

Can we have it all? Navigating trade-offs between research excellence, development impact, and collaborative research processes



*The “gold standard” of impactful international development research involves equitable north-south partnership, interdisciplinary collaboration, and co-production with non-academic actors, ideally including local communities. Such participatory and collaborative approaches are intended to have longer-term benefits, strengthening capacity for research, innovation, and knowledge exchange. Admirable though this may sound, it’s easy to see how it might appear overwhelming to researchers expected to fulfil these requirements while also ticking the boxes of “traditional” assessments of academic excellence. **Valeria Izzi** asks, when it comes to research for development, can we really have it all? Or are we setting the bar so high that researchers will be discouraged from even trying – instead embellishing their proposals with enough impact, partnership, and co-production jargon to win funding, before getting on with research as usual?*

Only a few years ago, few UK academics would have given much thought to the question “how will your research impact the life and wellbeing of communities in the Global South?”. But in a rapidly changing research landscape, this is no longer a niche question. An ever-greater proportion of the UK aid budget is spent on research, in turn covering an increasing share of the science budget. Large funding streams like the [Newton Fund](#) and the [Global Challenges Research Fund \(GCRF\)](#) have brought international development impact into the mainstream.

The prevalent discourse about “[research for development](#)” (as opposed to [research on development issues](#)) emphasises win-wins: excellent, cutting-edge research is expected to inform policy and practice, thus contributing to addressing global development challenges. There are expectations about *how* research ought to be conducted in order to seize these new win-win opportunities: the “gold standard” of impactful international development research involves equitable north-south partnership, interdisciplinary collaboration, and co-production with non-academic actors, including – ideally – the very local communities the research aims to benefit. These participatory and collaborative approaches are not merely intended to make that particular research project better and more impactful, but also to have longer-term benefits beyond the project, strengthening “[capacity for research, innovation and knowledge exchange in the UK and developing countries](#)”.

This all sounds great on paper, but it’s easy to see how it can also appear overwhelming to researchers, who are expected to tick all the boxes of “traditional” assessments of academic excellence, *while* achieving and demonstrating impact, *while also* nurturing collaborative processes that will leave a footprint in terms of increased capacity and sustainability. In the arena of research for development, can we really have it all? Or are we setting the bar so high that researchers will be discouraged from even trying – instead embellishing their proposals with enough impact, partnership, and co-production jargon to get funded, and then getting on with research as usual?

The recently completed [Ecosystem Services for Poverty Alleviation \(ESPA\)](#) programme offers valuable insights in this respect. ESPA was a nine-year, £43.9m programme, jointly funded by the Department for International Development (DFID), the Natural Environment Research Council (NERC), and the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC), to explore links between environment and human wellbeing in developing countries. Established in 2009, ESPA represented an ambitious attempt to produce research that not only met standards of academic excellence, but was also relevant and usable for policy and practice. It can thus be seen as a testing ground of the emerging research for development paradigm.

Over the course of nearly a decade, ESPA has funded 125 research projects in 53 countries, involving nearly 1,000 researchers, half of whom are based in the Global South. With hindsight, ESPA experience shows that producing high-quality research with development impact is not only desirable, but also possible. However, it also challenges the idea of easy, win-win solutions for both research excellence (as conventionally understood and measured in academia) and development impact (as defined by prevailing notions of aid effectiveness).

Research that creates impact in the short term is not necessarily the most cutting-edge or exciting from a purely academic point of view. Conversely, paradigm-shifting research generally does not show measurable impact within the timeframe of any one research project. Trade-offs can emerge at the design stage: some questions or methods may lead to policy-relevant answers but be less interesting from a research perspective, and – in practical terms – less likely to lead to publication in a high-ranking journal. Trade-offs can also arise unexpectedly during implementation. Consider, for example, this scenario: the opportunity comes up to use research data to influence a time-sensitive policy process. Doing so, however, would compromise the chance of publishing research based on this data in future. What should the research team do?

When “process requirements” are thrown into the mix, the situation becomes further complicated. Many ESPA projects dealt with multiple levels of complexity. This involved managing large interdisciplinary collaborations across different countries (and often different continents), dealing with many research partners, involving communities at every site, and struggling to align local relevance to multi-site comparability. Each additional layer comes with a time and money penalty: it takes longer, and costs more, to work in interdisciplinary teams and to establish and sustain equitable partnerships within and beyond academia. Genuine collaboration needs to allow for the existence of different viewpoints, interests and agendas, and have processes in place to manage those differences.

The necessary compromises of genuine interdisciplinary collaboration (regarding research questions, methods, and sample sizes) may lead to a final product that lacks the disciplinary rigour necessary for publication – thus penalising the team members’ academic careers ([see here for the views of an ESPA researcher](#)).

While participatory techniques have long been considered the holy grail of doing good development, their application to the world of research is not straightforward. For participatory research to be genuine and not tokenistic there has to be space to reframe questions, methods, and approaches in order to enable the participation of local stakeholders, leading to results that are relevant for them. Ultimately, by co-producing research, one may end up with very different questions compared to those set out in the original funding proposals.

While these in-depth participatory processes may be more easily applied on a local level, scaling up raises greater challenges. For multi-site processes, a trade-off exists between being locally led (letting local communities take the lead in defining research questions and methods) and cross-site comparability.

These trade-offs are well known to researchers, but largely glossed over by the dominant narrative on research for development. The challenge – for funders and academic institutions alike – is how to be realistic in the recognition of the conceptual and practical implications that come with the additional demands placed on academic research to achieve international development impact. As we uphold the ideal of collaborative research for development, greater awareness is needed of its implications in terms of time and resources.

Read more about ESPA’s programmatic learning on [Research for Development Impact](#), [Interdisciplinarity](#) and [Equitable Partnerships](#), or browse ESPA’s [Impact Stories](#).

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About the author

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