

The Power of the Collective and Global Knowledge Brokering

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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

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

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Endnotes

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Initiative. Further editorial support was provided by Emma Greengrass, Editorial Coordinator (IDS).

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DOI: [10.35648/20.500.12413/11781/ii360](https://doi.org/10.35648/20.500.12413/11781/ii360)