Impact of Social Sciences Blog: Putting the collective impact of global development research into perspective – What we learned from six years of the Impact Initiative

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Reductions to UK aid have highlighted the need to understand both how international development research has, and can continue to, effect positive change. Here, **Pauline Rose** *and* **Elizabeth Tofaris** *reflect on the Impact Initiative programme and what can be learned from six years of facilitating impact-focused research in global development.*

As cuts to the UK [aid budget](#) create a funding crisis for international development research, there has never been a more important time to highlight the impact that this research can achieve. The [Impact Initiative](#) was a significant joint undertaking between researchers in the global North and South, national governments and aid donors. Funded by the UK's Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC) and the Foreign, Commonwealth & Development Office (FCDO) in collaboration with the [Institute of Development Studies (IDS)](#) and the [Research for Equitable Access and Learning (REAL) Centre](#) at the University of Cambridge, the initiative represented a significant investment in understanding and enhancing the impact of international development research.

The programme's approach was to identify synergies across research projects and help to exploit engagement and influencing opportunities to maximise their collective impact. At the REAL Centre, we supported 30 education-focused grants funded via the Raising Learning Outcomes (RLO) programme. This entailed research in 24 low- and lower-middle income countries aligned to policy-relevant topics, including how to step up targeted support for raising learning outcomes for marginalised groups, system reform, and good-quality teaching.

Drawing on this experience, we highlight four factors that allowed us to better appreciate the varied benefits this research was producing.

1. Value different types of impact and collaboration

From the outset, the initiative aimed to value different types of impact. This enabled us to extend attention from a conventional focus on direct policy change, or 'instrumental impact', by recognising that not only is this extremely difficult to achieve within the timescale of a single project, but also that it can be problematic to attribute to any singular piece of research. Our definition of impact was close to that outlined by [UKRI,](#) although with an added emphasis on changes to networks and relationships (Fig.1).
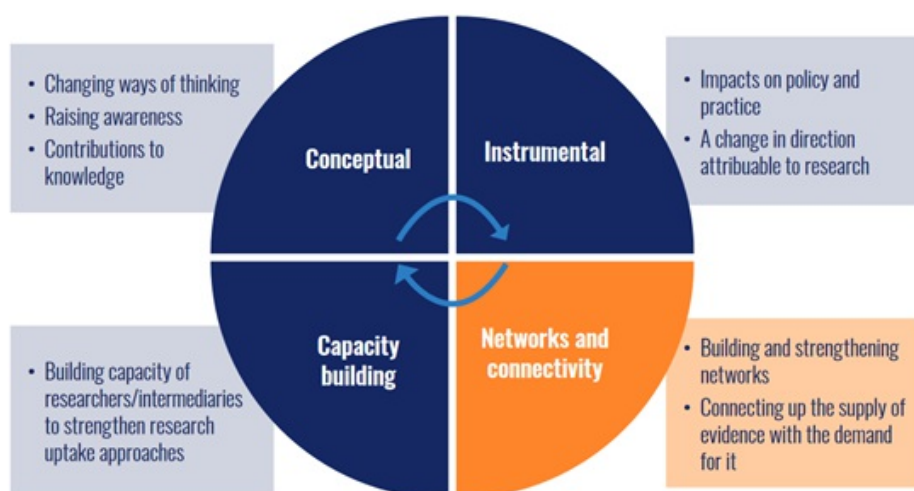

Fig.1: The Impact Initiative 'wheel of impact', based on ESCR-DFID Guiding Principles on uptake, impact and communication of research.

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Whilst some research did achieve direct policy impact: e.g. in South Africa, a multi-disciplinary research team working on early grade reading in African languages contributed to the efforts of the Department of Basic Education in developing national reading benchmarks. These benchmarks were also reflected in President Cyril Ramaphosa's 2019 State of the Nation Address and developed into one of five strategic areas for education policy.

In other cases, smaller moments of change were equally valuable and it was often these 'micro-impacts' that added up to more significant influence. One researcher, for example, was able to use a chance meeting with Education Ministers from Malawi at the Global Disability Summit in 2018 to arrange a follow-up in-country meeting in order to share research findings. The researcher, whose work focuses on improving the quality of early years provision for children with disabilities, said that the opportunity meant they were subsequently able to engage directly with those working on policy.

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Research projects also contributed to changes in the ways that communities and policy actors thought about issues of relevance to the 'conceptual impact' of raising learning outcomes. For example, in Uganda, research into the benefits of educational resources produced in local languages stimulated a passion for local language literacy and greater interest for reading in local language in homes, communities, and schools. In a different way, it also contributed to knowledge about successful approaches to teacher training and effective instructional materials in the country, which have a wider transformational potential.

2. A collective approach to research engagement

All too often, research is produced and shared in niche disciplinary spaces and in ways that can limit the scope for collaboration. Moreover, funders' reporting requirements can also incentivise researchers to claim impact for individual projects, while governments value the collation of evidence from a body of research. To address this discrepancy, the Impact Initiative took a collective approach to research engagement and focused on identifying and linking complementary bodies of evidence. By synthesising learning across projects that spoke to a related policy area (such as quality teaching, or gender and education), we were able to connect researchers and policy actors who might otherwise have remained in their respective silos.

This was facilitated by a dedicated publication, the Research for Policy and Practice paper series, through which it was possible to link the research to broader discussions and dialogues that may not have been possible for an individual project alone. For example, a paper on quality teaching was timed to inform DFID's 2018 Education Policy *Get Children Learning*.

3. Facilitating engagement to inform policy actions

We were active in linking evidence and researchers to policy conversations. Over six years this developed its own momentum, with connections across and between researchers and policy actors branching out in ways that helped agendas to move forward. This included supporting researchers working on completed projects to enable them to continue dialogues beyond official funding cycles.

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In some cases, there were fortuitous windows of opportunity that could be taken up. The Impact Initiative was able to support researchers by providing an adaptable framework for engagement. For example, at the outset of the programme, researchers working on disability were brought together at a workshop to identify common themes and priorities for influencing policy and practice. With the subsequent announcement that the first ever Global Disability Summit would be held in London, it was possible to reassemble this network at an event at the University of Cambridge a few months prior, together with FCDO, INGOs, UN agencies, and other bilateral and multilateral officials. The group developed a joint Statement of Action on Inclusive Education, that emphasised the importance of better evidence and data for developing effective strategies at scale. The messages from the Statement were influential, feeding into the Global Disability Summit's actions.

4. Supporting Southern-led influence for national policy change

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We were particularly keen to support initiatives led by Southern researchers, as these were more likely to ensure impact within countries, given the researchers' contextual understanding and in-country policy networks, as well recognising the importance and the commitment to equitable research partnerships. These initiatives were supported by providing financial resources alongside communications engagement.

Image Credit: [Dimitry Zub](#) via Unsplash.

Notably, we worked together with researchers in India across ten projects that focused on raising learning outcomes for children facing different forms of disadvantage in diverse contexts. These activities were based on a successful pitch by these researchers as part of a popular 'Dragons' Den-style' workshop at the annual workshop for education researchers in 2019, where researchers were invited to come together and create a plan for policy engagement. Activities included a workshop in Delhi at which India-based researchers met to share research findings, build networks, and identify their own common themes and synergies. This meeting led to a [Policy Brief](#) drawing together key evidence and policy relevant findings (translated into Hindi). The Policy Brief was then shared and discussed at a national dissemination and networking event with policy actors and practitioners in Delhi.

Maximising impact beyond academia

We could document many more positive examples achieved on a range of [impacts beyond academia](#), including on [education specifically](#). These successes highlight the value of continued investment in supporting a purposefully collective impact of research. They also reflect the importance of a long-term approaches to building networks to inform the collation of evidence across projects, and for taking incremental steps towards changing mindsets as well as influencing policies and practice. Ultimately, these forms of support, which need to continue beyond the life-cycle of any one research project, are vital processes that enable the translation of research into impact. However, in the current climate they are sadly at high risk of ceasing entirely.

Note: This article gives the views of the author, and not the position of the Impact of Social Science blog, nor of the London School of Economics. Please review our [Comments Policy](#) if you have any concerns on posting a comment below.