Evaluating Research for Development

NIRAS

What is Research for Development?

Research for Development, or R4D, funds academic research to address challenges in the Global South, with the aim to achieve development impact. This is generally done through ODA funding. NIRAS-LTS has recently supported several R4D evaluations:

▶ **Raising Learning Outcomes (RLO) Phase 1 Programme Evaluation (ESRC/FCDO)**

- £20 million programme with the aim to build evidence on how education systems can work better to overcome the global learning crisis

▶ **Contribution to Global Challenges Research Fund (GCRF) Evaluation (BEIS)**

- £1.5 billion investment to address challenges faced by developing countries, with a focus on capacity building and interdisciplinarity

▶ **Joint Fund for Poverty Alleviation Evaluation**

- £62 million programme commissioning social science research to address the goal of reducing poverty

Evaluation methodologies

Each R4D evaluation used a theory-based approach, either through tracking an existing Theory of Change or logframe (GCRF, RLO), or creating a programme Theory of Change (Joint Fund). This informed an evaluation framework, with key evaluation questions identified.

Several data collection methods were found to be particularly useful:

▶ **Online qualitative sessions:** These were moderated sessions hosted through an online platform where participants could respond to prompts about specific themes or topics. For the RLO evaluation, this was particularly targeted at Southern researchers, with the aim to make their voices heard through the evaluation.

▶ **Bibliometric analysis:** This included examining academic and non-academic citations; academic citations; and analysis of citing publications. Although academic outputs are not the only measure of a project's impact, citations can provide a proxy measure for a project's influence on academic debates.

How is 'impact' defined?

Traditional definitions of impact might be seen as a change to policy based on the research provided. Impact is actually much broader and encompasses several facets. The Impact Initiative, funded by ESRC and FCDO in collaboration with the IDS and the REAL Centre, have created a Wheel of Impact[1], as seen below, which display the four areas of impact in development research.

CONCEPTUAL

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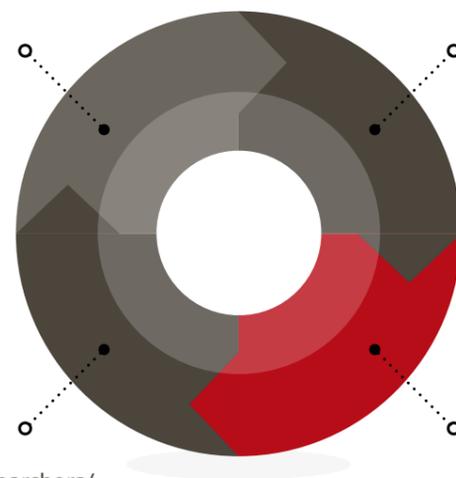▶ Contributions to knowledge

INSTRUMENTAL

▶ Impacts on policy and practice
▶ A change in direction attributable to research

CAPACITY BUILDING

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

NETWORKS AND CONNECTIVITY

▶ Building and strenghening networks
▶ Connecting up the supply of evidence with the demand for it

Key enablers of impact

1. Taking a programme approach

Taking a programme approach can help to create a programme that is 'greater than the sum of its parts'. Several approaches noted in programmes are below:

▶ Targeted commissioning process to create a strategic portfolio;
▶ Opportunities for networking and collaboration between projects;
▶ Resources for tailored impact outputs, such as policy briefs, webinars, or materials translated into local languages. Some universities also now have a discrete impact staff member or members to support this function.

2. Equitable North-South Partnerships

North-South partnerships are inherent in R4D programmes, and must be conducted in a fair and equitable way. Projects with some of the below structures in place were more successful in achieving project impact.

▶ **Before the project starts:** Longer design period to allow for partners to work together on project design in-person, and for the formation of equitable structures and management;
▶ **During the project:** Equitable finance arrangements, including payments in advance if possible, and open and communicative management structure;
▶ **After the project:** Co-publication and distribution of partnership benefits.[2]

3. Interdisciplinarity

Using the definition from ESPA's 2018 report[3] as 'a process where researchers from different disciplines work together to integrate knowledge and methods, to create something greater than the sum of its parts', interdisciplinarity is a crucial enabler to impact. Although it can take longer and may prove challenging at times, it has been noted by many project participants as a transformative catalyst to help them overcome disciplinary silos.

4. Co-production and community engagement

Co-production with non-academic stakeholders and community members can lead to better, more relevant knowledge and research uptake in policy or practice. This should be done in an ethical way and on the basis of 'do no harm'. Several successful approaches from projects are noted below:

▶ Including non-academic stakeholders as a formal partner, and including them in the design stage to ensure a realistic pathway to impact.
▶ Having members of the research team that are close to, or a member of, the community, who can act as mediators or knowledge translators.

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1 Source: Impact Initiative (2021) Putting the collective impact of global development research into perspective – What we learned from six years of the Impact Initiative.

2 Framework adapted from Stage 1 Fairness Report, GCRF.

3 ESPA (2018) Interdisciplinary research for development impact: How can funders walk the talk?. Edinburgh: Ecosystem Services for Poverty Alleviation.

Evaluator reflections

Interestingly, these key enablers of impact also reflect some of the approaches of the evaluation. For instance, each evaluation was grounded in **fairness and equity**, with efforts made to reach as wide an audience as possible. This was done through employment of a wide range of research methods, as well as flexibility on evaluator work hours to account for time zone differences, and using simultaneous translation where needed. A **gender and inclusion lens** was also used, although for each programme, incorporating gender into methods and research appeared not to be a high priority, unless it was an explicit focus of a project. For each evaluation, a **programme approach** was also taken, with each investment evaluated at both the programme and project level to assess progress and impact.

Another interesting reflection that emerged from discussions with academics was the strong **focus on academic publications**, and its use as a main proxy for academic impact. Many do not see policy impact as 'their role', or felt that they could not dedicate any time to it given the pressures of academia. However, as we have seen in the Wheel of Impact above, there are other types of impact beyond instrumental, such as capacity development, networks and community, and conceptual impact. Projects in the future, as well as evaluators, should consider expanding the measure of 'success' beyond academic publications.

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