



UNDERSTANDING HOW RESEARCH IS PUT INTO USE



BACKGROUND

The Ecosystems Services for Poverty Alleviations programme (ESPA) is a £40 million international research programme, funded by the UK's Natural Environment Research Council (NERC), the Department for International Development (DFID), and the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC). The programme aims to deliver high quality, cutting-edge research that will improve the understanding of the contribution of ecosystems services to poverty reduction and inclusive growth processes. In its aim to maximise the spread and meaningful use of research that is generated through its programme, ESPA has commissioned this study to understand the process of putting research into use, particularly within the context of the developing world. The project undertook a review of current and emerging practices of putting research into use, to distil lessons from experiences in different disciplines and sectors that may be relevant to ESPA.

KEY FINDINGS

The study found that while the use of language of 'research impacts' has been increasing substantially since the 1990s, there remains paucity of published works in this broad area. This paucity may be attributed to the structure of incentives available for publishing about the ways in which research may be put into use. *Building a body of scholarship on the subject may require targeted incentives to researchers and research users.* In fact, rich information appears to be available in grey literature (project reports, handbooks and case studies of experiences with research utilisation) that merits a more in-depth review.

The study further found that impacts from research can take a variety of forms, and may not often be readily visible. Thus, impacts may include increased awareness of problems or new ways of conceptualising them, improved access to and delivery of essential services, enhanced capacities to engage with research and knowledge, solutions to complex problems, dialogue leading to conflict mitigation, as well as changes in policy processes to make them more evidence based and consultative. *Researchers and funders should consider a range of impacts when planning for and evaluating research outcomes.*

The influence of contextual variables upon translating research into use was evident in the structured review as well as case studies. Trigger events, such as the starvation deaths in India and floods in Pickering, created opportunities for putting research into use. However, events such as these are of course unpredictable. Hence, *it is important to both look out for opportunities for putting research into use as well as be prepared to make the most of such unexpected opportunities whenever they appear.*

Impacts also tend to be more apparent in cases where research addresses an existing knowledge gap identified as relevant by practitioners. *Continued dialogue and networking between researchers, policy makers, planners and other research users can facilitate the identification of these knowledge gaps.* Extended engagement between researchers and research users can also engender a better understanding of organisational structures and politics, leading to more robust (and practical) impact strategies. In Case Studies 1 and 2, researchers' linkages with those involved in advocacy on a particular issue were important for translating knowledge into policy and practice.



Responsiveness to potential knowledge gaps on the behalf of researchers also seems to have been salient in the process of putting research into use. The formation and maintenance of longer-term relationships between researchers, research users and those involved in advocacy has shown to require time and resources that may extend beyond project timelines. *Dialogue and networking are thus crucial for forming longer-term relationships that act to facilitate the translation of research into use; time and commitment on the behalf of researchers as well as support on the behalf of funders are therefore key.*

The parameters for assessing research quality vary among stakeholders and can include various factors, such as inclusivity, ethics, credibility of the researchers, the relevance of the research, and the costs associated with research translation. Peer reviewed publications, which are sine qua non in establishing research quality in academia, may not be important for other stakeholders. *It is thus important to understand how research users conceptualize and assess research quality, and subsequently incorporate these parameters into research design and delivery.*

Many times, impacts may occur well beyond the timeframe of particular research projects. *Researchers and funders may therefore need to not only devise ways of remaining engaged with the processes of putting research into use beyond project timelines but also develop frameworks for monitoring and evaluation which can capture impacts over extended timeframes.* At the very least, it is imperative to be careful to not over-burden research projects with expectations of impact as there are limits to what a research project can deliver.

For Researchers

Write more about impact activities and experiences with RIU.

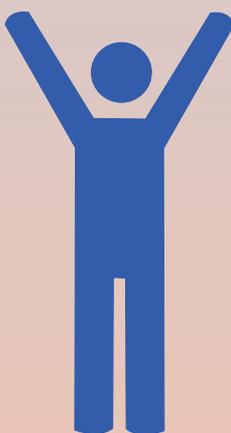
Consider a range of impacts when planning research impact strategies.

Think about stakeholders preferences for knowledge sources and parameters for research quality

In thinking about composition of research teams, also think about integrating partners who can facilitate RIU.

Look at existing capacities for research uptake (e.g. in setting out sampling parameters).

Research and impacts take place on different time-scales. Be patient (and be prepared!).



For ESPA and Research Funders

Think about a wide range of impacts and ways of capturing these beyond the time-frames of particular research projects.

Facilitate building of a community of scholarship on RIU (create dissemination vehicles; provide incentives to researchers to write about RIU experiences).

While projects may come to an end, researchers' may need to remain involved for putting research into use. Funding support for such initiatives is required.

Collaborative work, research partners take time to develop. Perhaps funders can support such processes.