The research impact symposium: If evidence really matters what can we do about it?

Event Report*

6 March 2017

Co-hosted by the Institute of Development Studies (IDS), International Institute for Environmental Development (IIED) and the Overseas Development Institute (ODI) and supported by The Impact Initiative for International Development Research and the ESRC-DFID Strategic Partnership.

There is currently great energy spanning academics, practitioners and donors on the lessons to be learnt from turning evidence into practice within complex settings. This event brought together key actors at an important time in the evidence into action debate. As some donors and aid critics appear to move even further toward narrower definitions of impact and value for money, whilst some private foundations seem willing to engage with complexity and systems thinking and all the implications this has for pathways to impact theory and practice, we asked: if evidence really matters, what can we do about it?

This report summarises the points that emerged from four questions we posed to delegates from research organisations, think tanks, NGOs and development agencies.

1. **How does the social and political context influence how evidence is used?**
   - There needs to be adequate time and funding for projects to really understand the social and political context of which they are operating in. The project design should include risk analysis, to reflect the rapidly changing contexts that many work within. This requires efforts from the outset from all sides, to build this time into the design, and also of funders to invest in projects for the longer-term.
   - Those involved in projects need to be ‘politically’ savvy and understand the changing context for which they are working in, and recognise the opportunities to share their evidence during the lifecycle and beyond, and the best channels, audiences to reach out to. It is important not to conflate the social and political context as they can be quite separate, where policy decisions may not take into account the social and cultural context.
   - Time should be spent on building legitimacy around the evidence through relationships and networks. It’s not just about what evidence, it also about who delivers the message and how it’s delivered. In turn, there needs to be consideration around the hierarchy of knowledge. Whose voices count in getting evidence to inform policy and practice and how do we make grassroots knowledge have value?

2. **How have individual relationships and networks influenced the impact?**
   - Achieving impact is often dependent on the relationship that exists between the institution or individual with their partners. In changing contexts and settings, it is the individual relationships that are often more resilient. So how do we maintain relationships at an

* This report was written by the Institute of Development Studies and the Impact Initiative based on notes from the discussions during the event to which partners and participants contributed.
institutional level, as staff change and move on? Is a new relationship with an important player impact?

- Building trust with multiple actors is integral throughout all initiatives, but it takes time, and can mean very different things to do different people. It is easier to build trust with someone who’s a champion than someone who’s an antagonist, but you may need to work with both, but how can we do this and maintain independence? Relationships from place to place will be drastically different, depending on sector, location etc. While individuals and institutions need to build up long-term relationships and networks, they also need to ensure that they are open to other opportunities and new relationships. These discussions asked: how can we institutionalise long-term relationships in a) short term funding cycles and b) staff turnover and c) needing to be innovative?

3. How have the capacity/capability of individuals and organisations shaped the impact of research and knowledge?

- Different factors contribute to the capacities of individuals and organisations to shape the impact of research and knowledge. At the individual level, these include motivation; position and influence within their organisation or network; networks; skills and interests and understanding of context.

- At the organisational level factors include turnover; institutional processes; relationships; processes of analysis & interpretation; translation and re-use of evidence; willingness to experiment; addressing multiple information needs and end users and the extent to which organisational specialises as specialisation can boost impact.

- There are additional factors that can also impact the capacity of individuals and organisations to shape impact. Some of these include sectoral differences (i.e. private vs public); funding & accountability; being open to emergent/unplanned questions & findings; building relationships and impact through the research process itself and the challenge of using a body of evidence as opposed to single studies.

4. What other types/sources of evidence need to complement research evidence and in what combinations?

- Impact is achieved, not just through a single projects or pieces of evidence, but from a whole body of evidence, at different points of the research to policy cycle. In this case, it becomes less about a combination of evidence, but more about the combination of evidence, partnerships and communications.

- The participants expressed a need to move away from the notion that research is the only robust form of evidence. Evidence from citizens is also evidence, just because you can’t attach numbers to it, it’s still important. It is not possible to just have research evidence; as you will run into so many barriers, we need to hear from people and share stories as well.

- One of the challenges identified, was knowing if evidence is good quality. Participants argued that there is a problem with the implicit assumption in framing research evidence as rigorous, which pits other evidence as not rigorous. However, quality and rigour will mean something different to different stakeholders; which is where communications come in really well to engage and share with different audiences.

- It is important to not solely by driven by audiences’ needs in the here and now, but to engage stakeholders around important pieces of work to have an impact. This requires those producing evidence, to not just be responsive, but to also be strategic in planning.
The essence of the discussion was succinctly summarised by Melissa Leach, Director of IDS. The process of evidence to impact, is complex and involves multiple actors throughout. Melissa emphasised that power relations and politics pervade the whole knowledge-policy ‘ecosystem’; both the politics of knowledge itself, affecting how problems are framed and whose knowledge counts, and a more material political economy of resources and interests that affect how policy processes unfold, and whether or not which kinds of evidence are taken up and used (or not). This applies in all fora and at all levels. A task for us all is to be more explicit about politics and power relations, so we can be more strategic in how we navigate them. Melissa concluded by arguing that there is a role for us all to play in making evidence matter:

**For researchers:**
- **The need to make sure your research is rigorous**, whatever methodologies underpin that rigour; could be quantitative but also qualitative or participatory. Rigour and sound methods, are essential if our research to have credibility and legitimacy.
- **Interdisciplinarity can be valuable** for many problems, and as researchers we need to be willing to look outside and across our disciplinary boxes, and to seek ways of combining social and technical insights. But no-one can do everything, and sharpness of disciplinary view can also be valuable, so partnerships and consortia which bring together and triangulate across different disciplines can be the way forward
- **The same applies to transdisciplinarity** – research co-constructed with stakeholders in society, whether they are civil society organisations, governments, businesses or international agencies. This can be hugely valuable, but requires openness to other’s perspectives, and particular skills – in facilitation for instance. Consortia that combine people with these different skills and capabilities that link academics with those in policy and practice, and allow mutual ‘learning by doing’ are valuable.
- **Researchers need to be willing to draw lessons from their projects and experiences**, and share these with others, and across projects and they need to be willing to tell the stories of their research and its impacts in ways that make sense to multiple audiences.
- **Independence remains vital and can’t be compromised** – but can be aligned with these other imperatives if we take a view of ‘objectivity’ as one that appreciates that all research is positioned and partial, and be explicit about that positionality.

**For research organisations:**
- **Provide training and capacity development opportunities** for researchers in research uptake, mobilisation, engaging with policy processes, co-production etc, where feasible
- **Much learning is tacit and informal**, and comes through experience and working with others. Research organisations need to create space for such learning to happen, from and between projects
- **There needs to be incentives** – in areas like reward and recognition, appraisal and promotion, roles and expectations – are aligned with this more engaged approach to research

**For policy and practice actors:**
- **Nurture a culture and set of practices in your organisation** that respect and value evidence and its use
- **Encourage moves towards all policy and practice being evidence-informed** (rather than necessarily evidence-driven in a narrow, instrumental way)
- **Be open to and appreciate plural kinds of evidence**, social as well as technical, and from different disciplines
- Be open to engaging with researchers in partnerships that bring knowledge into policy and practice processes from the outset, including through co-construction

For donors:
- That this all takes time; there is a need for long-term, flexible funding arrangements that enable the painstaking but worthwhile process of transdisciplinary problem-solving
- Push back against the trend towards short-termism, instrumental views of evidence (and payment only for that); be part of the move to recognize and value a broader multiplicity of approaches to realizing and evaluating impact
- Be prepared to fund not just research for development, but also research with development (capability-building) and research on development (more critical reflection and analysis of its assumptions and processes, towards improving them)

For the diverse category of ‘intermediaries’ (which might include knowledge brokers such as NGOs, think tanks, scientific advisory bodies etc communications professionals, knowledge managers, research uptake officers):
- You have vital roles to play as brokers, translators and connectors of the worlds of research and of policy and practice
- Central is the navigation and brokering of relationships – between individuals and between organisations and networks, and at local, national and global scales
- There is no one size fits all – successful knowledge brokering depends on context, geographical, social and political
- You must find and tell stories of impact and change in ways that will make sense and appeal to different audiences – from the person in the village or street to the politician or global policymaker

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Evidence informed decision making in a complex world – panel debate (livestream)
Following the closed discussion was a panel debate which included:

- 110 in the room
- 180 live streaming the video
- 60 live streaming the audio

In a fast changing world, development progress is complex: solutions are neither simple nor obvious. There is growing recognition among research and policy communities that flexible and adaptive approaches are the best way to address this complexity, and to deliver sustainable and inclusive change.

Decision-making is inherently political. And in a so called 'post-truth' world, the relationship between evidence and decision-making is becoming even more challenging.

But, at the same time, the rise of populist politics and attacks on aid are likely to be driving some donors towards simpler, more technocratic, definitions of impact. Accountability to funders and value for money may squeeze out complexity thinking and learning.

This event asked a diverse panel of donor, academic and non-governmental organisations: how do you navigate this tension to inform your day-to-day decision-making?

Chair: Louise Shaxson, RAPID programme, ODI

Panel:
- Gina Porter - Senior Research Follow, Department of Anthropology, University of Durham
- Irene Guijt - Head of Research, Oxfam
- Nasreen Jessani - Associate, Johns Hopkins School of Public Health
- Melanie Knetsch - Strategic Lead for Innovation and Interdisciplinarity, Economic and Social Research Council


Blogs:
It’s not what you know but who: How social relationships shape research impact: oxfamblogs.org/fp2p/its-not-what-you-know-but-who-how-social-relationships-shape-research-impact/

Building Trust in a Post-Truth Age: www.huffingtonpost.co.uk/vivienne-benson/building-trust-post-truth_b_15637186.html

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Launch of Social Realities of Knowledge for Development

Jointly funded by the ESRC- DFID- Impact Initiative for international development research and IDS, The Social Realities of Knowledge for Development, an edited collection of articles, was launched at the Symposium. The collection highlights the implicit social nature of evidence-informed decision making. It brings to the fore the importance of relationships and networks throughout the process of research impact, which can be scattered and intangible.

Download Social Realities of Knowledge for Development for free: www.theimpactinitiative.net/socialrealities
ANNEX - Detailed notes of world café tables:

1. How does the political and social context influence how evidence is used?

Project design: build in time to understand context

- Quite often where there are efforts in building relations and progress is, the project will come to an end and there is no funding for time.
  - This is a common problem, whereby seeking long term change with short term political cycles and short term project cycles – these ‘cycles’ not compatible.
  - Lesson: balance between having clearly articulated research question and agenda and have space within that agenda to respond to changes
  - Funding timelines are problematic. Flexible, quick funding would be very useful.
  - Experience in Africa, e.g. what’s happening in South Sudan now, there are projects that can’t continue because of political situation. This delays the projects, the funding timeline will end and we haven’t been able to do what we wanted to do.
  - Don’t always have opportunity and resources to respond to changing climates

- There is a need to map and engage stakeholders from the outset. Hard in the beginning, easier in the long run.
  - Involve research users in designing research questions
  - Need to involve government at the beginning with any research we do

- Balancing the research question with the policy agenda?
  - When you’re designing the project, you have to balance what you want to research and what is the policy agenda.
  - Need to be more honest along the way about ‘pathways to impact’

- Understanding the context and creating the space for people to act
  - Context determines what data is gathered and used and what isn't
  - Understanding the space – and what the space needs to be to get people to act in it
  - Different spaces function in different ways; listen to different evidence

Undertake risk analysis
- Research doesn’t do enough risk analysis, i.e. there is not contingency for regime change etc.

Researchers could learn a lot from project design, to ensure impact is more transparent

See social and political contexts as separate
- People giving experiences and recommendations about manoeuvring around political context with detriment to the social, e.g. ‘in Kenya, where a high burden of HIV/AIDS. So any evidence that helps with assisting efforts to tackle AIDS is welcomed. So when evidence came out that supported male circumcision, in the political arena it would have been a good move to pass a policy to do this, but it would not have been culturally sensitive. Reframing the issue from a social perspective meant that there was more uptake.’
- Christian Aid did a lot of work with church leaders to talk about sex – example of social context
Importance of knowing the context
- Research in China. Political context and systems and changing. Can’t take context as a given.
- Most of us are working in contexts of huge structural and social transformation. Are we talking about particular types of research?

Understand interests
- Where do you put yourself in the question? As an external person, you may be seen to have a donor agenda
- What is the best way to manage the tension between the trade-off of having the funder/policymaker in the room and not being led by other interests?

Producing research and evidence
- Need to veer away from the idea of academics creating the ivory tower of research – boxing academics in the type of research they produce, can propagate the idea of ‘them and us’
- Who’s doing what type of research? Have we moved too far towards having researchers with strong methodological frameworks e.g. economists, but not understanding of the context.
- Issue of transparency of evidence - politically challenging

Cultures of evidence use are important, needs long term systematic work on the demand side e.g. civil service college curricula as well as informal capacity building
- Culture of evidence use: Know the right way to influence: partner with organisations and people who have the skills to communicate research in creative ways that have impact
- Need to understand the policymaker problems/capabilities
- Being able to speak to broader issues, when you’re evidence is very specific and niche
- Confidence and capacity to put your perspective and apply to broader questions and context
- ‘Doing it’ to have the penny dropping moment – i.e. using evidence to back up advocacy discussion

Find expected and unexpected entry points
- Priority at local, national and international level may not align. There are historical moments where big historical shifts can occur.
- E.g. in Kenya, there was coordinated a piece of national research to be delivered at the policy forum (regardless of what it found), if the meeting (which only happened twice a year) the research would be useless.

Being politically aware
- Political sawviness
  - In Africa, which is sometimes seen as more neutral and not trying to impose a political agenda. But if we’re talking about transformation, we want to make it relatable and to get people interested in and talking about it (journalists, universities, people) and then you need to plan timing carefully for when to raise it to the political agenda.
- You need to decide, do you bring all topics, or those that the politician is interested in.
- The political and social contexts are stratified. There are important political moments and it’s important to be sensitive to them and read them correctly.
- Kenya – revising curriculum to change to an inclusive education policy (ESRC project) – have had opportunity to respond

- Recognise the need to be flexible and responsive to the opportunities that come
  - Research may come back into ‘fashion’ - bring it back into the public arena, refresh it. It represents your intellectual archive. Equally there is a tendency to favour most recent research.
  - Sometimes opportunities aren’t always there
  - Working on a political agenda is quite effective
  - How do we translate the success we have in one place to another?
  - Empowering people to recognise the opportunity

- Uptake of evidence
  - Timeliness: moments when open to be persuaded and moments not
  - What do we do about evidence that they don’t take up
  - Lots of reasons of why evidence is not taken up – policymakers need to recognise the context, but Often, researchers don’t understand the policy arena
  - Need a way of mutual education and respect
  - Sometimes opportunities aren’t always there
  - Working on a political agenda is quite effective

Build legitimacy around the evidence through relationships and networks: it’s not just what evidence it’s who delivers the message and how it’s delivered

- How do we navigate the issue of legitimacy – of researchers and of research?
- Evidence is not used - decisions based on values and personal experience, trusted relationships which means message is trusted - [Challenge: surely some evidence is used? What kind of evidence are we talking about? I.e. research evidence or anecdotal?] Often look at other countries to see what they are doing. Current political context is material - does it tie in w political agenda?
- Collaboration, being on the ground, is v important.
- Look for ways to give knowledge legitimacy (superficially) e.g. the right organisation or individuals being the messenger (and conversely can delegitimise message if choose wrong org or individual)
- Build legitimacy of evidence through building relationships and networks.
- We work better with our politicians, than in countries that we work with

Narrative that the researcher is the superstar, but generally it’s bodies of evidence that are negotiated through these long-term policy lifecycles that have the impacts

- Evaluation report across the ‘joint fund projects’ – it was the projects that took time at the beginning to do proper context research that were able to exploit the context to achieve impact. Advisory groups were helpful for keeping in touch with the local context. Local partnerships.
If we are to be promoting impact, how do we navigate the tensions between single project/bodies of evidence?

Power
- Hierarchy of knowledge? Different disciplines change the way they look at knowledge innovation and that affects how knowledge is
- Whose voices count in getting evidence to inform policy and practice?
- How do we make grassroots knowledge have a value?
- Power dynamics: private sector power may mean evidence is supressed
- Need to engage decision makers that balance the power dynamics

2. How have individual relationships and networks influenced impact?
   The who – gatekeepers can be champions or antagonists, and at different levels (individual, institutional)
   - It’s easier to build trust with someone who’s a champion than someone who’s an antagonist, but you may need to work with both. How can we do this and maintain our own independence? And what do we mean by trust anyway?

Nature or representation of the individual: behaviour and trust, values, they have multiple roles and identities – who is the right person/people?
- Collaborated with lots of different actors. Trust is really important. Practical trust. Contracts don’t ensure the delivery good quality research, the relationship will. You cannot always define quality. Trust, relationships and networks. Informal relationships built as you go.
- Built strong relationship in Kenya, Ministry of Health, because organisation director had worked on this, and invested time to do so. This meant they would commission research. There were many organisations working on health issues, but they don’t bring them evidence. They would ask, why is this getting attention, when we are on the ground?
- It is becoming more about contracts, contractual relationships, accountability, but it’s about both.
- Be ready and willing to give something back to the people you are working with. Example, working with factories who are giving us information that is really sensitive. For each factory we are giving them a benchmark figure – anonymously, this is where you sit among these 110 organisations. This helps them, when you give them something back, you build trust.
- Relationships from place to place will be drastically different. Sector, geographical location etc. MSF, medical research needs to be patient driven. Trust at all levels, from gov decision-makers to grassroots.
- Networks also gives legitimacy to the findings. Ownership. Change will take place by those organisations or government.
- Individual relationships play a large role. Your access to people and access to influence. Trust takes time to build, what happens when people leave? Are people we trust trustworthy? Need to go beyond agreement that we need to trust to unpick what trust means.
Unpick trust – there are many degrees of trust. Are you building the capacity of the people you’re working with? Work together. Trust in the credibility of you as a researcher, or trust in you because we are from the same place.

Any relationship will only work if it’s mutually beneficial. Need to bring together so many actors (beneficiaries, research orgs, gov etc.) may all have different agendas to the research agenda.

Trust – think in an expanded vision of trust. Trusted for our quality of research, credibility, how we get our data. Personality trust.

Complexity and dynamism: problems such as fragility, dangers of reliance, cultural context, other relationships, time needed, internal/external, long vs short term relationships

Impact at local, national and international levels. Having networks across those levels is really important. Multi-layered impact. E.g. unpaid care – local level, women involved in research talking to family, national level childcare policy, international global trend.

Unpack trust. Trust means different things in different contexts and to different people. Historic episodes can taint relationships. You need empathy and knowledge – seeing things from different points of view.

Trust is more of an organisational relationship (between beneficiaries or informants and an organisation)

Beyond project-based working and funding (e.g. temporary systems): long-term sustainability but also funding for informal meetings and connections

Unsettling relationships: don’t get stuck in a rut – unsettle contexts, venues, focus, roles

On the one hand we need to build up long-term relationships and networks, on the other hand we need to ensure that we don’t get stuck in a rut: how can we institutionalise long-term relationships in a) short term funding cycles and b) staff turnover and c) needing to be innovative?

Developmental aspect: learning from partners. Where you end up may be very far away from where you began

ActionAid, tries to build partnerships with national research institutes, as well as local NGOs. Lots of challenges. Transaction cost is huge, but think there is a huge benefit to impact. Different visions, politics, power dynamics.

How to mobilise local research to engage with different actors. Huge investment, but well worth working out how to do it well.

Recognising the importance of tensions between individual and institutional relationships. You can develop shared understanding but problems include staff turnovers, changed agendas. How do institutionalise some of these long-term aspects of relationships?

Exploiting personal relationships – how do you ensure continuity of relationships when individuals move on. Someone comes in without contextual knowledge for example.
In Kenya, a lot of the time we talk with mid-level decision-makers as entry points. The people who will communicate the findings to the top-level decision makers. The top level is political and they move, but the mid-level experts tend to stay.

- Both individual and organisational relationships. The individual ones are often more resilient. We need to do more to build institutional relationships. Overreliance on individual relationships.

- What counts as impact? Is a relationship with an important player impact?

Internal politics ‘bomb’ – if you don’t manage those (in terms of individual degrees of interest in objectivity vs pushing values for social change)

3. How have capacity/capability of individuals and organisations shaped impact of research and knowledge?

Individual level factors
- Motivation
- Position & influence within the organisation (both research org and end users)
- Networks
- Specific skills/skillsets and how these combine for success
- Understanding of context

Institutional level factors
- Turnover / institutionalising individual processes & relationships to avoid overreliance on individuals
- Processes of analysis & interpretation (digestion)
- Translation and re-use of evidence – challenges!
- Willingness to experiment, tied to risk orientation
- Addressing multiple information needs and end users
- Extent to which organisational specialises: specialisation can boost impact

Additional factors
- Sectoral differences (private vs public?)
- Funding & accountability
- Being open to emergent/unplanned questions & findings
- Building relationships / impact through the research process itself
- Challenge of using a body of evidence as opposed to single issues

- Individual factors – how do we best support individuals? How much is motivation tied to skillsets and positions, and how can we best support those? How can we unlock hidden capacities as well as more formally recognised ones? How important is learning by doing?

4. What other types/sources of evidence need to complement research evidence and in what combinations?

Big assumption that research adds to other forms of evidence: not true, it’s all evidence

- How do we build trust in the researcher as well as the research? What’s the difference between ‘evidence’ and ‘evidence processes’? How do we surface what’s silenced?
What does evidence mean? What is research evidence? What do we mean by evidence? It can move around. Evidence of what? E.g. even if research is narrowly defined; data comes from many different sources

Problem with the implicit assumption in framing research evidence as rigorous – and other evidence as not rigorous?

Different types of groups of people involved in gathering evidence; often are not involved in talking to each other – different audiences and different purposes

Want to feel confident that the evidence you present is backed up by the broad research

Not really a combination of evidence, more about the combination of evidence and partnerships
  o You need evidence to feel confident in what you’re saying (internal confidence in robustness)
  o How is that received from the users perspective, do they have the same confidence you do?

You can’t just have research evidence; as you will run into so many barriers – need people; stories etc.

If you want to be an effective development researcher; you have to be able to use all these resources and methods ‘you have to get your hands dirty’

Combinations of impact is around a whole body of evidence – not just your own project

Don’t just be driven by audiences’ needs: important to engage stakeholders to have an impact. But don’t just be responsive, be strategic

As researchers we’re trained in our disciplines: do we have to have interdisciplinary projects to have impact? How do we define interdisciplinary? How do we ensure that research is both ‘research’ and implementable/scalable?

How can we be both responsive and strategic at the same time – is it a characteristic of the researcher, the project or the institution?

Thinking about the social context and social relationship

What do we understand by impact? – Impact is mainly about who needs to change, not what needs to change

You could think about different types of audiences – depending on what you’re saying you might have different audiences that are more receptive to different research methodologies

Need to be honest and realistic about the fact that you can’t serve every need. It can be difficult to manage

It’s not about creating evidence that can be repackaged to meet every different type of need – need to be explicit about your purpose

As an academic, you need to think about if you’re going to make impact; how you’re going to do it. What we present, wherever, depends on getting people/orgs to move in a certain place

You must know audience; but must complement with other methods that make you confident in research?

Governments like impact evaluation; RCTs – less about the type of evidence, but more about how it is communicated? Tailoring outputs to suit the needs of the audiences – i.e. blog, film

Need to involve the right stakeholders from the outset of the project
- First and foremost, the research needs to be of high quality; it then becomes about how you engage end users
- Could have the best idea/project in the world, but it could be useless for many reasons – poorly implemented but well planned; or validity of evidence – i.e. not engaging with key stakeholders

**Quality of evidence:** look beyond single quality measures. Also about challenging biases (including our own bias)
- Evidence from citizens is also evidence – just because you can’t attach numbers to it, it’s still important
- You can get positive evidence that is also participatory
- If we’re not bringing in different forms of evidence – it means the results can be quite limited?
- Is there a trade off? Short-term vs. long term trade off
- It is fine about the source, but what about the quality of evidence? How do we determine this?
- Some of the research you might have expected, may not influence in the way that you anticipated, important to acknowledge the quality and unexpected evidence
- Quality will mean something different to different stakeholders; which is where communications come in really well
- Quality is around triangulation and looking as broad as possible
- Making evidence more locally relevant and more contextualised really helps
- Trade-off = time/quality?
- Translation of findings in language to direct audience

**Decision makers go to trusted sources:** it’s not just about traditional research evidence it’s about values
- Reputation of organisation is important – by policymakers
- How independent your research can be?