valuable. Your research can help us understand what girls want and need. Research can provide knowledge validation around community understanding and views – because the research is*

> **A key innovation in the Impact Initiative model at this point is the introduction of Research for Policy and Practice papers (R4PPs) that bring together the evidence of a small group of grants on a specific policy theme.**

> *both qualitative and quantitative it can really add value to our understanding of the policy challenges we face in the Zambia.*
> (Ponga pers. comm. 2018)[8]

For Nicola Ansell, a grantholder who attended the event:

> *Participation at CSW was a valuable experience to connect our research to international policy audiences. We have existing relationships with policymakers in the countries where we work but it is much harder to connect at the international level. Working with the Impact Initiative has made me think more strategically about how I present my research and think about potential audiences to put greater emphasis on strengthening relationships and ensuring that my presentations are engaging.*
> (Ansell pers. comm. 2020)[9]

Over six years of using SNA data to report to our funder, the evolving network patterns suggested an increasing confidence and maturity in the brokerage role of the Impact Initiative and our ability to identify synergies and complementarity of the evidence within bodies of knowledge. Work to deliver annual workshops with the RLO grantholders were particularly beneficial for building relationships. The example in Figure 3.1 shows how our events and outputs delivered during Year 4 connected grants to contribute a strong policy offer that had more value to decision makers than would be possible by presenting the findings of any individual grant. This highlights the value of working with researchers to strengthen their epistemic communities and explore their different perspectives on the policy solutions in order to bring coherent and comprehensive messages into policy conversations.

Figure 3.1 Example of Impact Initiative engagement across grants reported in Year 4

Key
- Joint Fund
- RLO
- Events
- Outputs
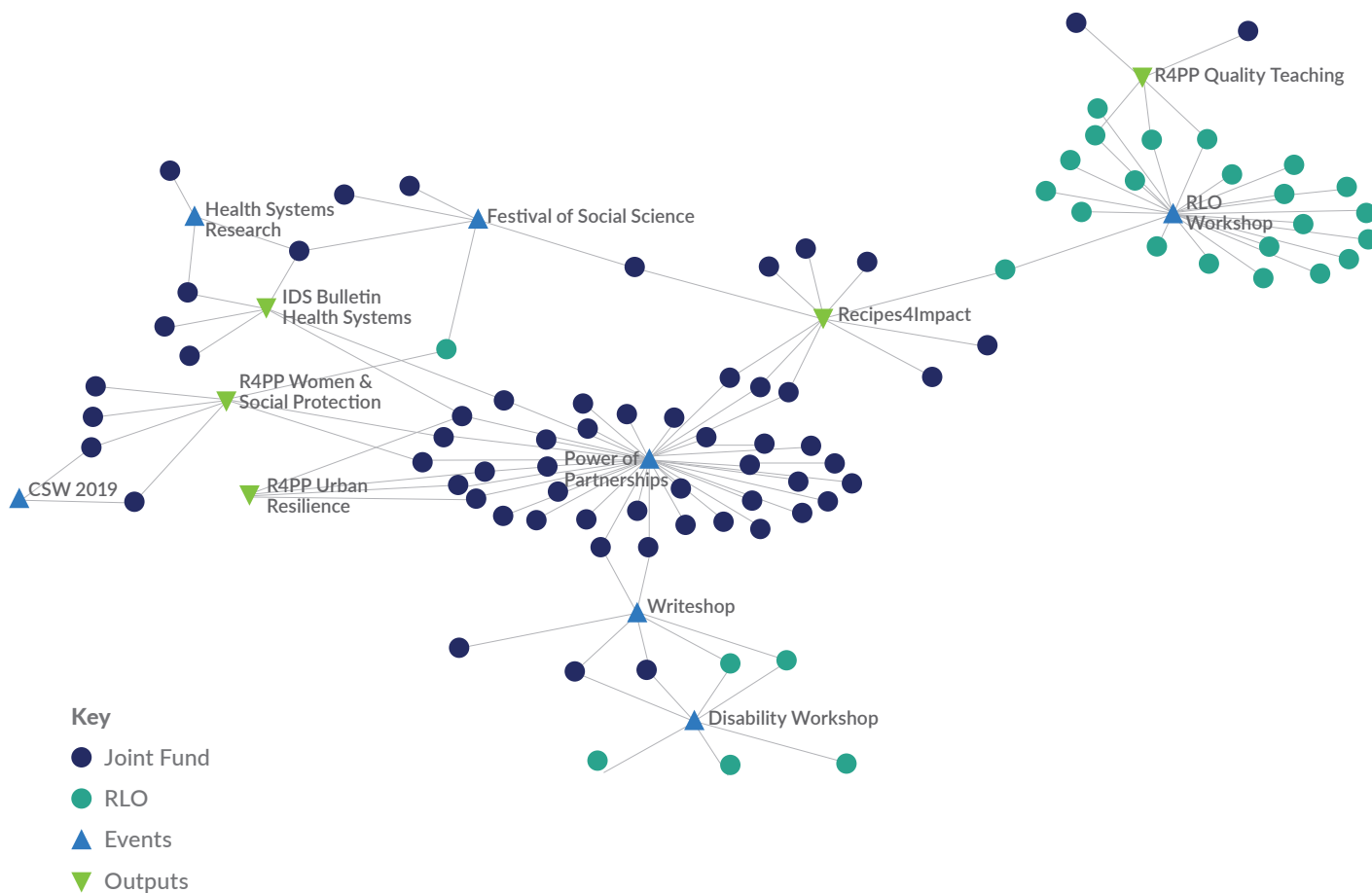
Source: Impact Initiative

A key moment in the Impact Initiative's brokerage journey was the second flagship event, the Power of Partnership conference in Delhi in 2018,[10] which brought together 100 researchers, policymakers, and practitioners to celebrate 13 years of the Joint Fund. The networking opportunities and relationships developed at this event and the policy engagement activities in Ethiopia, Somaliland, Uganda, and India that resulted from the connections made are discussed in greater detail in sub-section 3.3.3. Plans for a final flagship event during Year 6 were cut short by Covid-19. However, production of R4PPs continued and the planned reflection and consolidation activities on the range of impact pathways supported by the Impact Initiative during its six years moved online. While opportunities for face-to-face networking were lost, in some cases this shift to online events enabled broader policy audiences who were more easily able to participate in a 90-minute webinar than a multi-day event.

> The network-based approach demonstrates the importance of embedding this brokering and impact support function within a research portfolio in order to build strong relationships that can identify linkages and synergies across research themes and geographies.

The Impact Initiative used SNA to report to our funder on how our brokerage strategy was evolving as well as to inform our own reflections on the most agile approach to create and build on relationships across the RLO and Joint Fund portfolios. One of the key factors in this evolution was the building of the Impact Initiative's own relationships with grantholders and increasing knowledge of the research in the portfolios. This increased our ability to identify synergies and mechanisms for grantholders to collaborate on events and outputs. There was also increasing awareness of and trust in the Impact Initiative among grantholders, supporting greater willingness to engage and recognition of the value of the opportunities created to present and discuss their research with policy and practitioner audiences. The network-based approach demonstrates the importance of embedding this brokering and impact support function within a research portfolio in order to build strong relationships that can identify linkages and synergies across research themes and geographies. The following section will discuss how we built upon this foundation to deliver the other key objective of our brokerage strategy to strengthen and sustain connections between researchers, practitioners, and policymakers.

3.3.2 Sustained engagement to promote effective research–policy partnerships

To date, the Impact Initiative has organised 38 face-to-face and virtual events that have brought together 327 grantholders from across 187 Joint Fund and RLO grants, with 667 policymakers and practitioners and an additional 357 academics. These events span six years, four continents, and numerous thematic areas and share a specific emphasis on supporting research–policy networks. Of these, 106 ESRC-FCDO (DFID) grantholders from 71 Joint Fund and RLO projects participated in more than one event, alongside 86 policy actors and practitioners and an additional 35 academics and researchers. In this section, we use repeat participation at events as a proxy of the perceived value of the engagement, based on the assumption that busy professionals would not attend a second event if they had not seen tangible benefits from previous participation.

There was not one model for Impact Initiative events, and numerous examples have emerged over the course of the programme. These include: flagship events that brought together large cohorts of researchers; facilitating grantholder presentations and policy conversations at side events of global policy meetings such as the UNCSW and Health Systems Research; workshops to prepare focused policy messaging to feed into the Global Disability Summit; ensuring a strong research audience at All-Party Parliamentary Groups; creating networking opportunities for researchers and policymakers at conferences such as UKFIET International Conference on Education and Development[11] and Comparative and International Education Society (CIES);[12] collaborating on the ESRC Festival of Social Science in 2018 and 2019[13] as well as the focused events with national policymakers facilitated by the Dragons' Den collaborations (see Shephard 2019), discussed in more detail in sub-section 3.3.3. The key thing that these events had in common was creating opportunities to broker relationships between grantholders, policymakers, and practitioners and discuss how research evidence across multiple grants responded to policy questions and opportunities.

Figure 3.2 shows the network structure created by tracking the participation of individuals (researchers, policy actors, and practitioners) at multiple events as a proxy of the opportunities that the Impact Initiative has created to facilitate conversations around issues of common interest to identify mutual agendas and opportunities for collaboration. Attendance at an event does not offer any guarantee of relationships established or strengthened and cannot prove knowledge flows, but we believe repeat engagement increases the likelihood that connections and trust will develop. This is another two-mode network map that focuses on participants who attended three or more Impact Initiative events and Impact Initiative events that involved three or more grantholders as an example of how SNA can be used to demonstrate the concept of sustained interactivity.

Figure 3.2 Repeat participants at Impact Initiative events

Key

- Academics
- Policy Actor
- Practitioner
- Impact Initiative Events

Source: Impact Initiative

This network visualisation provides insights into how researchers, policy actors, and practitioners interacted across multiple events. It helps us to analyse a crucial dimension to the Impact Initiative's brokerage strategy, supporting sustained interaction and creating spaces for researchers and policy audiences to reconnect on specific issues over multiple years to develop trust and build networks that would last beyond the programme itself. Policy conversations around disability and children provide particularly strong examples of this multi-year engagement. For example, researchers who had met at a meeting of the Coalition to end Child Poverty in 2016[3] reconnected again at a three-day conference in Ethiopia in 2017[4] to discuss solutions for fighting child poverty in Africa; this network was built on in 2020 with an online meeting to discuss the benefits of engaging in global movements (Roelen and Shephard 2020). Similarly, those who attended the event on disability in Year 1 re-convened, together with key policy actors focused on education and disability, for a workshop in preparation for the Global Disability Summit. Along the way, targeted outputs including blogs, working papers, key issues guides, podcasts, and articles captured the evolution of these policy conversations. In some cases, this led to a clear commitment for action bringing together researchers, policy actors, and practitioners, as was the case for Putting Children First[4] and for the Global Disability Summit (Impact Initiative 2018a).

Using network data in this way does not provide empirical evidence of connections created, trust established, or use of evidence in specific research to policy relationships. Further follow-up and feedback from participants is still required to explore the value of the interactions and evidence shared in these events. For example, feedback from participants in the Putting Children First event included:

[The event] uncovered research on key issues around children in poverty that we wouldn't otherwise have been aware of, providing a platform and spotlight for Africa-related and -based research.
(Richard Morgan, Director of the Child Poverty Global Initiative, Save the Children, quoted in IDS 2018: 26)

[The] whole tenor of the conference has provided an additional dimension that we would have missed – the issue of child poverty in inequality. It has also helped to sharpen our messaging when we work with member states.
(Saurabh Sinha, Social Development Policy Division, United Nations Economic Commission for Africa, quoted in IDS 2018: 26)

The network data presented in this section provides insights into what brokering looks like at the level of global research portfolios, where policy networks are disparate and dispersed with multiple interacting factors at play in the research engagement process. Supporting sustained interactions across these groups requires identification of shared interests and agendas that motivate participation and demonstration of the quality of the evidence and value of shared reflection of key issues from the different perspectives of policy, practice, and research. Brokerage to support the desired outcome of evidence-informed policymaking requires time and trust. SNA can provide a snapshot of how relational structures evolve between different groups, but additional qualitative data are needed to fully understand and explore the quality and reciprocity of engagement through these interactions as well as the role of external contextual factors and opportunities to drive decision making.

3.3.3 Creating spaces to facilitate engagement and linkages between converging sectors

Our final example discusses how the Impact Initiative used SNA at events to explicitly encourage networking and provide a real-time visualisation of conversations and interactions between delegates. This approach was first used at the Power of Partnership event held in Delhi in 2018 and subsequently used at the Raising Learning Outcomes annual grantholder meeting in 2019. Both events also included the Dragons' Den methodology (from the eponymous television programme, also known as *Shark Tank*) that invited grantholders to work together to pitch ideas on potential collaborations with Impact Initiative support on policy-influencing activities, providing an additional incentive to create and establish connections.

In contrast to the above examples where we analysed our programme monitoring data using different social network software (Netdraw[14] and Kumu[15]), this exercise generated data using a licensed application called SumApp.[16] This provided all meeting delegates with a unique web link that took them to a profile page where they could share a photo and some basic biographical information about themselves and see who else was attending the event a few days before the meeting took place. A simple drop-down menu enabled all users to indicate their connections to other delegates and indicate people that they knew prior to the event in terms of whether they had previously

worked together, met, heard of their work, or had some social connection. This provided us with a baseline to track the level of new and strengthened relationships over the course of the event while introducing delegates to others who were attending the conference.

During the event delegates were encouraged to track the people that they had met with whom they had conversations of mutual interest or identified actions for follow-up after the event. The SumApp data was exported to Kumu, an online visualisation platform, and an updated network map was presented back to delegates in the opening plenary session each morning. This was used as a prompt to encourage people to log their conversations during the day, building momentum around the exercise and incentivising increased participation. The evolving network map was also made available on the project website (Impact Initiative 2018b). Delegates had the option to opt out of the visualisation and not appear in the map by name, although the vast majority were happy to appear in the maps as this also enabled them to locate themselves in the network.

Figure 3.3 Network map of strong relationships established at Power of Partnership conference (names removed for data protection)
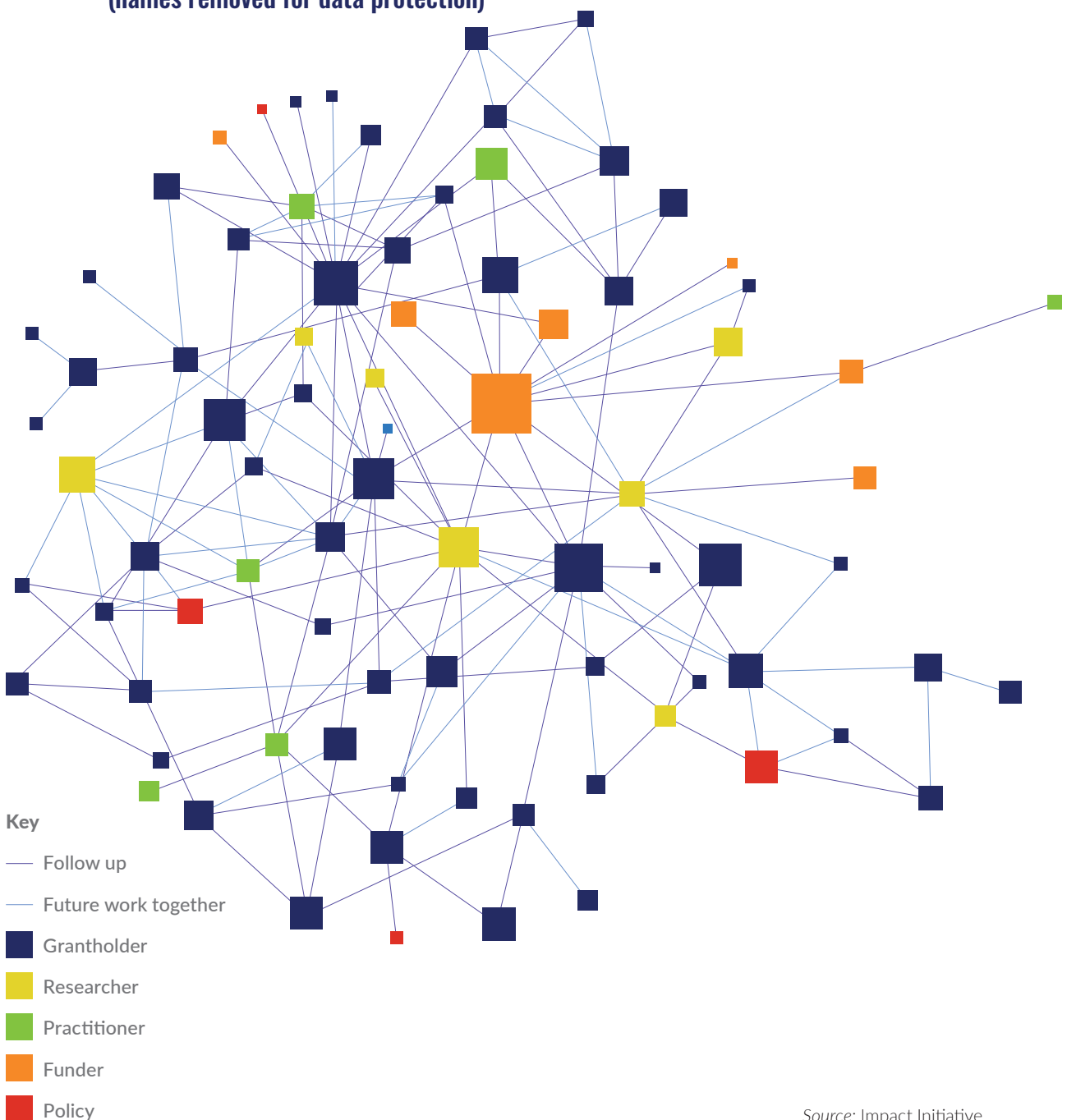
Source: Impact Initiative

During the three days of the event, 82 per cent of delegates actively used the tool and 95 per cent of delegates were mentioned. This generated a rich network data set of the different levels of conversations while making the networking value of the meeting explicit and encouraging delegates to be purposive in their conversations to identify future opportunities to collaborate. After the event, these data were filtered to remove connections of people who already had a strong connection or had previously worked together or reported conversations that were not linked to future collaboration or identifying shared areas of interest. Connections to the Impact Initiative team were also removed. This left 267 new connections made between 84 people who agreed to follow up and 73 people who planned to work together in the future. Figure 3.3 shows these 267 connections of which 187 had been made between actors who had not previously met and 68 between actors who had previously communicated but not met. This provides strong evidence that the Impact Initiative had facilitated new and strengthened existing relationships during the conference.

While the tool certainly encouraged proactive networking and generated a rich data set, it was a means and not an end and just one element in bringing grantholders, policymakers, and practitioners together at the event. Providing a concrete focus for these interactions in the form of a research to policy Dragons' Den encouraged researchers to formulate proposals for policy engagement opportunities in their coffee-break conversations and develop a pitch on a policy opportunity to a panel of policymakers and practitioners. These collaborative proposals led to a series of events that put evidence directly into the hands of policymakers addressing issues of youth and disability inclusion in Ethiopia, urban planning in Bangladesh, and transport to support food security in Uganda, each of which was supported by an R4PP. The networking and Dragons' Den combination was also used at the RLO annual meeting and generated a pitch from SCAFFOLD (Stakeholder Convergence

for Focus on Learner Disadvantage), which went on to deliver a national networking event (De and Samson 2020) and policy brief (De *et al.* 2019) to share emerging findings from seven projects to 39 policymakers and key stakeholders including government, NGOs, and journalists. Connections made at this event led to plans for one project to discuss their findings with state government officials and teachers, which were unfortunately postponed by Covid-19. However the evidence synthesis and policy conversations to date:

> *...will serve to substantively enhance our understanding of critical governance questions in education. I believe this work offers us the foundation for building new analytical frameworks and identifying new forms of practice that will serve to shift India's education system firmly in the direction of improving quality and inclusiveness.*
> (Yamini Aiyar, Chief Executive, Centre for Policy and Research, India, quoted in Impact Initiative 2020: 1)

These events provided a further platform to consolidate relationships between researchers and create new connections to policymakers, presenting their combined research evidence to feed into policy conversations at the national level.

While the majority of development professionals, be they academics, policymakers, or practitioners, acknowledge the networking value of events and meetings to make new connections and listen to new ideas, this example highlights the benefit of making that networking explicit and providing a visual reference that both encourages and supports connections. The connections created have led to collaborations to deliver the policy events mentioned above as well as establishing lasting connections among researchers who have gone on to collaborate on future funding calls, bringing together their different perspectives and building upon existing networks and evidence to continue to explore solutions to development challenges.

3.4 Conclusion

Our experience has demonstrated the value of network analysis to both monitor our performance and inform our strategy to deliver programme-level brokerage to strengthen relationships among researchers and create connections to policy

conversations. Tracking these interactions over the six years of the Impact Initiative has generated a valuable dataset to demonstrate the evolution of our brokerage pathways and reflect on the challenges of bringing people together across sectors and disciplines. The

use of two-mode or bipartite network mapping supports new learning around how knowledge-brokering projects can use events and outputs to build relationships and support sustained interaction around key thematic areas. Used systematically, SNA has potential to support brokerage initiatives to promote collaboration among research cohorts by building awareness of how relational structures can be leveraged to maximise evidence uptake. Although SNA data alone are insufficient evidence that brokerage and strengthened networks increase evidence use, these data can help us to better understand the different dimensions of brokerage and explore the relational patterns created by sustained interactions. This can help us to understand the ways in which research knowledge helps shape discourse and provide new conceptual understanding of both key issues and potential solutions.

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Endnotes

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

†† Illustration on page 27 © Jorge Martin 2021

1   A special issue of the *IDS Bulletin* on Exploring Research–Policy Partnerships in International Development (*IDS Bulletin* 50.1, June 2019) aimed to identify how partnerships focused on the production of policy-engaged research seek to achieve societal

impact and the challenges in these processes: DOI: [10.19088/1968-2019.100](10.19088/1968-2019.100)

2   [Lessons from a Decade's Research on Poverty: Innovation, Engagement and Impact Conference](), Pretoria, South Africa, 16–18 March 2016

3   A combination of Impact Initiative convened events took place including the three examples cited:

- Global Coalition to End Child Poverty Research Day, IDS, Brighton, UK, 18 November 2016

- UK Digital Development Summit 2017, London, 13 March 2017

- Bangladesh in Focus: Successful Development Through Inclusive and Sustainable Researchv, London, 27 February 2017

4   [Putting Children First: Identifying Solutions and Taking Action to Tackle Poverty and Inequality In Africa Conference](), Addis Ababa, Ethiopia, 23–25 October 2017

5   ['Making Universal Health Coverage a Reality by 2030: Evidence of What Works'](), satellite session at the 5th Global Symposium on Health Systems Research, Liverpool, UK, 8–12 October 2018

6   Side event on 13 March at CSW63: ['Does Poverty Stop at Employment?'](), New York, NY, 11–22 March 2019

7   The 12 Research for Policy and Practice papers (R4PPs) can be accessed from https://theimpactinitiative.net/resources

8   Impact Initiative interview with the attending Zambia Minister, Auxilia Bupe Ponga, at the Commission for the Status of Women in New York, NY, in March 2018.

9   Impact Initiative correspondence with Nicola Ansell, Brunel University (30 November 2020).

10 [Power of Partnership: Research to Alleviate Poverty Conference](), New Delhi, India, 3–5 December 2018

11 ['The Opportunities and Challenges of Translating Evidence into Policy and Practice'](), workshop on 18 September at UKFIET International Conference on Education and Development, Oxford, UK, 17–19 September 2019

12 ['The Role of Evidence in Advancing Policy to Raise Learning Outcomes Equitably for Sustainable Development'](), panel on 16 April at CIES 2019, San Francisco, CA, 14–18 April 2019

13 From [Period Poverty to Oil in Kenya in 2018]() and [Ending Pensioner Poverty in 2019]()

14 Netdraw, https://sites.google.com/site/netdrawsoftware/download

15 Kumu, https://kumu.io

16 SumApp, https://greaterthanthesum.com/sumapp

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An Approach to Synthesising Research Around Policy Agendas

Kelly Shephard and Elizabeth Tofaris

Summary

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

4.1 Introduction

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

> **A key approach to identifying research projects that combine to provide coherent messages for decision makers has been to produce a series of outputs called Research for Policy and Practice papers (R4PPs) that have enabled grantholders to respond to live policy issues.**

4.2 Research for Policy and Practice papers

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

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

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

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

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

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

Bangladesh and in face-to-face meetings. So, the process has been useful for us to think through our structure and audience
(Adger pers. comm. March 2019).[1]

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

The selection of... research explores the realities facing people for whom water insecurity is a daily threat. Experiences of managing reservoirs in Burkina Faso identifies the challenges and conflicts facing user groups. Meanwhile, in Ethiopia, a study of pastoralists looks at the inter-relationships between emotional wellbeing and water access. This small snapshot provides useful insights for what is needed to tackle the global water crisis.
(Impact Initiative 2019d: 1)

Events such as the Power of Partnership: Research to Alleviate Poverty conference,[2] which brought together over 100 participants to look at how the evidence coheres around key policy issues and the role of partnerships in achieving impact, also helped us to create spaces where researchers were able to identify synergies and collaborate. By facilitating in-depth discussions with the research teams they were able to better understand the nuances of critical issues and co-develop messages; many of these discussions have resulted in R4PPs and joint work around policy engagement events. One researcher who attended the Power of Partnership event went on to collaborate on the R4PP on water security. Speaking after the event, Marlene Elias from Bioversity International said, 'the really excellent part of this meeting was having my ideas challenged from multiple perspectives' (Elias pers. comm. August 2019[3]).

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

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

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

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

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4.3 Engaging policy communities with bodies of evidence

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

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

> **The output [an R4PP on quality teaching] was shared at an FCDO advisers event, with one Education Adviser reporting how useful they found the R4PPs and highlighting that the R4PP on quality teaching had been particularly useful for colleagues in the government as there was nothing of that kind on the topic that brought strands of research together.**

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

The R4PPs also demonstrated their relevance in the longer term. For example, the R4PP on disability and education was used and referenced at the Global Education All-Party Parliamentary Group (APPG) on Quality Inclusive Education for Children with Disabilities in July 2019[5] – a year on from the Global Disability Summit. Southern-based grantholders were encouraged to attend the meeting at which the R4PP was referred to as well as distributed. Drawing on the evidence showcased in the R4PP, panellists highlighted what governments must consider in order to ensure that children with disabilities benefit from quality education without discrimination or exclusion.

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

the Decade of Leaving No Girl Behind[16] (supported by the Global Partnership for Education, the Impact Initiative and RESULTS UK) met in the UK House of Commons to share progress and discuss what still needs to be done in order to move beyond the numbers of girls in school towards gender equality (Impact Initiative 2020a). Moderator Professor Pauline Rose (Co-Director of the Impact Initiative) used the R4PP to highlight the importance of education policy being informed by evidence. Highlighting the work of the Impact Initiative, she reminded the attendees that it is essential that evidence informs policy, recognising the R4PP profiled research on adapting measurements of gender equality and work looking at post-school prospects and aspirations for girls in remote areas.

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

> **The gender research has been particularly helpful. [It] overviews... the education landscape through different filters (disability and gender of particular interest in my case), with clear links to related content and blogs. They [R4PPs] have helped me to build connections in both fields and to see how the context in East Africa might compare to the case studies presented in the policy papers. These insights have supported my programme and intervention design.**
>
> **(Sinclair-Jones pers. comm. February 2020)[8]**

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

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

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

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

> The gender research has been particularly helpful. [It] overviews... the education landscape through different filters (disability and gender of particular interest in my case), with clear links to related content and blogs.They [R4PPs] have helped me to build connections in both fields and to see how the context in East Africa might compare to the case studies presented in the policy papers. These insights have supported my programme and intervention design.
> (Sinclair-Jones pers.comm. February 2020)[8]

Speaking on the experience of constructing the R4PP on urban community resilience (Impact Initiative 2019c), co-author and researcher Richard Giulianotti (Professor of Sociology, School of Sport, Exercise and Health Sciences, Loughborough University, UK) said, 'It brought together different scholars in the same field under a common theme, and it helped us to start discussing possible collaborations' (Giulianotti pers. comm. February 2019).[9] The resulting R4PP also drew on the networks of the participating authors and went on to be disseminated at diverse events that were attended by the different researchers involved. One set of researchers shared copies at a high-level urban planning event in Dhaka in 2019,[10] while another researcher and co-author shared it with a large group of Southern researchers attending a Development Frontiers symposium, on The Role of Youth, Sport and Cultural Interventions, in 2018.[11]

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

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

> ## Take-up figures bear testament that R4PPs have resulted in timely engagements that have wide-reaching appeal. The collection of 12 R4PP papers, which shares the research of 33 grants, has been downloaded more than 11,000 times.

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

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

4.4 Supporting synthesis across the portfolio

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

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

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

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

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

4.5 Conclusions

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

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

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

for the building of relationships and provides the space for mutual learning. Developing a common understanding of a given problem can help to develop a shared agenda for evidence-informed change and can help to cement relations between policy advisers, practitioners, and researchers (Georgalakis 2020).

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* This section was written by Kelly Shephard, Head of Knowledge, Impact and Policy, IDS and Elizabeth Tofaris, Communications Officer at the REAL Centre, Faculty of Education, University of Cambridge. Further editorial support was provided by Emma Greengrass, Editorial Coordinator, IDS.

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

†† Illustration on page 43 © Jorge Martin 2021

1   Response from Neil Adger to Impact Initiative survey submitted March 2019

2   The Power of Partnership: Research to Alleviate Poverty conference took place in New Delhi, India from 3 to 5 December 2018. The event focused on the ESRC-FCDO Joint Fund for Poverty Alleviation Research and explored how evidence coheres around key policy issues and the role of partnerships in achieving impact.

3   Interview with Marlene Elias, August 2019

4   The Impact Initiative has produced the following series of ESRC-FCDO Research for Policy and Practice (R4PP) papers – this collection of papers can be accessed at: https://theimpactinitiative.net/resources:

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

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

> *Enseñanza de Calidad*: Spanish translation of Quality Teaching

> *Género y educación:* Spanish translation of Gender and Education

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

5   APPG on Global Education, 'Quality Inclusive Education for Children with Disabilities', took place on 9 July 2019.

6   APPG on Global Education, 'Marking International Day for Education: Heralding the Decade for Leaving No Girl Behind', took place on 22 January 2020,

7   APPG on Global Education met to discuss the global teacher crisis on 27 November 2018.

8   Email correspondence with Catherine Sinclair-Jones dated 17 February 2020

9   Impact Initiative interview with Richard Giulianotti, Professor of Sociology, School of Sport, Exercise and Health Sciences, Loughborough University, UK, February 2019

10   Hosted as part of the Safe And Sustainable Cities: Human Security, Migration and Wellbeing project, led by University of Exeter

11   Hosted as part of the New Development Frontiers? The Role of Youth, Sport and Cultural Interventions project, led by Loughborough University

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Evidencing Impact Across a Diverse Portfolio of Research

Kelly Shephard and Vivienne Benson

Summary

This section sets out the approach undertaken by the Impact Initiative to capture and communicate the impact of research projects as part of its knowledge-brokering role for the Economic and Social Research Council-Foreign, Commonwealth & Development Office (ESRC-FCDO) Strategic Partnership. It describes how diverse dimensions of impact were recognised and articulated and the value of micro-impacts. In contrast to other approaches, including the UK's Research Excellence Framework and its Impact Case Studies, the Impact Initiative worked collaboratively with researchers at all stages of their projects' life cycles, identifying and evidencing changes that research processes have contributed to. The benefit of a narrative-based approach that structured impact stories around a challenge or problem, a research process, and subsequent changes was further enhanced by a very concise, accessible format. For knowledge brokers and donors the key lesson is around the value of a collective, programme-level approach to developing impact stories. The Impact Initiative's collection of these is impressively broad and combines rigour with accessibility. As a body of work it provides a unique insight into how impact is understood and achieved in development studies, and the process of building this collection has created a rich learning environment.

5.1 Introduction

This section documents the Impact Initiative's approach to identifying stories of impact across a broad portfolio of development research and packaging them in accessible ways. This is important learning at a time when UK Overseas Development Aid is coming under increasing scrutiny and globally the expectations of research donors and the wider public around the measurable, visible impact of evidence continues to increase (Parsons *et al.* 2020). In the absence of large programme evaluation budgets, it is becoming increasingly common for research organisations and donors to produce narratives that seek to identify, with some supporting evidence, the difference they are making. As an often-contested concept, evidencing research impact can be a challenge. For the ESRC-FCDO Strategic Partnership-funded portfolio of research projects the publication of a series of impact stories has demonstrated that impact happens in many ways and sometimes in small steps. The 24 stories span education, conflict, health, urbanisation, poverty and inequality, and many other topics across South Asia, Africa, and Latin America. They illustrate that, despite the complexity of evidence impact processes,

> **Despite the complexity of evidence impact processes, programme-level knowledge brokers are in a strong position to work collaboratively with researchers to showcase rich bodies of impact.**

programme-level knowledge brokers are in a strong position to work collaboratively with researchers to showcase rich bodies of impact. We also explore how a process of identifying impact stories that is not constrained by project life cycles can build researchers' capacity and confidence to engage with the impact agenda and provide valuable learning for those designing research projects and seeking to maximise their impact.

5.2 Why telling stories of impact is important

The language and art of impact is highly complex and shaped by widely differing understandings of how change happens. Subsequently, capturing and communicating impact can be elusive and often hard to visualise or articulate. The Impact Initiative communications team were tasked with developing practical tools and processes to tell the stories of research impact in clear and compelling ways, without diminishing the content.

This presented challenges, as the concept of impact is often contested and debated – so how could it be possible to document demonstrable impact when there is debate on what impact looks like? In addition, even if we were able to agree on definitions of impact, many researchers are hesitant to claim that their project has achieved it. Of particular concern is the issue of attribution. In a complex world in which there is unlikely to be a simple linear relationship between a project and a societal change can anything be claimed? These challenges forced us to focus our attention away from big outcomes to processes and changes that suggested there were compelling narratives to be told. The process of the storytelling revolved around discussions with the research teams and identifying those small impacts that contribute to a bigger picture. This might be a discernible shift in the perspectives of a particular stakeholder group over time, a change in critical relationships, or an increase in the capacity of key groups to engage with research. The stories that emerged were tangible and honest and added up to an exciting description of how development research makes a difference in the world.

We started by taking inspiration from the work of others (Tilley, Ball and Cassidy 2018; Shaxson 2018). We looked at the process and formats that the Research Excellence Framework (REF) Impact Case Studies (ICS) take. This is the system that assesses the quality of research across all UK universities. Here the ICS narrative describes how research, conducted during a specific timeframe at a named institution, resulted in a change and had an effect on or benefited culture, the economy, the environment, health, public policy, quality of life, or society, using qualitative and quantitative evidence.

While these direct approaches have their place, and efforts to simplify impacts can make it easier to capture and tell the story, they can miss the

> **One analogy might be to think of 'impact' similar to a pot of water boiling over: most of what happens is gently heating, bubbling and gaining energy over time – we can think of these as incremental outcomes. We see the impact when the water finally boils over'.**

Nasreen Jessani, Senior Researcher, Centre for Evidence Based Health Care, Stellenbosch University, and Faculty, John Hopkins University Bloomberg School of Public Health (pers. comm. 2020)[1]

point. The focus on a specific timeframe and the attempt to demonstrate how one project impacted 'culture' or 'economics' highlight the tension between attribution and contribution. We realised that our stories could not, and should not, attempt to claim one project as the sole reason for social change. Instead, our stories would demonstrate the different dimensions of impact that responded to the definitions set out by the ESRC Impact Toolkit (ESRC 2020a; ESRC 2020b). We were also inspired by the simple techniques and clear impact success stories presented by organisations such as UK Collaborative on Development Research (UKCDR 2020) and FCDO's (formerly Department for International Development's) Stories of Change (DFID 2014). We recognised that in the context of social science, and its ability to influence meaningful social change, it is essential to embrace the diverse 'ingredients' that contribute to shaping the bigger picture.

To identify those moments, we knew that it would take time to build trust and develop relationships with research teams so that we could have honest discussions. We started from a belief in the need to work collaboratively with the researchers. Our approach to co-creating stories of impact was created

partly to strengthen skills and networks. We did not focus solely on projects that had recently closed or reached some critical point of uptake (however one defines this). Instead, we engaged with anyone who had an interesting story to tell and encouraged researchers to share incremental change and learning. Both live and long-closed projects had important learning to share around responding to emerging policy agendas, influencing practice, and engaging marginalised communities.

The result has been that we have produced a series of impact products – a collection of stories, chapters, and films.[2] Behind the production of these are strong relationships that have been built between researchers, with a view to deepening our collective understanding and appreciation for research uptake and impact. It is our hope that these connections and ways of working will continue to feed into their research long after the Impact Initiative programme

has finished. It has not been a linear path, there have been challenges and diversions along the way, but it has been one of shared learning and demonstrates an important approach to supporting and promoting the impact across such a diverse research portfolio.

> **It has not been a linear path, there have been challenges and diversions along the way, but it has been one of shared learning and demonstrates an important approach to supporting and promoting the impact across such a diverse research portfolio.**
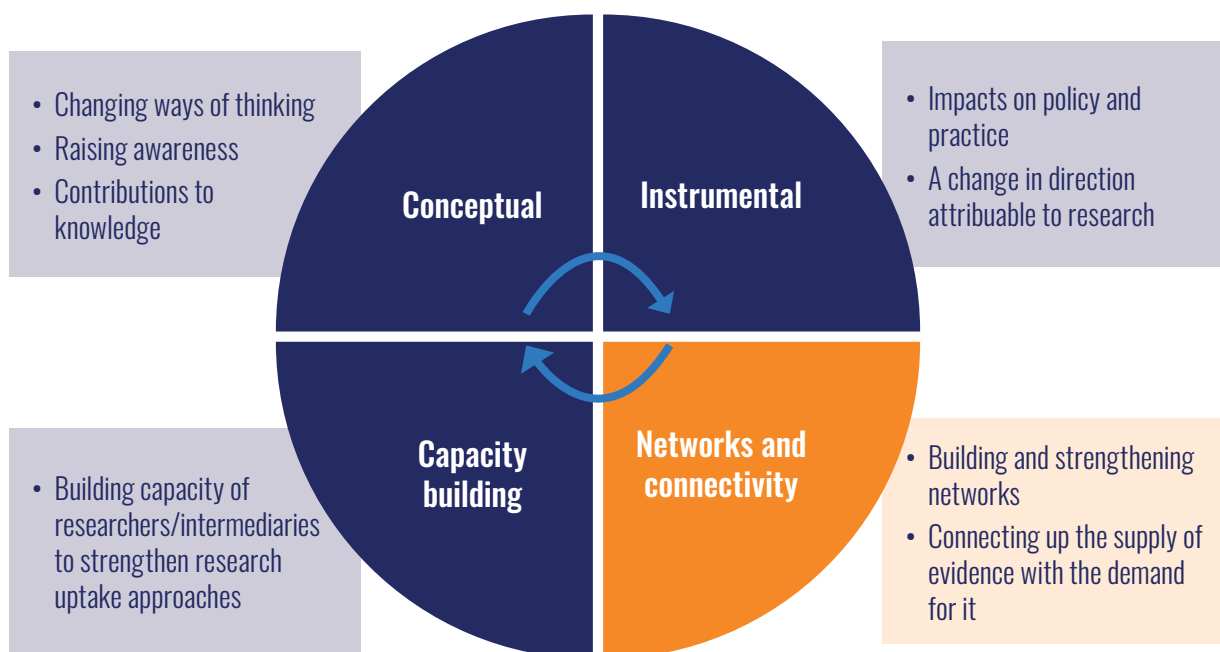
5.3 How to tell stories of impact

The importance of compelling narratives that make the impact of research less abstract and more concrete has been an important feature of impact assessment in academia (Davidson 2017). Discourse analysis of the highest scoring impact case studies from the UK's REF showed that case studies that clearly articulated benefits to specific groups and provided evidence of this scored much better (Reichard *et al.* 2020). The impact stories that we have produced are clear and succinct and draw on supporting evidence. To make them accessible, we intentionally kept them short (two pages) and we stuck to a simple structure, with terms of reference developed and shared with each of the authors, who were always members of the research teams. The stories focus on the issue that the research planned to address, the action taken, including how they overcame any challenges, and the impact that the research had. Importantly, they all include further reading to evidence the impact in detail. We made it clear that this narrative approach was not a rigorous evaluative exercise. However, despite their brevity, the impact stories are told in a way that ensures that the research activity and subsequent impact is neither simplified nor exaggerated. They all provide links to further studies and background reading to add to their depth.

When it came to writing the impact stories, we encouraged researchers to demonstrate their impact by identifying at least two modes of impact as set out within the ESRC-FCDO Guiding Principles on uptake, impact, and communication of research framework of impact (Figure 5.1). The Impact Initiative had modified this to include a fourth mode of impact around strengthening networks and relationships, which reflects our understanding of impact as a process rather than simply as a set of outcomes:

1 Instrumental: impacts on policy and practice – a change in direction attributable to research
2 Conceptual: changing ways of thinking, raising awareness and contributions to knowledge
3 Capacity building: building capacity of researchers and intermediaries to strengthen research uptake approaches
4 Networks and connectivity: building and strengthening networks, connecting the supply of evidence with the demand for it.

We encouraged the researchers to think about their intended impacts and the pathways they were pursuing to achieve them. In having these conversations we honed in on the 'micro-impacts' (Clark and Goodier 2019) – that conversation with a politician, that email from an adviser at an international

Figure 5.1 The Impact Initiative's wheel of impact

- Changing ways of thinking
- Raising awareness
- Contributions to knowledge

Conceptual

Instrumental

- Impacts on policy and practice
- A change in direction attribuable to research

Capacity building

Networks and connectivity

- Building capacity of researchers/intermediaries to strengthen research uptake approaches

- Building and strengthening networks
- Connecting up the supply of evidence with the demand for it

Source: Georgalakis and Rose (2019: 2).

agency, a line in a policy document, a new committee with diverse representation in a village. Our view was that, across the research portfolio and in the broader policy agendas, these micro-impacts add up to more than the sum of their parts. The list was surprisingly broad, and surprisingly tangible. We then focused on how this impact could be presented in a narrative structure and evidenced with images, quotes, and further information.

Specific types of evidence included:

- Reference to the research in policy documents
- Reference to research by policymakers, e.g. letters from ministers or officials supporting the story being told
- Reference to research in practitioner guides
- National statistics that give indicative evidence to support the story
- Survey evidence from individuals who have benefited.

The process of writing these stories very much depended on the capacity of the researcher to articulate their story. In some cases, researchers took the story and ran with it with little more than copy-editing and support to layout the template; at other times it was led by a communications and impact professional and involved a lot of back and forth between the communications professional and the researcher to really get to the heart of the story.

Frequently, projects had only anecdotal evidence of impact, and considerable time was spent by the Impact Initiative in following up with stakeholders to obtain quotes and other validations of claimed changes in capacity, understanding, and evidence use.

Working across so many stories led to us producing our Impact story recipe book (Impact Initiative 2018)[3] as a way of demonstrating a variety of ingredients for impact. At workshops we also encouraged researchers to use our handy blank template at the back of the book so that they could practise telling their own stories of impact.

> *I presented the impact story[4] in my own words and style in dialogues with government leaders and practitioners in Sierra Leone, Kenya, Tanzania, Uganda and India on a continual basis over the past three years. It helped people appreciate the difference between top-down and bottom-up approaches and to see the value-added of the latter.*
> (Michael Wessells, Professor of Clinical Population and Family Health, Columbia Mailman School of Public Health, and Poverty Alleviation Research Fund Grantholder, pers. comm. 2019).[5]

Collectively the stories demonstrate the multiple pathways and approaches that can be taken to achieve impact. Notably, despite the simple structure, no two stories are the same. They also present the richness and diversity of the projects funded by the

ESRC-FCDO Strategic Partnership. This accumulation of stories highlighted context and key moments of change and understanding but were also accessible in tone and language. As Mandu Reid, Leader of the UK Women's Equality Party, said when reflecting on the portfolio of research on gender, 'to meaningfully tackle persistent poverty – particularly how it manifests for women – [research] must encompass a much broader range of considerations. The selection of ESRC-DFID-funded research presents pertinent examples of how this applies in practice' (Impact Initiative 2019c). This point is crucial, as we know that stories tap into the way that people make decisions. Simple storytelling mechanisms of plot, central characters, and context help transcend complex information for time-poor people (SPARKOL 2018). They also help bring the complex research to life, making it more relatable and inspiring change. In humanising the stories, we are able to contribute to a richer understanding of complex development issues. The accumulation of smaller impacts within a body of work using this narrative style provides a powerful record of how investments in social science contribute to development and learning.

5.4 Moments of impact and change

We fully acknowledge that evidence comes in many forms, and impact can appear in so many ways. Pamela Mason, Strategic Lead for International Development, ESRC, explained in an interview[6] with the Impact Initiative that the potential impact of research goes way beyond policy and different types of impact:

> We talk about policy change as kind of this gold standard impact… It has the most far-reaching consequences, but actually much more incremental impact are equally valuable. Capacity building, training people to conduct research but also in terms of practice in their own work and their own skill-set, changing the discourse around the subject and increasing the body of knowledge and the understanding that we have about a policy related subject, but not necessarily going so far as changing that policy.
> (Mason 2018)

We worked closely with the researchers to identify those moments of impact and change, while also acknowledging that impact within a small project is more often about contributing to change as opposed to 'owning' it. At a macro level this led us to look at the different research methods and activities that projects used to bring about change at various points (i.e. not just thinking about impact in terms of influencing policy alone, but the journey of impact overall). This informed our work to identify a set of six practices (Clark and Goodier 2019) that could lead to research impact. At the micro level, we felt it was really important to document the different levels of impact – from local to global, conceptual to instrumental; the collection of impact stories presents a picture of a programme's activities and contributions to impact over time.

While written stories have a long shelf life, the spoken word often has the added advantage of giving a hint at the people behind the story. At the Power of Partnership: Research to Alleviate Poverty event in 2018,[7] we approached storytelling from another angle. We invited participants to share their stories in the impact storytelling booth. The 'booth' was in fact a cosy side room that provided a space to break away and think about the basics – we asked individuals to record their name and present a brief overview of their project and why it mattered, being clear about the challenge the research addressed, and what impact or intended impact happened as a result.

The storytellers only had three minutes to tell the story before the app on the iPad stopped recording

"We felt it was really important to document the different levels of impact – from local to global, conceptual to instrumental; the collection of impact stories presents a picture of a programme's activities and contributions to impact over time."

(Sahle 2018). What could possibly go wrong? It turns out not much actually – once people were in the room they were happy to tell their stories and sometimes they even recorded one story and then came back to tell it again from another angle or, occasionally, another language. These are not polished videos, but they allowed researchers to tell their stories out loud and in just three minutes. This encouraged the researchers to think about those

moments of impact and the changes they had made in their research that were really worth sharing. After the videos were complete, we checked to see if new stories had been told and in a few cases we went on to work with the researchers to capture the impact in written accounts. It was also a moment in time to hear these stories and see if there were shared experiences, overlaps, and impacts that pointed to the bigger picture of impact.

5.5 Dissemination and engagement

Every output produced by the Impact Initiative has been accompanied by an engagement plan. This makes it clear who needs to hear the story and what influence you hope the research findings can have. This distinction between dissemination and engagement is important. In moving away from the linear 'pump it and share' model of dissemination, we entered a dialogue with researchers to share and build better understanding of the issues. Often this helped to determine follow-on formats such as blogs or videos – most of the time it provided new networks and rich discussions.

It is also important to note that, while the Impact Initiative is active on social media and has connections with different networks to disseminate, and media relationships, often the most effective way to engage is for the researchers to share their messages and stories themselves. This is echoed in the feedback from grantholders – when they have their impact story or Research for Policy and Practice paper in hand, they are equipped with a concise and powerful message to give to different stakeholders.

Victoria Brown, Education, Monitoring and Evaluation, and Development Consultant, and Raising Local Outcomes (RLO) grantholder, explained that her impact story[8] was:

> *A great way to succinctly share our results and learnings and engage policymakers, practitioners, and other researchers in dialogue about why mother tongue education matters – and why it should be further funded and researched. We have used these findings to help influence the next phase of early grade reading programming in Uganda, and to inform bilateral programming from USAID and DFID, for example, as the next phase of reading programming*

is designed for Uganda. We have also shared this with the IGC and Uganda's National Planning Authority during the ongoing design of Uganda's new National Development Plan, which has a large focus on education.
(Brown pers. comm. 2019).[9]

Ricardo Safra de Campos, Lecturer in Human Geography at University of Exeter and RLO grantholder, met and subsequently collaborated with other researchers funded by the Joint Fund at the Power of Partnership event in 2018. They went on (supported by the Initiative) to host a policy event on the cross-cutting issues they work on. He describes not only the impact of the published outputs but also the fact that he was well positioned with these outputs to get them into the hands of the people that they wanted to influence:

> *The Impact Story[10] along with the Research for Policy and Practice paper[11] have enabled dialogue with other researchers working on the field of migration, displacement and urbanisation. Those outputs have also facilitated engagement with urban planners interested in using participatory methods for urban governance. The Impact Story has been useful in following on funded work which is engaging with urban planners in Chattogram, Bangladesh. It was a useful instrument to show evidence of the impact of our research among policy and planning circles. The document was shared with both Minister of Planning and Disaster Management of Bangladesh as well as other national and international stakeholders.*
(Safra de Campos pers. comm. 2019).[12]

A recurring challenge raised by researchers around the impact agenda is that the 'big moment' to share their research might come before they are ready, or long after they have shared their findings. It is here

that we see the strongest justification for programme-level knowledge-brokering functions supporting researchers to be better positioned and prepared to share their learning irrespective of project life cycles. If the moment came before the research was complete we needed to work with researchers to share what they already knew, being sure not to overclaim. If the moment came long after the research had finished, it was our job to go back to the researchers and provide opportunities to revisit, collaborate, and contribute their insights to a live debate.

This was true for the impact story *Keeping African Girls in School with Better Sanitary Care* (Dolan and Tofaris 2018).[13] We drew on this story and worked with the lead researcher at several points – to feed into engagement at the 63rd UN Commission on the Status of Women in 2019 and media engagement as the topic arose in conversation internationally and in the UK. It also presented the opportunity to link the researcher with other researchers and policy actors working on connected issues. This story was also included in the *Rethinking Impact: Applying the Gender Lens* collection (Impact Initiative 2019a).[14] This pack collected many of the impact stories, policy papers, media pieces, and other resources that in some way addressed gender equality. By including the story in this new compilation, we were able to give it an additional push to new audiences. For example, this pack was shared at events coordinated by the UK Department for Education Period Poverty Taskforce, demonstrating the importance of mainstreaming gender throughout research and policymaking.

5.6 Conclusion

Stories are powerful, and told in the right way they can spark ideas and emotions and bring about change. While there are many ways to document research impact, often they can be perfunctory and very narrow in their focus. In focusing on the end impact goal, impact stories can miss the crucial moments of incremental and procedural change that occur over time. By creating clear, simple, but effective storytelling processes we have enabled researchers to tell those stories. Yet beyond the storytelling itself, the Impact Initiative has helped to build lasting relationships while deepening understanding of outcomes and the multiple processes employed to support wider learning.[15,16] It is also our belief that this approach has encouraged and enthused many in the academic community to see how they can tell their stories of impact and that often those stories will have value and use well beyond the lifetime of the original research project.

Working across diverse portfolios of research, knowledge-brokerage programmes such as the Impact Initiative are in a prime position to help researchers step back, spot connections, and produce compelling impact narratives. Not only do these stories highlight the achievements of individual projects, they collectively generate deep learning on the impact agenda itself and provide a compelling justification for investing in research to improve the lives of people around the world.

> **Stories are powerful, and told in the right way they can spark ideas and emotions and bring about change. While there are many ways to document research impact, often they can be perfunctory and very narrow in their focus. In focusing on the end impact goal, impact stories can miss the crucial moments of incremental and procedural change that occur over time. By creating clear, simple, but effective storytelling processes we have enabled researchers to tell those stories.**

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Endnotes

* This section was written by Kelly Shephard, Head of Knowledge, Impact and Policy, and Vivienne Benson, Communications and Impact Officer, at IDS. Further editorial support was provided by Emma Greengrass, Editorial Coordinator at IDS.

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

†† Illustration on page 53 © Jorge Martin 2021

1   Interview with Nasreen Jessani, 26 August 2020

2   The Impact Initiative has produced a series of impact products – this collection of stories, chapters and films can be accessed at https://theimpactinitiative.net/resources.

3   *Recipes for Impact: Feed, Thinking, Nourish, Change* (Impact Initiative 2018) presents a selection of impact stories to show a snapshot of the research and to highlight the multiple, unique, and sometimes surprising paths to achieving impact.

4   *Reducing Teenage Pregnancy in Sierra Leone* (Georgalakis and Wessells 2017) explores how research directly involving teenagers and their families in Sierra Leone has reduced teenage pregnancy and helped pave the way for a new community-friendly Child and Family Welfare Policy.

5   Response from Michael Wessells to Impact Initiative survey, submitted 4 December 2019

6   Pamela Mason, ESRC, talks about how research evidence can influence change in a short interview which took place at the Power of Partnership: Research to Alleviate Poverty conference (Mason 2018).

7   The Power of Partnership: Research to Alleviate Poverty conference took place in New Delhi, India, 3–5 December 2018. The event focused on the ESRC-FCDO Joint Fund for Poverty Alleviation Research and explored how evidence coheres around key policy issues and the role of partnerships in achieving impact.

8   *Mother Tongue Education Improves Literacy in Uganda* (Tofaris and Thornton 2018) presents research evidence demonstrating that the provision of teacher support and educational resources produced in local languages can lead to large learning gains in rural, under-resourced and overcrowded classrooms.

9   Response from Victoria Brown to Impact Initiative survey, submitted 8 December 2019

10   *Understanding Displacement and Urbanisation in Somali Cities* (Bakonyi and Chonka 2019) captures the experiences of displaced people in four Somali cities and explores impact from providing spaces for them to raise their concerns with policymakers.

11   *Urban Community Resilience* (Impact Initiative 2019b) focuses on urban community resilience drawing on research from Bangladesh, Cape Verde, Nepal, Nigeria, South Sudan, and Timor-Leste.

12   Response from Ricardo Safra de Campos to Impact Initiative survey, submitted 5 December 2019

13   *Keeping African Girls in School with Better Sanitary Care* (Dolan and Tofaris 2018) shows that providing free sanitary products and lessons about puberty to girls in rural Uganda contributes towards an increase in their attendance at school.

14   *Rethinking Impact: Applying the Gender Lens* (Impact Initiative 2019a): this collection profiles research and impact that explicitly focuses on gender inequality as well as on projects where the gender dynamics emerged during the course of the work.

15   *Opportunities, Ownership and Tailored Outputs: How to Respond to Demand for Evidence* (Nelson 2016) recommends ways in which researchers can cultivate a demand for evidence, recognise and create opportunities to influence policy and practice, and nimbly respond to opportunities when they arise.

16   *The Social Realities of Knowledge for Development: Sharing Lessons of Improving Development Processes with Evidence* (Georgalakis *et al.* 2017) provides analysis of the critical challenges faced by organisations and individuals involved in evidence-informed development through a diverse set of case studies and think pieces.

Annexe: Impact Stories

The following impact narratives highlight examples of how the Impact Initiative created opportunities to connect researchers with policymakers and practitioners to present evidence and influence policy conversations. These impact narratives were developed for annual funder reporting of the Impact Initiative's goal-level achievements.

Impact Narrative 1: Bringing evidence to a non-academic audience at the UNCSW62 – March 2018

At the 62nd UN Commission for the Status of Women (UNCSW62), the Impact Initiative hosted a panel discussion[1] as part of the NGO parallel events on 'Improving Women's Life Choices'. Chaired by Thokozile Rudvidzo, Director of Social Development in the United Nations Economic Commission for Africa (UNECA) Policy Division, the discussion drew on evidence from Raising Learning Outcomes (RLO) and Joint Fund for Poverty Alleviation Research (Joint Fund) grantholders and a senior practitioner from World Vision International. This brought to life the messages of a Research for Policy and Practice paper (R4PP) *Women's Life Choices* (Benson and Shephard 2018) which was disseminated at the discussion.

The event was attended by just over 30 NGO activists, civil society organisations and policy actors. Most notable was the attendance of Auxilia Bupe Ponga, Permanent Secretary of Zambia's Ministry of Gender and representative to the UN. Ponga said that she found the evidence presented very relevant to her work, particularly the discussion on child marriage and the need for a more creative school curriculum to improve girls' life choices. She particularly appreciated the synthesis of evidence from across a variety of themes that connect around a core policy issue and found it very useful to see the linkages between different issues such as access to transport and education (Ponga pers. comm. 2018).[2]

Impact Narrative 2: Building bridges at the Putting Children First conference, Addis Ababa, October 2017

The Global Coalition to End Child Poverty and the Impact Initiative co-hosted a pan-African conference to bring together coalition members with academics and policy actors and donors. The Putting Children First: Identifying Solutions and Taking Action to Tackle Poverty and Inequality in Africa conference[3] took place at UNECA in Ethiopia and hosted over 200 delegates. The event bridged divides across sectors, disciplines, policy, practice, and research and provided an opportunity to build lasting relationships. The conference featured research from 22 Economic and Social Research Council-Department for International Development (ESRC-DFID) (since 2020 ESRC-FCDO – Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office) grantholders representing 15 projects across both the RLO and the Joint Fund and including 10 Southern research partners.

The conference was highly policy-orientated but also incorporated Impact Initiative participatory sessions on evidence-informed decision making and a panel debate on research to policy processes.

Richard Morgan, Director of the Child Poverty Global Initiative, Save the Children, Putting Children First Co-Organiser, said the conference: 'Uncovered research that we wouldn't have been aware of or known about, providing a platform and spotlight for African-related and -based research. It provided an addition to knowledge' (Morgan pers. comm. December 2017).[4]

Impact Narrative 3: Policy collaborations emerge from participation in the world's largest health systems event

At the Fifth Global Symposium on Health Systems Research (HSR2018) in Liverpool, the Impact Initiative convened a satellite session[5] highlighting evidence of scalable, tangible policy

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ideas and innovations that could help make 'health for all' a reality by 2030. The panellists included two grantholders, funded by the Joint Fund, and a senior policymaker from the Ministry of Health in Liberia. Following the event, GAVI, the Vaccine Alliance, included the research findings in its 2019 strategic planning for Mozambique. A representative from GAVI was subsequently invited to integrate the Civil Society Advisory Group of GAVI in the country. N'Weti, a Mozambican non-profit organisation, and its local partners in Mozambique were invited to attend the Community of Practitioners on Accountability and Social Action in Health conference in Delhi. The invitation was also extended to the Brazilian partners.

This provides an example of the power of networking and connection through face-to-face Impact Initiative events and highlights how the sharing of evidence in such fora can build relationships between stakeholders that open up new paths to evidence use and behaviour change.

Impact Narrative 4: UK Disability Summit informed by the ESRC-DFID Raising Learning Outcomes Programme

Responding to increased policy, programme, and research focus on disability, the Impact Initiative's work on disability and inclusive education came to a climax with direct involvement of ESRC-DFID grantholders at the 2018 Global Disability Summit. Facilitating the partnership of multiple stakeholders on global policy processes meant that evidence was used at the macro level to shape global policies and legislations inclusive of the needs of persons with disabilities.

Ian Attfield, Senior Education Adviser, South Asia Region, DFID, noted:

> This was a space to really engage with researchers and practitioners and think through the detail of joint ideas and common messaging around disability in education. It was good to discuss the extent to which research communication and dissemination can support country operations and be done most effectively. Researchers offered support around gaps of knowledge of how children with complex needs can be supported.
> (Impact Initiative 2018)

Impact Narrative 5: Influencing a new national youth policy in Ethiopia

Taking advantage of a new Ethiopian government with a stated commitment to a more inclusive and evidence-informed approach, researchers from the ESRC-DFID-funded YOUR World Research and Bridging the Gap projects co-hosted the National Youth Seminar in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia, on 21 March 2019 (Webb 2019). Ahead of the event, the Impact Initiative prepared stories describing barriers to education for disabled youth and what it is like being young and disabled in the city to hand out to policymakers on arrival (CHADET *et al.* 2019a; CHADET *et al.* 2019b). A total of 46 youth and more than 50 adults participated in the event. Adult participants included ministry officials, NGO representatives, and local researchers. The adult participants were welcomed to the event by Ato Abiy Hilemelekot from the Ministry of Women, Children and Youth. The ministries of Education and Labour and Social Affairs were also represented.

Matiyas Asefa Chefa, Ministry of Women, Children and Youth noted:

> We strongly believe that the outcomes of this research will help us a lot, especially in the policy-designing process. Today I have heard lots of interesting and fascinating points raised in these discussions, we must incorporate these issues in the policy-making process because they are vital for our future policies.
> (Chefa 2019).

Impact Narrative 6: Bringing evidence on inclusive education to the UK parliamentary processes

Working directly with the UK All-Party Parliamentary Group (APPG) on Global Education to organise and host meetings provided a space for grantholders to connect with political agendas, build networks with key policy actors, and garner parliamentary awareness and support for further funding. Bringing evidence and research into the policy conversations built on the connections needed to move political agendas forward. Lucy Drescher, Head of Parliamentary Advocacy, RESULTS UK commented: 'Having researcher and evidence present at the APPG meeting was

positive as researchers were given access to policy conversations and policy makers were able to engage first-hand with evidence from specific contexts' (Drescher pers. comm. July 2019).[6]

Impact Narrative 7: Successful in-country cohort building and research–policy engagement activities emerging from Dragons' Den pitch

Activities involving RLO projects contributed towards an evidence-based strategy of education policy reform in India. Focused on raising learning outcomes for children facing different forms of disadvantage in diverse contexts, activities included a workshop and national dissemination event of a collaboratively produced policy brief, providing the opportunity for each project to engage with each other and those at state level (De *et al.* 2019). Leadership by Southern-based research teams meant activities and outputs were contextually relevant and were able to engage on some issues presented by the draft national education policy.

Gayathri Krishna, an RLO researcher said of the regional event[7] where the policy brief was disseminated:

> They had a very good panel especially as it had people coming from different aspects of the same sector. There were a lot of different experiences and perspectives which really will benefit many of the projects which are now in the process of wrapping up and also infer the policy implications.
> (Krishna pers. comm. December 2019)[8]

Impact Narrative 8: Contributing to understanding of partnership and brokerage

One of the Impact Initiative's high-level goals is strengthening the international profile of the ESRC-FCDO partnership, enhancing its reputation as a centre of excellence for social science research on international development. This has been achieved through the IDS OpenDocs collection, which includes the full text of both Joint Fund and RLO research outputs and the Impact Initiative's synthesis products.[9] The production and promotion of an *IDS Bulletin* edition on 'Exploring Research–

Policy Partnerships in International Development' (Georgalakis and Rose 2019), an edited collection on *The Social Realities of Knowledge for Development* (Georgalakis *et al.* 2017), and a Delta of Impact working paper (Clark and Goodier 2019) have also contributed to this goal. Another contribution of the Impact Initiative has been the support to grantholders to generate Research for Policy and Practice papers (R4PPs) and impact stories.

Grantholder Ricardo Safra de Campos said of the R4PP on urban resilience (Impact Initiative 2019b):

> It was a useful instrument to show evidence of the impact of our research among policy and planning circles. The document was shared with both Minister of Planning and Disaster Management of Bangladesh as well as other national and international stakeholders. The Research for Policy and Practice has enabled dialogue with other researchers working on the field of migration, displacement and urbanisation. Those outputs have also facilitated engagement with urban planners interested in using participatory methods for urban governance.
> (Safra de Campos pers. comm. December 2019).[10]

Impact Narrative 9: Contributing to the conversation on applying the gender lens to impact

In July 2019, the Impact Initiative published a booklet (Impact Initiative 2019a) that profiles the cross-cutting research, funded by the ESRC-DFID Strategic Partnership, that provides clear lessons on gender equality and mainstreaming in international development for practitioners, funders, and researchers. The booklet has gone on to be downloaded over 1,000 times. In presenting the gendered perspective in a variety of forums – from impact stories, to all-party political events, to large scale international fora and using press and media coverage, we can ensure that gender is not sidelined but plays a key role in recognising the realities of poverty.

Commenting on the usefulness of the gender outputs, Mandu Reid, Leader of the UK Women's Equality Party said, 'To meaningfully tackle persistent poverty – particularly how it manifests for women – [research] must encompass a much broader range of considerations. The selection of ESRC-DFID-funded research presents pertinent examples of how this applies in practice' (Impact Initiative 2019c).

Impact Narrative 10: Dragons' Den collaboration provides foundation for implementation and impact

The Dragons' Den at the Power of Partnership conference held in Delhi in December 2018[11] provided a space for grantholders to network, make concrete proposals for joint activities, and leave with tangible plans in place for future work together. One of the pitches presented brought together researchers from three projects to co-produce the *Urban Community Resilience* R4PP (Impact Initiative 2019b). These projects were able to take their research findings to the policy dialogues co-hosted in Dhaka by researchers from ESRC-DFID-funded projects, 'Safe and Sustainable Cities', and 'Supporting the Mobility of Trapped Populations' (Safra de Campos *et al.* 2019), and the Hargeysa International Book Fair in 2019 (Collyer 2019).

The Dhaka event provided an opportunity to distribute 100 copies of the *Urban Community Resilience* R4PP (Impact Initiative 2019b), including to the Minister for Planning, Mr M.A. Mannan, and the Minister for Disaster Management and Relief. Mr M.A. Mannan stated that the Bangladesh government 'would like to coordinate, and change things so that at the end of the day, city dwellers, new migrants, [and] old migrants… can live in peace'. The lessons that emerged from research findings and discussions will be relevant for development of policy that takes account of the urban challenges faced by new migrant populations in the country (Safra de Campos *et al.* 2019).

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Endnotes

1   The Panel Session at the 62nd UN Commission for the Status of Women 'How Can We Improve the Life Choices for Women in Rural Africa?' took place in New York on 20 March 2018.

2   Impact Initiative interview with the attending Zambia Minister, Auxilia Bupe Ponga, at the Commission for the Status of Women in New York on 20 March 2018

3   Putting Children First: Identifying Solutions and Taking Action to Tackle Poverty and Inequality in Africa conference took place in Addis Ababa, 23–25 October 2017.

4   Impact Initiative interview with Richard Morgan, Director of the Child Poverty Global Initiative, Save the Children, on 12 December 2017

5   The satellite session 'Making Universal Health Coverage a Reality by 2030: Evidence of What Works' took place at the Fifth Global Symposium on Health Systems Research (HSR2018) on 8 October 2017.

6   Impact Initiative interview with Lucy Drescher, Head of Parliamentary Advocacy, RESULTS, on 9 July 2019

7   The regional event brought researchers, policymakers, development practitioners, and civil social representatives together in Delhi on 9 December 2019 to discuss improving learning outcomes in different Indian contexts.

8   Impact Initiative interview with Gayathri Krishna, an RLO researcher, at the regional event in Delhi on 9 December 2019

9   The IDS OpenDocs repository is accessed via https://opendocs.ids.ac.uk/opendocs/

10 Response from Ricardo Safra de Campos (University of Exeter) to Impact Initiative survey, submitted 5 December 2019

11 Power of Partnership: Research to Alleviate Poverty took place in New Delhi, 3–5 December 2018.

THE IMPACT INITIATIVE

For International Development Research

This report, by the Impact Initiative for International Development Research, provides an approach for brokering evidence across large research investments. It is based on six years of work undertaken by the Institute of Development Studies (IDS) and the Research for Equitable Access and Learning (REAL) Centre based at the University of Cambridge, engaging with over 200 research projects funded by the Economic and Social Research Council-Foreign, Commonwealth & Development Office (ESRC-FCDO) Strategic Partnership. It provides lessons and recommended practices for all those funding and designing social science research for development and seeking to maximise its impact beyond academia. It is focused on the value of working across multiple research projects, spanning topics and geographies, and how this collective approach supports learning and impact.

The Impact Initiative seeks to connect policymakers and practitioners with the world-class social science research supported by the ESRC-FCDO (formerly DIFD) Strategic Partnership, maximising the uptake and impact of research from: (i) the Joint Fund for Poverty Alleviation Research; and (ii) the Raising Learning Outcomes in Education Systems Research Programme. We seek to identify synergies between these programmes and their grantholders, support them to exploit influencing and engagement opportunities, and facilitate mutual learning.

The Impact Initiative is a collaboration between the Institute of Development Studies and the University of Cambridge's Research for Equitable Access and Learning (REAL) Centre.

Joint Fund for Poverty Alleviation: aims to enhance 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.

Raising Learning Outcomes in Education Systems Programme: aims to provide policymakers and practitioners with concrete ideas on how to improve learning outcomes and to inform relevant policy and programme decisions.

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