Workshop Aims

The purpose of this workshop was to share the findings of the Cambridge-led ESPA Research into Use (RIU) project (PI, Bhaskar Vira), commissioned by the ESPA Directorate to ascertain which approaches are useful for putting ESPA research into use for reducing poverty and inclusive growth.

The workshop provided the opportunity to hear additional perspectives on research-policy-practice from Louise Shaxson (Research Fellow, Research and Policy in Development) and from Nigel Asquith (ESPA Researcher) and to promote discussion in the specific context of current projects.

The outcomes of discussion will be used to inform the ESPA programme’s approach to building impact, the revision of its Research Into Use Strategy and the overall impact activities funded by the ESPA Directorate including the new ESPA Regional Opportunities Fund.

Welcome and Introduction: Lessons Learnt from the DFID Research into Use Programme: Presented by Andy Frost (ESPA Research into Use Task Leader)

Andy Frost described the lessons learnt from the DFID Research into Use Programme which finished in 2012. The lessons learnt provided the evidence base upon which the ESPA Research Strategy was built and informed the University of Cambridge study.

The purpose of the DFID RIU programme was to maximise the poverty reducing impact of the previous Renewable Natural Resources Research Strategy (RNRRS), and, by so doing, to significantly increase the understanding of how the promotion and widespread use of such research can contribute to poverty reduction and economic growth.

The DFID RIU programme represented a change in direction from funding research and the generations of new knowledge to funding research uptake. In considering research into use activities within ESPA projects, it was highlighted that there is a need for flexibility in order that opportunities that arise for research uptake can be pursued even if they weren’t in the original research plan.

A key message in relation to getting research into use is that it takes time. Time is, therefore, a major constraint.

Summary of lessons learnt:

- Brokering (putting ideas, resources and people together) networks and alliances are critical. This brokering role can take many forms, e.g. building capacity, advocacy for institutional/policy change, demand articulation, enhanced access to technologies, access to credit, farmer collaboration, experimentation etc.

- There is an increasing number of entrepreneurs who have developmental interests. Many of these perform the brokering function around opportunities they have identified. This represents a real opportunity for making better use of research (e.g. agricultural research) for development.

- Core research is just part of a much broader value chain which must have research into use firmly embedded. The broader vision must be taken into account in all research.

- Research/innovation champions are very important in facilitating getting their research product into use. Their role is, in essence, similar to mentor/advisor with knowledge of the science.
There is a need to improve the link between research and development – making research funds available for developmental initiatives.

The main institutional change has been building the innovation platforms that have improved dialogue between stakeholders for innovation.

Private sector involvement is key – both in terms of private sector acting as product champions and in terms of core activity to ensure economic continuity. Private sector linkages are the key to longer-term sustainability.

Supply push doesn’t work; there is a need for market pull. Any mismatch between supply of knowledge or tools and demand in target countries must be avoided.

There are mixed opportunities to influence policy

There is a need for flexible and adaptable management in order to maximise research into use opportunities – this is very different to research management. To manage RIU opportunities well research practitioners must be able to respond to evolving sector needs. The DFID RIU programme introduced a flexibility fund which allowed country teams to chase exciting opportunities, i.e. there was greater autonomy for teams in responding to opportunities

There is no blueprint for getting research into use and it takes time. Time was the key constraining factor throughout the DFID RIU programme.

Introduction to Research into Use Workshop: Presented by Bhaskar Vira (University of Cambridge)

Bhaskar Vira, PI of the ESPA RIU project, invited the group to take a step back and look more broadly at the wider lessons that can be learned while considering some specific case studies from the Cambridge-led ESPA RIU project.

The ESPA project had the following aims:

- To review existing approaches for putting research into use in selected sectors relevant to the ESPA programme;
- To identify best practice examples of research into use from a selection of case studies;
- To identify key leverage points for the ESPA programme, and for ESPA researchers, for maximizing the dissemination, uptake and use of research in different contexts.

There were a few stages in the approach and methods used in the project:

- Review of literature and development of conceptual framework for understanding research into use.
- A light touch structured review of a sample of available peer-reviewed literature. Identification of gaps.
- Focus on three case studies – food security in India, flood risk management in the UK, global network for improving mental health.
- Two expert workshops, for feedback, insights and peer review/critique – one at inception (January 2013), one at project end (September 2013).

The outputs and resources were:

- End of project final report
- Six briefing papers:
  - Conceptual Framework
  - Key findings and suggestions (for researchers, and for ESPA and research funders)
  - Knowledge gaps and findings from the structured review
Case study 1 – Food security in India
Case study 2 – Flood risk management in the UK
Case study 3 – Global network on mental health (PRIME)

- Website with findings and key resources
- Paper (in prep.) for submission to Evidence & Policy

**Conceptual Framework and Findings from the Review: Presented by Rohini Chaturverdi (ESPA Researcher, University of Cambridge)**

Rohini provided an overview of the approach and the main findings from the systematic review as part of the ESPA RIU project.

A structured review of a sample of available peer-reviewed literature was carried out. There was a focus on three case studies – food security in India, flood risk management in the UK and global network for improving mental health.

Two expert workshops, for feedback, insights and peer review/critique, were carried out – one at the project inception phase (January 2013) and one at the project’s end (September 2013).

The structured review looked at 65 articles. There was a dominance of health sector articles with only 13 articles described research into use. These 13 articles, however, provided a rich account.

The findings of the structured review found that research may lead to various types of impacts and that RIU is considerably influenced by contextual factors. In order to be relevant, research must respond to the knowledge needs of the policy or practice context. Researchers and users may draw on different parameters for assessing research quality. Many studies reported participation and involvement of users, in the research process.

A suite of communication tools were effective for dissemination. Extended communication facilitated identification of knowledge gaps, the creation and stabilisation of networks for knowledge flows and the creation of spaces for researcher involvement in the policy process.

Achieving impact also required understanding organisations, their cultures, politics, and constraints. Furthermore, buying out time from users required dedicated funding to facilitate RIU.

Significant knowledge gaps were found in terms of:

- Context: what are the motivations and incentives for RIU?
- Research and Knowledge Sources: which knowledge sources are preferred by researchers and research users?
- Stakeholders and Networks: which factors enabled collaboration among stakeholders?

In terms of the case studies considered, the project established that researchers should:

- write more about impact activities and experiences with RIU
- 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)
- keep in mind that research and impacts take place on different time-scales: researchers should therefore be patient and prepared to maximise research into use opportunities.

For ESPA and research funders:

- Think about impacts in more general terms
- Facilitate building of a community of scholarship on RIU (create dissemination vehicles, provide incentives to researchers to write about RIU experiences)
• Research and project time-lines are often different; projects may end but researchers’ involvement may not: consider how this can be supported.
• Collaborative work and research partnerships take time to develop. Can funders support such processes?

The following conclusions were drawn:
• There is not a lot of academic work published in this broad area
• Impacts can take a variety of forms, over time
• Dialogue/networking is important as it allows researchers to respond effectively to articulated needs from potential users
• Researchers need to understand organisational structures and politics to work out an impact strategy
• Dedicated funding is required for RIU activities
• Need to be careful NOT to over-burden research projects with expectations of impact

Discussion and Q&A

Was there consideration in your project team as to what other evidence is being produced?
Yes. The project team thought it would be useful to pick up some of these studies and see what other material had been produced, such as in grey literature. The project contacted researchers and found that putting research into use was not always their purpose and that some papers were stand alone. It’s more likely that evidence will be found in technical reports than in grey literature.

There is an advantage to using peer reviewed literature in that it’s indexed and searchable, whereas grey literature isn’t, unless there is a good archive that can be used, but this will mean that the study won’t have a systematic approach. It’s not easy to get a good representative sample. The focus of the ESPA RIU project was on evidence of putting research into use, not what generates impact.

Do you make any attempt to understand incentives?
The culture of research is changing in that researchers now have to write impact statements as part of the Research Excellence Framework (REF). This is bringing about change. So, there is an incentive change, at least in the UK context.

The REF has drawn attention to the difference being made to poor people, and this is making more senior researchers realise that impact pathways and research into use should be considered in their work.

In other contexts, in China for example, it was noted that research is really being put into use and that promotions for researchers are based on how much policy influence they are having.

In the Indian context, there have been discussions about the REF and looking at how it could be developed for Indian context.

The Evidence and Policy journal would like papers from the research community. They are currently overwhelmed by health and social science papers and are lacking papers from other disciplines as well from a southern context.

It was discussed that an opinion piece for the journal would be suitable from the ESPA programme and that this would be investigated further by ESPA’s Impact Officer once they're in post.

DEGRP Impact Strategy: Presented by Louise Shaxson (DEGRP Programme Manager and Impact Lead)
Louise talked about the DFID-ESRC Growth Research Programme (DEGRP) and its impact strategy. The programme is specifically about fostering economic growth in low-income countries (LICs).
The role of the evidence and policy group that was set-up was to:

- maximise impact of the programme on policy and practice relevant to LICs
- establish a strong international profile at programme and project level
- ensure DEGRP findings are effectively cohered, disseminated and used by policy makers
- facilitate the uptake of commissioned research on economic growth by developing country policy makers

The group provides targeted support to projects, runs workshops for policy engagement to support individual projects and provides capacity building impact and communication support.

Key aspects of the DEGRP approach and understanding includes:

- The need for indicators of impact through revising pathways to impact and communications strategy
- Knowledge brokering functions are key – the core is making information available. It’s not enough to just put information out there; a knowledge broker needs to be contributing and shaping political debate
- It’s not just about conceptual and instrumental impact but capacity building impact – stronger networks, getting developing country researchers to be PIs on projects
- The process of evaluation is important. What’s the difference between promoting your evidence and becoming a policy advocate – how far can you push it?
- Helping people to advocate for their evidence is also a key role but we make sure to open up debate and contextualise the evidence through policy engagement.

Discussion and Q&A

ESPA encourages researchers not to advocate for their own evidence but to use knowledge intermediaries to do this instead, so that it is considered alongside other evidence. There is a danger that evidence is deliberately manipulated to fit a desired policy outcome. When presenting results on behalf of the ESPA programme, positions needs to remain objective.

It’s not always possible for researchers not to end up engaging in advocacy as this is a natural consequence of the role. While the primary role of research is objective knowledge production, there is a tension with using advocacy positively to push the agenda for stakeholders. Regardless, evidence should be presented in a balanced way, as a potential outcome for policy but not the only outcome. Researchers are in some cases being driven as a research practitioner for actual positive, real change rather than for just scientific endeavour.

Research into Use: Nigel Asquith (ESPA Grant Holder, Harvard University)

There is a difference between what is driving researchers and implementers in terms of the emphasis between research and its actual use. It’s important to consider incentives and what’s driving people. Traditionally, researchers are incentivised by seeking academic publications, for example. Implementers are incentivised by getting research into use and bringing about real change.

In general, there is a lack of integration between researchers and implementers. Implementers are however, getting better at being implementers for development projects because they are being forced to think about integrating research into their work.

There is a need to think about what is driving the difficulties in putting research into use, to think about how this process starts and how best to address it. It’s important to step back from the usual approach of aiming to communicate better and instead to look at the beginning of the process and how it starts and how to bring researchers and practitioners together from the outset.

The ESPA agenda is to get more use from research. This may mean seeking more projects led from outside of the UK.
In order to maximise getting research into use, evidence coming for research work has to be
credible, salient and legitimate. Researchers must carefully unpack their idea of getting RIU: i.e.
who is collecting research, what’s the source of the knowledge versus what is the knowledge,
research and evidence going to be used for – is it simply for enlightenment, or is it to negotiate with
policy makers or is it make base a decision on? There is a gap between what researchers say is
good, useful evidence that can be used and what potential users say is useful and can be used.

Practitioner activities and research activities are not well integrated. Traditionally, researchers
identify their area of academic interest, identify partners to work with, carry out the research,
present their results, and then, to a certain level have an assumption that uptake will happen.
Practitioners work in a different manner whereby they identify an issue, attempt to solve that issue,
with little or no research involvement beyond evaluation research to assess impact and the
effectiveness of the solution that was implemented.

A more effective, integrative approach to ensure that research is used in bringing about change
may be, based on Nigel’s approach in Bolivia:

- The stakeholder identifies an issue
- The practitioner comes up with solution to the issue and pilots a way to resolve it
- Researchers then look at how the solution works – evaluative research
- Look at research results
- Feedback from that research in the policy process and back
- Refine the process and the solution
- Scale out the work to other areas

Two are two broad approaches in seeking research into use:

- Research-led: the traditional linear research process, with not much feedback, which hopes
to inform policy.
- Practitioner-led: stakeholders identify an issue, practitioners pilot a response (without a lot
of data) to resolve the issue, then researchers comes in to evaluate and feedback into the
process.

The key message is that researchers’ incentives are very different to those of practitioners.
Researchers want evidence, they desire understanding, they accept that work will take a long time.
Practitioners desire solutions/change, and they want them immediately.

Q and A Discussion

Why was only evaluation research mentioned as opposed to other types of research?

Evaluation research was used as an example because is a key element of the NGO-based
approaches that Nigel outlined based on his work in Bolivia.

There is a view that in general, engagement may not there between stakeholders and researchers,
early on in the research process, and that work is being built upon theories. Perhaps uptake would
be more achievable if the research was driven by a conceptualisation made with stakeholders and
researchers in conjunction from the outset. There is a need to use the different strengths of
researchers and practitioners.

Who would be your ideal scientific partner?

Nigel outlined that from his NGO perspective, a successful partnership comes about by
collaborating with external researchers.

IIED highlighted that bringing people together, including NGOs and scientists, to share thinking, is
critical and that more networking is key.
Discussion Session: Key Issues for RIU and Pathways to Impact

The afternoon session invited participants to break up into three groups to consider the review that was carried out by the ESPA RIU project and to think about elements that have come up during the morning’s presentations and discussions that relate back to their own projects’ pathways to impact and RIU strategies. Each group then reported back on the main points that came up in discussion.

Rob Doubleday, University of Cambridge, first of all invited participants to consider three themes that came up from the review and to reflect on the way that research informs policy and practice:

1) it takes a long time, research is one small part in a complex world, it is not a linear relationship with practice and implementation, there are many different actors
2) having an understanding of the complex and tenuous relationships is important
3) impact is unpredictable, it is not possible to know if the research will have impact in the world. There are also a wide range of possible impacts.

Participants were then invited to share ideas that they wanted to reflect on further and to create a starting point for the group discussion.

Key ideas identified were:

- how do we actually work as a knowledge intermediary and what is our role as a knowledge broker? There is a need to avoid the ‘science push’, it must be demand led. In articulating the demand to a client, you need to be able to challenge if a question is researchable.
- The issue of impact and the idea that there is multiplicity of impact. Which impacts are you after and what is achievable? There is a typology of impact; many valid types not just change in law or regulation that counts. Be clear about difference in impact from individual project, programme and body of knowledge.
- The issues of incentives is important, the impact agenda. The real world has problems and universities have departments, so how do we achieve interdisciplinarity. How do we get interdisciplinarity and the incentive/disincentives that can drive this?
- The way to bring the two worlds of practice and research into alignment is how to deal with both complexity and uncertainty, as both don’t like this.
- Communicating uncertainty to policy makers is undesirable.
- Why are we talking about research into use and not research for use?
- In going through the ESPA theory of change document, there is a sense of an envisaged change that the programme wants to implement. Projects should aim to identify, along with the input of their partners, area that are having impact and research questions driven out of stakeholder needs as well as building an evidence base for policy makers. It might not be possible, however, to say what the desired outcomes and changes will be from the project. There are inconsistencies in the strategy in terms of how it is worded with the approach of stakeholder driven project.

Feedback from Group Breakout Discussions:

Group 1

- Self- versus independent-evaluation and legacy: what do you need to get in place to able to walk away from the project and for the ball to keep rolling?
- The exercise of marrying science with impact is challenging and the steps involved in achieving impact take a long time, which may well be beyond the scope of a single project.
- What research would a local farmer or mayor choose to do? How different would projects have looked if that were the case?
- Projects have multiple levels of stakeholders. We need to think about the different level of stakeholders involved.
Group 2

- Applying for funding requires the use of ESPA language and this isn’t accessible to people who are not working in universities. Demands have to be articulated in a particular language.

- The question of scaling up is important. Do we achieve proof of concept first and then follow this through further funding? The timescales are long.

- There is a trade-off between less scientific certainty and greater possibility of impact. What is the balance to be struck to achieve research into use?

- Citizen science could reduce transaction costs.

- Cost effectiveness, data has to be good enough but in what confidence, this is a compromise.

- Local communities and experts have different priorities. It is important to consider who is making decisions, is it at local, national or global level.

Group 3

- The importance of partnerships, external and within a research team. Making the most of people skills – technical people shouldn’t be those holding meetings with stakeholders.

- Responding to demand, identifying what will actually help.

- Some of us don’t have confidence in models, which can be underpinned by many assumptions which aren’t transparent. It’s also difficult to communicate outcomes of models.

- Building relationships, understanding wider context.

- Tracking impact and evidence can be an issue. It is hard to see where your work may have appeared in policy. There is a need to maintain relationships with people in country.

Concluding Comments

Bhaskar Vira, ESPA RIU project PI, concluded that the workshop had been a really useful opportunity to hear from people and projects, particularly around the caveats of the systematic review that was carried out as part of the ESPA RIU project.

The discussion in the workshop reflects the points made in the detailed project report which is available for anyone who is interested. The discussions will help feed into the update of the ESPA RIU strategy.

Going forward, Paul van Gardingen, ESPA Director, advised that, by the end of 2014, the ESPA Directorate will have one person focussing on overall ESPA programme level impact, another on communication and also two Regional Evidence Brokers, one in South Asia and one in East Africa.

So, as well as more funding for research into use activities through the ESPA Regional Opportunities Fund, there will be four more people in the ESPA Directorate dedicated to helping projects build impact.
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