Research with development impact

Lessons from the Ecosystem Services for Poverty Alleviation programme

June 2018
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# Acronyms

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<tr>
<td>DFID</td>
<td>UK Department for International Development</td>
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<td>EPR</td>
<td>DFID End of Programme Review</td>
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<td>ESPA</td>
<td>Ecosystem Services for Poverty Alleviation</td>
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<td>ESRC</td>
<td>Economic and Social Research Council</td>
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<td>GCRF</td>
<td>Global Challenges Research Fund</td>
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<tr>
<td>M&amp;E</td>
<td>Monitoring and evaluation</td>
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<tr>
<td>MoU</td>
<td>Memorandum of Understanding</td>
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<tr>
<td>NERC</td>
<td>Natural Environment Research Council</td>
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<tr>
<td>NGO</td>
<td>Non-governmental organisation</td>
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<tr>
<td>RCUK</td>
<td>Research Councils UK</td>
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<tr>
<td>REF</td>
<td>Research Excellence Framework</td>
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<tr>
<td>ToC</td>
<td>Theory of change</td>
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<td>UK</td>
<td>United Kingdom</td>
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ESPA theory of change

Knowledge Exchange

Global
Regional
National
Local

Awareness raised
Knowledge enhanced

Local communities do things differently
Policy-makers do things differently
Practitioners do things differently
Business leaders do things differently

Institutional Context

Appropriate policies
Appropriate investments

Ecosystems are conserved and managed sustainably, supporting poverty alleviation and enhancing well-being

Knowledge is co-produced with research users
Introduction

The Ecosystem Services for Poverty Alleviation (ESPA) programme was established in 2009 to investigate how ecosystem services can support – or undermine – poverty alleviation efforts and communities’ wellbeing in developing countries, and to provide relevant evidence to inform policy and practice. This was an ambitious attempt to produce research that not only met standards of academic excellence, but was also relevant and usable for policy and practice.

At the time of the programme’s design, the concept of ‘impact’ as an indicator of research performance was just starting to emerge in the United Kingdom (UK). Over nearly a decade of ESPA’s lifespan, pressure has mounted for academics to provide ‘research that matters’ to underpin action on major global challenges such as poverty, climate change and environmental degradation. In this sense, ESPA acted as a ‘useful testing ground for understanding how to meet these new requirements and adapt to a paradigm shift in research funding and evaluation’. As an integral part of its legacy, this paper aims to share lessons in a way that can be relevant for funders and managers of programmes with similar focus and ambition.

About ESPA

Funded jointly by the UK Department for International Development (DFID), the Natural Environment Research Council (NERC) and the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC), ESPA was developed as a direct response by the UK Government to the findings of the 2005 Millennium Ecosystem Assessment. This assessment had highlighted how substantial gains in human wellbeing in recent decades had been achieved at the expense of high and often irreversible levels of ecosystem degradation.

ESPA’s overall goal was to ensure the conservation and sustainable management of ecosystems in ways that alleviate poverty and enhance wellbeing. The programme had four key objectives:

1. to create a strong research and evidence base on the connections across ecosystem services, their dynamics and management, human use and pathways to sustainable poverty reduction;
2. to develop innovative, interdisciplinary research and methodologies, delivering tools and approaches that enable decision-makers to simulate and predict socio-ecological responses to complex social and economic trends;
3. to engage and communicate effectively with policy-makers, practitioners and decision-makers so that ESPA’s research is well understood and used;
4. to enhance the capacity of researchers in the Global South to conduct, lead, use and communicate high quality ESPA-type interdisciplinary research, including through effective international research partnerships.

Over the course of nine years, ESPA has funded 125 research projects in 53 countries. Of the nearly 1,000 researchers involved in ESPA projects, half were based in the Global South.

About this paper

This paper aims to provide an open and honest reflection on the ‘development impact’ of ESPA research. In concrete terms: to what extent has ESPA-generated knowledge changed the way in which ecosystem services are managed, in a way that alleviates poverty and promotes human wellbeing? How ‘impactful’ have ESPA-funded projects been? What factors have enabled or hindered the achievement of impact? What lessons can be distilled to inform other programmes?
To address these questions, the paper looks back at ESPA’s conceptualisation of impact pathways, as defined in the programme’s theory of change (see p.5), and considers how this has played out in practice for ESPA projects and the programme as a whole. It focuses, in particular, on two dimensions that are crucial to ESPA’s vision of impact:

- interdisciplinarity, seen both as a factor for research excellence and a condition for knowledge relevance and impact;
- equitable partnership between research institutions in the Global North and the Global South.

The paper also offers reflections on the way in which ESPA projects have engaged with local communities in developing countries (as the intended beneficiaries of ESPA research) and the lessons derived from such engagement.

**Process and methodology**

This paper draws on a process of programmatic learning led by the ESPA Directorate in its final phase (May 2017-March 2018). The following data-collection and analysis activities were undertaken as part of this process.

- **Desk reviews**
  The process started with a comprehensive review of ESPA documentation, including project proposals and reports. A parallel literature review was conducted to map the status quo of current debates on the research/impact interface and related themes, and to strategically identify knowledge gaps and opportunities for ESPA learning to add value.

- **Online survey**
  An online survey, which ran from August to December 2017, was open to all ESPA researchers and partners. It attracted 38 responses, covering 19 projects in total (with many projects represented by multiple responses from different members of the project team). While the survey allowed for anonymous responses, all respondents bar one chose to give their full details, which enabled a summary of the characteristics of the sample. Most respondents were in leadership positions within the projects, with 16 principal investigators and 10 co-investigators. In all, 30 of the respondents worked for academic organisations in the Global North compared to only eight in the Global South, giving the survey a bias towards the views of those working in the Global North.

- **Key informant interviews**
  Fifteen semi-structured key informant interviews were carried out between September 2017 and January 2018. Given the relatively low representation of researchers based in Southern institutions in the online survey, a targeted effort was made to reach out to Southern researchers through these interviews.

- **Workshop ‘Interdisciplinarity and development impact – what have we learned?’**
  This November 2017 workshop aimed to give ESPA researchers an opportunity to reflect on their own experience of interdisciplinary research, share the challenges and opportunities that they had encountered and, crucially, elaborate concrete recommendations for funders and researchers in programmes with similar interdisciplinary approaches. The participants comprised 16 ESPA researchers, several ESPA Directorate staff and a few researchers who were not affiliated with ESPA. Overall, 53 ESPA researchers (30 males and 23 females) were involved in the programmatic learning process, participating in one or more of the activities listed above. Of these, 32 were based in UK institutions, 10 in non-UK Northern institutions, and the remaining 11 in institutions in the Global South. Overall, 25 projects were represented in this sample – or one fifth of the total ESPA project portfolio.
In addition to the activities listed above, insights were gained from regular Directorate engagement with ESPA projects, including catch-up meetings and completion meetings.

A number of limitations should be noted. First, there was substantial turnover in the ESPA Directorate, which meant that information on ESPA’s activities before 2016 could be accessed only via desk review. Second, our sample was heavily biased towards UK-based researchers and researchers in senior roles. The attempts to reach out to Southern researchers and partners through the interviews resulted in a sample bias in favour of those (typically senior) Southern researchers who had been more actively involved in the ESPA community, while the voices of more junior, less well-connected Southern researchers remained under-represented. Finally, as a desk-based exercise the programmatic learning process had no involvement with local communities, end users and ultimate beneficiaries of ESPA research. This inevitably limits the extent to which it could gain insights about co-production, community involvement and impact of projects on intended beneficiaries.

Part of the process of programmatic learning overlapped chronologically with the DFID-commissioned *Independent end of programme review* (EPR). Care was taken to ensure complementarity and avoid duplication between the two parallel processes, and to share relevant information gathered.
Impact is at the heart of ESPA. Its research and engagement activities aim to improve the lives of poor people. As ESPA fills knowledge gaps with new insights and evidence, and as decision-makers and communities act differently as a result, ecosystems will be conserved and managed more sustainably – in ways that alleviate poverty and enhance wellbeing. This improvement is not guaranteed however – success depends on various factors.

ESPA impact strategy (2016)

Impact is non-linear, takes time and can be hard to measure; some of our most compelling impacts weren’t necessarily those we anticipated, while others require ongoing stakeholder engagement that will inevitably take time to filter through.

Melissa Leach, Principal Investigator

‘Impact’ is a widely used and increasingly popular term both in international development and academia. However, the term has very different meanings and implications for these two professional communities. As a research programme that aimed to tackle key development issues, ESPA found itself at the crossroads of these different meanings and implications at a time when they were both still in flux. The evolving impact agenda opened exciting opportunities, but also raised conceptual and operational challenges for ESPA researchers and for the programme as a whole.

Impact in international development

Among development practitioners and agencies the terms ‘impact’ and ‘impact evaluation’ have become common parlance. A consensus view has emerged around the definition given by the Development Assistance Committee (DAC) of the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD), which considers impact as any ‘positive and negative, primary and secondary long-term effects produced by a development intervention, directly or indirectly, intended or unintended’. However, there is wide variation across the sector on how the concept is used in practice in programme design, management and evaluation.

While there is no single definition of ‘impact evaluation’, one common element is the focus on a counterfactual (what would have happened without the intervention?) as a strategy for causal inference (did the intervention contribute to the observed change?). The call for impact evaluations is embedded in the search for evidence-based policy and practice, with development actors challenged to demonstrate that their decision and interventions are informed by hard evidence of ‘what works’, rather than by untested assumptions on how things ‘should work’. This search, in turn, has been given new urgency by shifting public perceptions of aid, and the need to demonstrate value for money in international development.
Impact in academia

Research Councils UK (RCUK) distinguishes between ‘academic impact’ (‘the demonstrable contribution that excellent research makes to academic advances, across and within disciplines, including significant advances in understanding, methods, theory and application’) and ‘economic and social impact’ (‘the demonstrable contribution that excellent research makes to society and the economy’). The emphasis is, increasingly, on the latter. In practice, however, the distinction can be quite blurred.

Similar to the pressures on international development to demonstrate impact, the increasing focus on impact in academia has been driven by pursuit of public accountability: researchers are expected to operate under an ‘explicit social contract’, giving something back to wider society in return for public funding. In the UK context, ‘impact’ is a particularly loaded notion, as it represents an increasingly important component of the Research Excellence Framework (REF), the performance-based research funding system through which British and Northern Irish universities are assessed. Strong financial and reputational incentives to promote impact are increasingly changing workload models and promotion criteria.

The impact agenda is not without its critics. Many academics resent the increased use of the term because its meaning is unclear, with ‘the elusive impact particle’ leaving researchers to ponder such minutiae as ‘how many clicks would it take for a podcast to count as impact’. In the absence of clarity, impact risks being equated with frenetic activities and endless products (policy briefs, workshops, seminars, blogs, social media, advisory and consultancy roles, etc.). The fact that the word is also used routinely in relation to the ‘impact factor’ of academic journals (which measures the frequency with which the average article in a journal is cited by others in a particular year) only adds to the confusion.

Other concerns go beyond semantic ambiguity. Critics are split between those who fear that the impact agenda is infringing on academic autonomy (i.e. impact is going too far) and those who think that impact is receiving lip service, but is not fundamentally changing the culture and practice of academia (i.e. impact is not going far enough).

Those who believe the former have pointed to the threats to academic autonomy, and the risk of ‘impact capture’ of academic research. The very incentives that place impact high on the list of priorities for universities may lead individual researchers to pursue the low-hanging impact fruits for motives that are based purely on career advancement, for example by focusing on research themes that have the potential to score highly for impact in the REF, rather than embarking on original, innovative and open-ended research. Related to this is the risk of ‘impact sensationalism’ – the disconnect between what is ‘promised’ in a grant application and what can be realistically delivered under real-life constraints and within the limited timeframe of the project.

On the other hand, it is often noted that, despite the rhetorical emphasis on benefits for wider society, academic success still tends to be measured by the number of peer-reviewed journal articles published and the number of times those papers are cited. Impact ‘done properly’ requires a type of upskilling – such as the ability to engage with non-academic partners, or to communicate research findings to lay audiences – that is neither prioritised nor resourced in today’s academia. Ultimately, both lines of criticism point to the fact that academics have yet to fully grapple with the complexity of including impact as an integral component of research, its implications for what counts as ‘good research’, how researchers are supported and rewarded, and the risks of a disconnect between rhetoric and practice.
Impact in ESPA

ESPA was the first major collaboration between DFID, NERC and ESRC, and, as such, a testing ground to reconcile and operationalise the two notions of ‘development’ and ‘academic’ impact. Not surprisingly, the three funders had different views on impact, at least in the early years of the programme. Having been at the forefront of the promotion of impact and impact evaluation as part of the evidence-based policy and value for money agenda, DFID envisaged ESPA’s impact as a demonstrable improvement in the lives of poor communities in the countries where projects were undertaken. The two Research Councils, on their part, were more attuned to academic notions of impact, and had less stringent requirements in terms of timeline and attribution.

These different perspectives had implications for what was expected from projects in relation to level of impact and timescale, and the guidance provided to researchers. As a result, many ESPA researchers felt that ‘impact’ was a moving target, particularly in the early phases, with expectations and priorities often shifting considerably during the lifetime of a single project. According to DFID’s EPR, this difference of views among funders was ‘perhaps ESPA’s most significant challenge [...] a complex issue that ESPA has struggled with at a programme as well as a project level, and to some extent it remains unresolved’. One interviewee of the EPR team poignantly summarised the dilemma of reconciling ‘academic impact’ and ‘development impact’: ‘the whole idea of research is that you don’t know the answer. The whole idea of aid is to deliver the answer’.

The emphasis on impact in ESPA’s calls for funding evolved over the years, reflecting the growing impact agendas in both the academic and the international development fields, and the related need to navigate different understandings of impact among the funders. The 2012 funding call stated that projects would be required to deliver both academic impact (i.e. ‘a potential to produce research that can be published in high-profile international peer-reviewed academic journals’ and ‘the generation of new high-quality datasets as well as new tools, approaches and methods’) and development impact (i.e. ‘the likely contribution to the sustainable alleviation of poverty, improved health and wellbeing and the creation of new opportunities for poor people in low-income countries to benefit from sustainable growth of the global economy’). In subsequent calls, the emphasis shifted more towards academic impact. Alongside the requests for core grants, a number of funding calls were launched at different times during the programme for specific support for impact activities (mostly managed through the ESPA Directorate).

The role of ESPA’s Directorate in promoting and supporting impact

A Directorate was contracted in 2010 to support ESPA’s implementation, primarily through coordinating ESPA research and impact activities and undertaking additional activities to add value to the programme. From its base at the University of Edinburgh, the Directorate issued guidance documents on impact and research-into-use, including the ESPA impact framework (2010), an ESPA theory of change (ToC) with a detailed manual (2012), an ESPA research into use strategy (2012), and an ESPA impact strategy (2013). In the early years, however, this proliferation of documents was not accompanied by significant support or advice from impact specialists. As a result, it was not clear to ESPA researchers how to determine what was expected from projects in relation to level of impact and timescale, and the guidance provided to researchers. As a result, many ESPA researchers felt frustrated with at a programme as well as a project level, and to some extent it remains unresolved. Not surprisingly, the three different perspectives had implications for what was expected from projects in relation to level of impact and timescale, and the guidance provided to researchers. As a result, many ESPA researchers felt that ‘impact’ was a moving target, particularly in the early phases, with expectations and priorities often shifting considerably during the lifetime of a single project. According to DFID’s EPR, this difference of views among funders was ‘perhaps ESPA’s most significant challenge [...] a complex issue that ESPA has struggled with at a programme as well as a project level, and to some extent it remains unresolved’. One interviewee of the EPR team poignantly summarised the dilemma of reconciling ‘academic impact’ and ‘development impact’: ‘the whole idea of research is that you don’t know the answer. The whole idea of aid is to deliver the answer’.

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In 2016, ESPA’s focus on impact was renewed and strengthened, in particular through the recruitment of a dedicated impact team as part of the ESPA Directorate, and the launch of a new ESPA impact strategy. Based on extensive consultation within the ESPA community, the strategy refocused ESPA’s work and amplified impact as a key priority, alongside academic synthesis, during the final phase of programme delivery. The new strategy placed greater emphasis on development impact (as opposed to academic impact) than the 2012 strategy. The new strategy also elaborated more clearly the value of a programme-wide approach, and used a programme-wide ToC, to guide programme management and inspire the design of project-level ToCs. The new strategy was formally launched at two regional impact events in March 2016: in Kenya (for Africa) and India (for South Asia).

The presence of a dedicated impact team allowed the Directorate to offer more targeted support to researchers to identify and optimise impact opportunities as they arose throughout the life of the ESPA programme. This was achieved, among other ways, through biannual ‘project catch-ups’, where project teams could share challenges and get advice on possible avenues of impact. Many ESPA researchers see this as a turning point to address what they had previously seen as a mismatch between high expectations for impact delivery and low levels of support and guidance on how to achieve this in practice.
Box 1: What is a theory of change?

A theory of change (ToC) can be defined as a description of how and why a desired change is expected to happen in a particular context. It focuses on filling in what has been described as the ‘missing middle’ between ‘activities’ (what a programme or project actually does) and the achievement of the desired goals. It helps to unpack and critically examine assumptions about how change is expected to happen in a particular context at a particular time. ToCs often take the form of a visual illustration, accompanied by a narrative.32

A ToC approach is now being used in international development by bilateral donors such as DFID, multilateral agencies and international non-governmental organisations. UK Research Councils are also increasingly using this approach for grants funded as part of official development assistance, such as the Global Challenges Research Fund, where applicants must set out their ‘pathways to impact’.

ESPA’s theory of change

The 2016 ESPA impact strategy uses a ToC approach to define pathways for impact. This helps to illustrate plausible links from activities and outputs in the short term, through to outcomes in the medium term and on to longer-term impact. Its recognition of non-linear and iterative pathways from research to development impact is a crucial aspect of the ESPA ToC (see p.5) – much more so than for ‘traditional development’ interventions. It also recognises that, in most cases, it is only possible to make claims of contribution, rather than full attribution. Finally, the ToC stresses the need to be adaptable and flexible, responding to opportunities as they emerge.

The ESPA ToC sets out a more direct way in which ESPA-funded projects can have impact, through targeted ‘demonstration activities’ that aim to test and prove a particular approach, while generating direct benefits for local communities in developing countries.

Types and levels of impact for ESPA projects

ESPA has funded 125 projects over the course of nearly a decade. Overall, there is a high degree of variation in terms of the impact pathways they envisaged, and in the type and level of impact they have actually achieved. The EPR found that several ESPA projects stand out for the extent and the quality of their impact, while others show innovative potential for future impact. In most cases, the lifespan of an ESPA project only allowed the observation of progress along an impact pathway, rather than the ultimate impact envisaged in the project proposals.

There are several common examples of how ESPA projects contributed to a process of change in the management of ecosystem services.

- **Influencing policy**: research findings have informed policy processes and texts; tools, models and datasets have been used by decision-makers; and ESPA project teams and their partners have been invited to serve as experts on national and international committees.

- **Influencing citizens’ action**: research findings have been picked up by local media, non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and citizens’ groups and used to mobilise the public on themes related to environmental protection and poverty alleviation. The ESPA project ‘The political economy of water security, ecosystem services and livelihoods in the Western Himalayas’ (see project example 1 that follows), provides a compelling case study on the importance of supporting timely, relevant research that is connected directly with people’s wellbeing, and of researchers engaging constructively with key stakeholders.33

- **Influencing business practice**: research findings have led to the engagement of private-sector actors on new eco-friendly models and business models. The ECOLIMITS project in Ghana, for example, has engaged with major cocoa producers (such as Touton, Cadbury, Hershey, Nestle, Sainsburys and Wrigley) to promote eco-friendly farming methods for cocoa, a pillar of Ghana’s economy and of rural livelihoods. ESPA research played an important role in broadening the evidence base on sustainably farmed cocoa, suggesting critical directions for new research and practice in the years ahead.34

- **Influencing local practices**: providing communities with new knowledge, tools and resources to protect their ecosystems, while supporting their livelihoods and wellbeing. Alongside these impacts from research, some ESPA projects have achieved direct and more easily attributable impact from ‘demonstration activities’ – similar to more traditional development interventions that have tangible short-
term (and typically small-scale) benefits for the community. The Mikoko Pamoja project (see project example 2 that follows) is one example of research that has leveraged a win-win scenario for ecosystem conservation and restoration on the one hand, and progress on community wellbeing on the other.35

- Providing a scientific ‘proof of concept’ to leverage subsequent funding by bilateral and multilateral development donors.

Some researchers also noted specific development impact (often short-term) as a result of the donation of equipment (e.g. weather stations) to local counterparts.

Indicators of progress along an impact pathway are not, however, any guarantee of the kind of impact the researchers intended. The fact that a model is used by decision-makers does not guarantee that pro-poor decisions will be taken as a result (in fact, the opposite may happen). But it does represent a logical step in the right direction, and is often as much as can be expected within the lifetime of any single research project.

Box 2: Insights from the online survey on researchers’ perceptions of impact

The online survey asked researchers to assess the extent to which their project had already achieved development impact (see Figure 1).

When different people responded on the same project, however, they often gave very different answers on the extent to which they felt the project had achieved an impact. This seems to suggest that participants either lacked a project-wide understanding of what constituted impact, and/or were not all equally familiar with the project’s activities and outcomes.

Figure 1: Researchers’ perceptions of impact

Some development impact already achieved (46%)

Significant development impact already achieved (8%)

Very limited or no impact so far (46%)

Project example 1: ESPA research informs action by local citizens to protect critical water sources in a small Himalayan town

ESPA’s project ‘The political economy of water security, ecosystem services and livelihoods in the Western Himalayas’ is an example of research results being both timely and relevant to decision-making processes that affect the wellbeing of local people.

One of the project study sites was Nainital, a mountain resort town in the Himalayan region of India. The town is heavily dependent on its lake to support its growing population and tourism industry, but the water levels are rapidly declining, with direct consequences for the wellbeing of local people, particularly the poorest. The research results suggested that encroachments from illegal construction activities should be halted to address this problem.

The project team convened a three-day meeting that brought together hydrologists, geologists and social scientists, to discuss the impact of illegal construction on Nainital’s critical recharge zones. The findings of this expert group were shared by local media through a series of articles, informing the community about the problem when water scarcity was at its peak, underpinning the connection between water management and the shortage. On 3 June 2017, 1,000 people took part in a barefoot march through the town to raise awareness about this issue.

The report findings were also leveraged by the community as evidence for a public litigation lawsuit against illegal construction activities. As of April 2018, the court case is ongoing; in the interim, the High Court has banned any further construction and given immediate orders to prepare a detailed project report for the irrigation department to rejuvenate the recharge zone.
Project example 2: Kenyan mangrove conservation earns money for community development projects, while helping to fight climate change

In Gazi, Kenya, an ESPA-funded team worked with a project known locally as *Mikoko Pamoja* (meaning ‘mangroves together’) to explore the potential of mangroves to store carbon below ground, and the vulnerability of this carbon storage if the mangroves are cut down. This research provided evidence for a conservation scheme to apply for accreditation to sell carbon credits through the voluntary carbon market, presenting a win-win scenario: the local community received an income for mangrove conservation, while hundreds of mangrove trees were preserved and restored, which kept their carbon locked safely in the ground.

As of April 2018, the sale of carbon credits to individuals and organisations had raised $52,758, funding forest conservation and local community projects. After consultation with the local community, a village council was established to select the project’s spending priorities. To date, these have included new water pumps and distribution points (supplying 75% of the area’s population); the development of a new school building (benefiting 600 children); new textbooks and furniture for local schools; and sponsorship of dozens of local children for primary, secondary and tertiary education.

Project example 3: Well-timed ESPA research feeds into the Bangladesh Delta Plan 2100

The livelihoods of more than 40 million poor people in Bangladesh’s delta region are increasingly precarious as the natural resources upon which they depend are threatened by soil salinisation, land-use change, migration to urban areas, unstable food prices, cyclones and more. Researchers from the ESPA Deltas project in Bangladesh analysed multiple drivers of change to model how different development interventions and decisions might affect the lives of people living in the delta.

The policy environment in Bangladesh changed rapidly, just as the researchers were going about their work. The government sought development interventions that could help Bangladesh achieve its goal of becoming a middle-income country by 2021, Bangladesh’s 50th anniversary. It also became motivated by the new Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) targets. The high-level Planning Division of the Government of Bangladesh began to work on an ambitious, long-term initiative to help the country meet these goals: the Bangladesh Delta Plan 2100 (BDP2100). Its launch was an opportunity for the researchers to feed their findings into the policy-making process, and long-term engagement was made possible by additional funding from the ESPA Directorate to build on the foundations of the initial project.
Designing research projects for development impact

Looking back at the projects that were relatively successful in their pathway to impact, a key question is to what extent their positive outcomes can be attributed to specific elements of project design rather than other factors, such as the local political context or personal chemistries within the team. The best answer is probably ‘a bit of both’, recognising that appropriate project design can greatly enhance a project’s chances of being ‘in the right place at the right time’ or having the right mix of people on board.

Having a clear and realistic idea of how change is expected to happen was seen by ESPA researchers as a crucial factor, and an area where teams would have welcomed more proactive advice and hands-on support from the Directorate, particularly in the early years of the programme. Early identification of entry points for impact helps to clarify the direction of travel and retain a sharp focus during the process – knowing when to say ‘no’ and resisting the temptation to get involved with different processes and activities, however interesting they may appear. Projects that identified clear policy entry points early on had the advantage of knowing their stakeholders from the outset, and could involve them in the knowledge-generation process rather than simply communicating research results to them at the end.

Of course, things rarely go according to plan: the real world is far more complex, and more chaotic, than any ToC can ever capture. Impact was repeatedly described by ESPA researchers as non-linear, unpredictable, and to a certain extent serendipitous, with many critical factors beyond the control of the project team. Several ESPA projects had impact in ways that could not have been planned, or even imagined, at the outset. For example, the findings of the ESPA project ‘Dynamic drivers of disease in Africa’ anthropological research on the social dynamics of Lassa fever found an unanticipated application in informing the response to the Ebola pandemic.

A ToC should be used as a compass, rather than an instruction manual. Flexibility and adaptive management are always crucial and are aided, rather than hampered, by having a clearly defined vision from the beginning. Timing is critical: when opportunities for impact emerge unexpectedly during the course of a project, the team should be able to grab them (as demonstrated, for example, by the Deltas project in Bangladesh – see project example 3). This is often a challenge for project teams, as academics tend to be reluctant to be rushed into sharing findings or to make data available before they have been published in academic journals. Having a well-designed ToC helps to anticipate and navigate such trade-offs and dilemmas.

Effective research communication

Impact needs specific expertise that is not normally reflected in the skillset of a traditional research project. This includes, crucially, the ability to communicate research findings in a way that is relevant and makes sense for the intended audience. This may not always be easy for academics (as one interviewee put it very candidly ‘we scientists are not good at telling people what we do’).

The impact agenda has emphasised for academics how important it is to translate academic prose into more accessibly written and concise documents such as policy briefs – as well as other communications products such as blogs, infographics, films and animations. Social media, with its capacity for terse ‘headline’ approaches, helps raise the profile of key messages and signpost to longer forms of content among researchers and decision-makers and can break through to broader audiences in civil society – although it often takes the additional attention of journalists, mass media platforms and public-facing NGOs to act as additional communicators to bring this content to the general public.

The ESPA impact strategy focuses on the value of effective research communication. Such communication has to be ‘two-way’: not only ‘pushing’ information out to target audiences, but also ‘pulling’ target audiences to engage them, involve them and build relations with them in a more proactive way. Key messages need to be packaged in different formats, styles and levels of complexity to accommodate different audiences who have varying levels of technical understanding and available time, and who engage with communication materials in different ways.

Research uptake may require a change in the language to fit the way in which particular problems are framed by policy-makers or practitioners in a certain context. ESPA researchers noted, for example, that the language of ‘ecosystem services’ is often ill-suited for engagement with decision-makers and other potential research users. It is important to understand the way in which concepts are culturally constructed in any given context, and how different words can be misunderstood or mistranslated.
Tell us about your role in the SPACES project

‘I started working on SPACES in November 2016, towards the end of the project. My role was to support the planned impact activities with communications products and to help strategise and tie all the activities together. I started with a series of interviews with numerous members of the SPACES team from data-collectors, to researchers, to the project investigators. From here, I pulled out the key findings that were coming out of the project and worked closely with the SPACES researchers to streamline them into messages that could be taken back to the communities where the research was collected and to stakeholders in Kenya and Mozambique.’

What were the main challenges?

‘The main challenge was coming in at the end of a project and trying to play catch-up. Another challenge was working with two teams in Kenya and Mozambique: Skype meetings can only go so far, and often times something that would be solved quickly face-to-face takes much longer remotely.

‘And then there is, of course, the big challenge of measuring impact. Even though the SPACES project put in place several rounds of meetings with local communities, delivering research findings and suggestions on how to use them, we are still at the early stages of seeing impact. It will take much longer to know what kind of effect SPACES has truly had on local communities and on policy in the region.’

What recommendations would you give to future research projects to achieve development impact?

‘Definitely to begin working on impact from the beginning of the project – starting with it at the end is too late! Also, local organisations should be involved throughout the whole project and not only at the end. Build a relationship with the organisations and the communities, so they look forward to the project’s members visiting and meeting with them.’
Co-production of knowledge with non-academic actors

The development of the impact agenda in academia has been paralleled by a rising call for the engagement of non-academic actors (intermediate research users and/or ultimate beneficiaries of research) in the design and production of knowledge. In its most accomplished form, this is known as ‘co-production’. With an ‘allure that is hard to resist’, co-production promises better-informed problem definition; more pertinent (and more challenging) research questions; better data collection; wider dissemination; a more nuanced understanding of how the research fits into the ‘bigger picture’; and realistic expectations of the project’s likely contribution – all resulting in higher potential for the uptake and use of research findings.

The 2016 ESPA impact strategy refers to co-production, stating that ‘in order to leverage the benefits of local knowledge and connections, ESPA supports projects within which the potential research users and/or ultimate beneficiaries play a significant role in research design and delivery’. The strategy stresses the importance of the involvement of local stakeholders in all stages of the research process, ideally from the beginning, not as passive recipients of knowledge but as partners with a sense of involvement in – and ownership of – the research process.

This is intended to help researchers develop a more nuanced understanding of barriers that inhibit change at the individual or institutional level, devise strategies to overcome these barriers, and contribute to the delivery of effective and sustainable outcomes that are maintained and owned by stakeholders after the end of ESPA funding. From the outset of a project, applicants for ESPA grants were encouraged to stimulate active engagement with potential users of research, as well as ultimate beneficiaries whenever possible.

For all its benefits, however, co-production remains elusive and aspirational – as outlined in a recent blog by Future Climate For Africa, entitled ‘Co-production sounds lovely, but have we ever seen it?’. Several ESPA researchers have echoed this sentiment. When it is genuine, co-production is not simply an ‘add on’ to research-as-usual: it represents a qualitatively different form of knowledge generation, which goes to the very core of how ‘knowledge’ is understood, and challenges the essence of conventional academic thinking and practice.

For both analytical and operational purposes, it can be useful to see involvement of non-academic partners in research across a spectrum – the equivalent of an ‘Arnstein Ladder’ used to assess citizens’ participation (see Table 1).

### Table 1: A spectrum of co-production of evidence with non-academic partners

| Information | Non-academic partners are informed of the aim of the research at the outset, and findings are shared with them afterwards. This is fundamentally one-way communication: while partners are invited to express feedback, there is no commitment from the researchers to take this into account, and no leeway built into the research timeline and budget for substantial changes in the process based on this feedback. |
| Consultation | This includes all the elements of ‘information’. However, in this case there is time built in for feedback: community members are encouraged to ask questions, and there is space for the process to be modified according to this feedback. |
| Involvement | Involvement goes beyond consultation, with research ideas brought to communities at the early design stage, and researchers open to the idea that the final results may differ significantly from these initial ideas. However, involvement differs from fully fledged co-production in that the final decision, and the final responsibility and accountability for the product, still rests with the research team. |
| Co-production | All parties have an equal say in the final decision on research questions and processes. |
In authentic co-production, the final results are likely to differ significantly from the original vision of the academic partners. While these results are likely to be more relevant and ‘impactful’, they may also end up being less exciting or innovative from a purely academic point of view, and therefore less publishable. As academic recognition and career advancement is still determined largely by ‘how much’ and ‘where’ a researcher publishes, this is not an easy dilemma to navigate.  

The degree to which research users and beneficiaries are involved in knowledge production is very context-specific, and – again – depends crucially on the project’s ToC: the envisaged pathways and assumptions on how change is going to happen determine who should be involved in the process, to what extent, and in what capacity. Research proposals may sometimes overstate claims of co-production, defining any form of engagement with a partner as co-production to align with the dominant paradigm and the perceived preferences of funders. This lack of precision is problematic in a number of ways, not least because it can lead to disillusionment on the part of non-academic partners.

**Assessing contribution**

With hindsight, ESPA researchers wished they had more guidance and support on how to measure impact, which indicators to look at, and how to carry out an analysis of contribution. Thinking through a ToC helps to address some of the difficulties in demonstrating the causal nexus between research intervention and observed change. In most cases, even the most successful ESPA projects can claim no more than a meaningful contribution (rather than a direct attribution) to development change.

Impact seems more likely if ESPA’s funding is part of something bigger – perhaps part of long-standing collaborations between researchers and other stakeholders, possibly with different sources of funding – yet such collaborations make it more difficult to draw a straight line between ESPA funding and observed changes. As one researcher put it, ‘the more impact you get, the more difficult it is to attribute it to ESPA’.

Interestingly, challenges around attribution and contribution seem to be, in part, related to different disciplines. It was noted, for example, that social scientists tend to be less comfortable with attributing impact to specific interventions, as they are accustomed to recognising the complex and non-linear nature of social processes.
Interdisciplinarity has emerged as an integral dimension of the ‘research for development impact’ agenda, and is often presented as a research mode that can facilitate relevance and usability of knowledge. The rationale is that the grand challenges facing society today – such as food security, climate change or global health – are not amenable to investigation by researchers from any single discipline. This requires the convergence of expertise from biological, physical and social disciplines, as well as innovation.

Indeed, innovation is expected to be enhanced by interdisciplinarity: ‘discoveries are said to be more likely on the boundaries between fields, where the latest techniques, perspectives and insights can reorient or increase knowledge’. Tellingly, 80% of the impact case studies submitted to REF2014 were based on interdisciplinary research.

ESPA was one of the first UK-funded research programmes to take an interdisciplinary approach to complex issues in the Global South. In carving out a new conceptual niche at the crossroads between ecosystem management (traditionally the

**Box 4: What is interdisciplinarity?**

**Interdisciplinarity** can be defined as a process where researchers from different disciplines work together to integrate knowledge and methods, creating something that is greater than the sum of its parts. The concept is often used loosely, as a catch-all term to refer to a wide variety of research strategies and practices. It is sometimes used interchangeably with similar notions, such as multidisciplinarity and transdisciplinarity, that are not always defined consistently. Views differ on whether these distinctions represent ‘theological hair-splitting’ or useful categorisation.

**Multidisciplinarity** is used mostly to indicate different disciplines working alongside each other towards a common objective, interacting but without the synergy of approaches that characterises interdisciplinarity.

**Transdisciplinarity** generally refers to the inclusion of perspectives from stakeholders, as well as from different disciplines.
remit of natural scientists) and poverty alleviation and wellbeing (traditionally viewed through a social science lens), ESPA emphasised the value of systems thinking. Several other programmes have since been launched that require or encourage a similar interdisciplinary approach, including, for example, ‘Unlocking the Potential of Groundwater for the Poor’ (UPGro), ‘Science for Humanitarian Emergencies and Resilience’ (SHEAR), ‘Future Climate for Africa’ (FCFA) and the ‘Global Challenges Research Fund’ (GCRF).

The vision of the 2016 ESPA impact strategy draws a strong correlation between interdisciplinarity, research excellence and development impact. One consistent requirement in ESPA’s funding calls has been the need to demonstrate interdisciplinarity in team composition, research questions, approaches and method. Interdisciplinarity was also the specific focus of ESPA’s mid-term learning review, which aimed to assess how the application and review process for ESPA-funded projects had supported and shaped the type of interdisciplinary research funded. ESPA can, therefore, be seen as a large-scale experiment in funding, conducting, publishing and assessing interdisciplinary research, with the potential to offer critical insights to current and future programmes that have a similar focus.

It is hard to say to what extent ESPA’s projects, and the programme as a whole, have truly reflected this vision. Interdisciplinarity was not integrated in ESPA’s monitoring and evaluation (M&E) system, with one exception: the ESPA logical framework tracks the proportion of projects (out of all the projects that have published journal articles) where at least one article has been published in an interdisciplinary journal (83% for the ESPA programme as a whole). Of all ESPA articles, more than half have been published in interdisciplinary journals (as shown in Figure 2).

The DFID EPR concluded that ESPA has ‘created a demonstrated value of interdisciplinary science and design for development impact’, as well as an ‘interdisciplinary science community that did not exist previously’, and played a crucial role in making ‘interdisciplinary approaches and teams […] more accepted, and sometimes even required, by the Research Councils, by DFID and by the UK’s Global Challenges
Research Fund’. According to the EPR, ESPA has also provided ‘practical lessons for designing and delivering good interdisciplinary research’ including the importance of strong project management, leadership and coordination, as well as appropriate budget and time resources.\[^{54}\]

While all ESPA projects have been, to some extent, based on collaboration among different disciplines (an essential requirement of ESPA funding calls), the degree of interaction, exchange and synthesis varied considerably across projects. The term ‘interdisciplinarity’ has been used loosely, with projects covering a whole spectrum of collaboration and integration – sometimes coming closer to multidisciplinarity, and sometimes venturing into transdisciplinary territory (see Box 4 for definitions).

In general, ESPA researchers support the idea that interdisciplinarity leads to both better quality research and greater development impact. Specifically, interdisciplinarity seems to be related to ‘getting to the heart of the problem’, and gives researchers the credibility to engage with policy-makers.

Many ESPA researchers spoke fondly of their experience of interdisciplinary collaboration, seeing it as personally and professionally enriching, and often describing it as ‘exciting’ and ‘fun’. At the same time, they note that interdisciplinary research comes with its own characteristics and challenges.

**Interdisciplinary research takes longer**

Interdisciplinary work carries an inevitable time penalty at every stage: from writing a research proposal, to designing the research process, agreeing on methods and sampling techniques, to deciding where to publish the results. In addition, interdisciplinarity in a programme like ESPA does not take place in sterile lab conditions: it interacts with other dimensions of complexity, such as the difficult logistical conditions for field work.

Interdisciplinary work is also more likely to be delayed, as work packages are interdependent, rather than just progressing in parallel. Therefore, if one work package is deferred for whatever reason, the domino effect on the others is more significant than it is for a traditional project. The ambition and excitement of interdisciplinary research need to be tempered, therefore, with a realistic attitude towards what can be achieved within the limited timeframe of a research project.\[^{55}\]

**Interdisciplinarity requires a shift in mindsets**

Researchers who have been part of successful interdisciplinary projects often talk about an ‘a-ha’ moment when the value of seeing a problem through an interdisciplinary lens is finally revealed, and they come to realise the value of this new way of working. This epiphany often emerges from long-term frustration with the inability of traditional disciplinary paths to solve real-life puzzles.

Respect, trust and open-mindedness are essential to overcome predictable differences in mindsets. While personality clashes can happen in any team, they can be compounded when interdisciplinary team members join from different backgrounds, disciplinary stances, attitudes and perceptions. One ESPA researcher half-jokingly compared disciplinary attitudes to religious fundamentalism for their absolute belief in the standards of ‘good science’. Defensive attitudes can emerge if researchers feel that their discipline is not given adequate credit, is included in a tokenistic way, or is confined to a ‘service’ role. Therefore, project teams underestimate the ‘soft’ elements of project management at their peril. Facilitation skills in the team can determine the success of an interdisciplinary collaboration, and yet these skills are not generally supported or rewarded in research leadership.

The most successful examples of interdisciplinary collaboration were those where team members met regularly, and worked alongside each other, rather than just coming together for meetings. However, the incentives and resources for teams to meet in person are often insufficient.

> **Being an interdisciplinary team gave us in the Deltas project the credibility to engage with government ministries in Bangladesh, which a team of only hydrologists wouldn’t have had.**

Alex Chapman, ESPA researcher
Interdisciplinarity means keeping a focus on the ‘bigger picture’

The success of interdisciplinary collaboration depends, to a large extent, on the ability of the team as a whole to see the overall picture, beyond its constituent components. This calls for team composition that includes not only an appropriate mix of disciplinary expertise, but also researchers with a more generalist profile. The latter are also referred to as T-shaped researchers, who have some knowledge of other disciplines and the ability to collaborate across disciplines (the horizontal bar of the T), as well as in-depth expertise in their own discipline (the vertical bar).

Scale matters: in smaller projects, one generalist can be involved in all work packages and interact with specialist researchers. For larger projects, this is not feasible. Instead, projects tend to adopt what ESPA researchers have called a ‘spoke-and-hub’ model, where research leaders in the hub must dedicate sufficient time and resources to examine and understand all the complexities of every part of the project, and facilitate the necessary connections.

Box 6: Views from the ESPA community

Different disciplinary interests and priorities pose challenges for interdisciplinary collaboration (Simon Willcock)

We all have different passions and interests. In an interdisciplinary collaboration, this can be a very good thing, with each researcher bringing different expertise and a different way of looking at or solving a problem. However, when first coming up with an interdisciplinary idea, what many researchers overlook is that an interesting and exciting research question from the point of view of one subject area may be boring and mundane to the other fields you want to involve. Some ecosystem service valuation studies provide an example: it might be very interesting for a geographer to investigate carbon storage across social-ecological gradients (as I did for my PhD research). However, it is a rare economist who will find the valuation of the carbon an interesting academic exercise.

One way to ensure every team member is interested in the research is to allow each field to pursue their own research questions. Merging research goals in this way may result in a project that is interesting to all parties, but is it cost effective or even feasible? Within the ASSETS [Attaining Sustainable Services from Ecosystems through Trade-off Scenarios] project, we created a household survey that covered the data collection needed across several disciplines. However, we may have pushed the patience of survey respondents, many of whom dedicated an entire day to answering our survey!

A similar issue arises around the necessary sample size. An anthropologist may require a single case study in great depth, while a collaborating natural scientist might scorn an apparent n of one, preferring to include 50 communities or more. In reaching a compromise, the team might agree to work to less depth, but cover 10 communities. While this may harmonise the interdisciplinary collaboration, allowing data collection to proceed smoothly, it might cause issues when attempting to publish the findings. Should the paper be sent to an anthropology journal (where it faces being rejected as too shallow) or a natural science journal (where the small sample size may be criticised)? Furthermore, while success with the former journal is of obvious benefit to the anthropologist’s career, can the same be said for the collaborating natural scientist?

“A few thoughts on conducting successful interdisciplinary research: trust each other, respect different points of view, communicate, communicate, and try again, and last but not least, laugh, have fun doing research.”

Genevieve Patenaude, Principal Investigator
Growing recognition of the value and benefits of interdisciplinary research still clashes with an academic culture that remains largely within the boundaries of individual disciplines, as reflected in decisions around funding allocation, peer review and career advancement. While funders can play a catalytic role in supporting interdisciplinarity in a way that promotes development impact, genuine interdisciplinarity calls for a more radical shift in academic culture and practice.

This creates a dilemma, particularly for researchers who are just starting their careers and who may find their future job prospects penalised. ESPA early-career researchers often voiced frustration during the consultation at having been part of an enriching and exciting interdisciplinary experience, but then finding themselves struggling to secure their next academic job (and, in at least one case, considering leaving academia altogether) because they were seen by potential employers as a 'jack of all trades but a master of none'.

The lessons learned from ESPA can offer critical insights to the opportunities and challenges of interdisciplinary research.

*Photo credit: Clare Mills @ListenThinkDraw*
North-South research partnership

ESPA’s focus on research that is undertaken via North-South collaboration and exchange is designed to further enhance the professional practice of all researchers involved.

ESPA impact strategy (2016)

“... the fact that we built our ESPA project on the back of an existing longstanding professional relationship was a massive advantage. We had existing trust and credibility within our key team members from the start.

Online survey respondent

Collaboration between research institutions in the Global North and Global South is widely regarded as critical in supporting evidence-based action on the global challenges of sustainable development. International research partnerships are seen as both desirable in themselves (the ‘normative argument’) and as a means to achieve development impact (the ‘functional argument’).

Academia is grappling with the challenges of promoting partnerships that are non-hierarchical, built on mutual understanding and trust, and that reflect the different partners’ values and priorities. These challenges are well known to international development practitioners: the search for ‘best practices’ in collaboration between Northern and Southern NGOs has been going on for at least two decades, and offers important insights for collaboration by research actors.

Funders call repeatedly for partnerships to be ‘equitable’. Yet the exact meaning of this term often remains unclear, and operational conditions can run counter to these stated aims and work against true equity. Having truly equitable partnership is difficult and goes beyond good intentions – it involves recognising structural power differences, unconscious bias and divergent incentive structures, which cannot be simply wished away.

North-South partnerships have been central to ESPA’s ethos and ToC. Funding calls have mandated the active involvement of developing-country researchers and institutions in the design and implementation of projects. In the early stages of ESPA (2009-2010) specific funding calls focused on developing networks and partnerships between individuals and organisations in the Global South and North and enhancing the capacities of Southern researchers through their meaningful participation and leadership in interdisciplinary research.
One key feature of ESPA’s innovation was that there was no requirement for project teams to include researchers and research institutions based in the UK or elsewhere in the Global North. Instead, the significant involvement of at least one developing-country institution in the project was a requirement – an aspect considered by the EPR to be a valuable advance that other programmes (such as the GCRF) could benefit and learn from. In practice, however, the extent to which Southern institutions were able to benefit from this approach was constrained by the complexity of the RCUK joint electronic submission system (Je-S) and the difficulties new organisations faced in registering on the system. The overwhelming majority of ESPA projects were led from institutions in the UK or other Northern countries.

As for the case of interdisciplinarity outlined above, the focus on partnership in the ToC was not tracked in the M&E system. Only two indicators in the final revised ESPA logframe related to partnership: percentage of publications with a developing-country lead author or developing-country co-author (see Figure 4).

ESPA project partnerships show wide variations in complexity, from the very simple (bilateral collaboration between academic institutions in the Global North and South) to the multifaceted, with multiple layers of interactions (multi-country, interdisciplinary partnerships involving both academic and non-academic actors in different regions). Initially, ESPA made a distinction between ‘academic’ and ‘impact’ partners. However, this distinction proved far more blurred than anticipated, and was not particularly useful, ultimately, in reflecting the roles played by ESPA partners. In several projects, national and international NGOs served as research partners, and in some cases as lead research institutions.

**Partnership-building is a long-term process, which takes dedicated time and resources**

Looking at ESPA projects with hindsight, the duration of the partnership appears to be an important factor for impact. Having a long-standing relationship of collaboration and trust – one that is not conditioned by specific sources of funding or reporting requirements – allows partners to co-design the project based on its contextual relevance. The first collaboration may not be necessarily the most effective, at least in terms of concrete deliverables: its main value may be to lay the foundation for more impactful work in the future.

There is a natural tendency for project teams to start discussing the nuts and bolts of research (such as sampling and data-collection methods) before spending time scoping out the details of the partnership itself. Once the project is underway, intense timelines mean an extremely busy schedule for the team, and keeping the project on track may come at the expense of reflection and learning. This is a particular challenge when coupled with the practical constraints of working across continents, and relying on email and Skype communication for team-building, often with poor connectivity.

One principal investigator spoke of the challenge of managing a multi-country, interdisciplinary team remotely, with many hidden messages in body language that are lost in virtual communication. ESPA learning highlights the importance of giving project partners the opportunity to travel to each other’s institutions throughout the project – ensuring that this travel is two-way, with Southern researchers offered the opportunity to visit the institutions of their Northern partners. However, resources are often too limited for this to happen, as most funders regard large travel budgets as being incompatible with conventional notions of Value for Money.

For ESPA projects based on multi-country case studies, the challenges of working in partnership are even greater. These projects tend to be organised around a ‘hub’ (in the case of ESPA projects, this was often a UK-based institution) and while there may be opportunities for Southern partners to get together once or twice during the project, most of the interaction tends to be bilateral between the lead institutions and the other partners. Multi-country projects also have an intrinsic need for comparability and this, by definition, limits flexibility at the country level to change the direction of research and/or maximise impact opportunities.
Money affects power relations between partners

In international research projects, it is often Northern partners who hold the purse strings: they apply for funding, manage the funds, and report to donors. In its early years, ESPA represented an interesting departure from this norm: initially, each partner received and managed its own share of the budget directly. While informed by notions of equity, this model also posed challenges for principal investigators, who found themselves ultimately responsible for the project’s performance and results without having significant leverage to ensure that work was carried out in a particular way or at a specific time. This changed mid-way through the programme to a more centralised model where the lead institution (in most cases, based in the Global North) managed the budget, and was responsible for its disbursement to partners.

Given the limited core funding available to them, Southern research institutions depend heavily on external grants. Some Northern principal investigators reported frustration at the tendency of Southern institutions to ‘absorb’ funds for core functions rather than using them exclusively for the purpose of the project. Once again, many of these problems are about mutual perceptions, and are made worse when project teams do not have the opportunity to come together regularly for open discussions.

Different incentive structures matter

Partnerships are never just about a single research project, and they do not exist in isolation from contextual incentive structures. All parties have a variety of legitimate objectives, and the successful partnership is the one that not only delivers project-related results, but also meets these varied objectives in a fair and equitable way, as a key component of the distributive dimension of equity. For example, while publishing is a requirement for academics worldwide, the pressure to get one’s work into high-impact academic journals varies across different regions. In general, Southern researchers do not face the same ‘publish or perish’ sword of Damocles as their Northern colleagues: they have to respond to different types of demands, such as providing data and technical advice to policy-makers.

Northern academics are also under great pressure to demonstrate impact. In contrast, Southern academics, while often attuned to translating research into use, may not face the same pressure to ‘show’ impact. This imbalance may frustrate Northern academics, who feel they have to ‘chase’ Southern partners for the impact-related information they need for reporting purposes. Southern academics, meanwhile, often feel that they are under intense (and at times inconsistent) demands from Northern partners that diverge markedly from the requirements of their own institutions. Southern researchers are also unlikely to have as much administrative support as institutions in the North, and face a heavier burden of administration and logistics, which cut into their time for actual research and publishing.

Researchers from the ESPA-funded Deltas project worked in close partnership with the Government of Bangladesh to develop a cutting-edge model to indicate the effects of development policies on future livelihoods. 

Photo credit: WorldFish
North-South partnership carries a risk of falling into a predictable division of labour

In many partnerships, assumptions are made (not necessarily explicitly, or even consciously) about the different strengths that individuals and institutions bring to the table. As a result, Northern partners tend to be most active on project design, relations with funders, academic publications and presentations at academic conferences, as well as interacting with global-level policy processes. Southern partners, for their part, tend to focus mostly on data collection, relations with local NGOs and communities, and interacting with local-level decision-making processes, as well as providing ‘case study’ materials for communication and reporting purposes. While this is not necessarily a problem (and may well make the greatest sense in a specific context), assumptions left unchecked can influence the type of evidence that is produced and hamper the partnership’s transformative potential.

Not only is this ‘default’ division of labour not equitable (thereby contradicting the ‘normative’ argument for partnership), but it is also less likely to lead to impact (negating the ‘functional’ argument). It assumes that ‘research’ and ‘impact’ can be decoupled and operationalised sequentially: first the research is done under the leadership of the Northern partner, and then the findings are handed over to the Southern research partners to ensure that they are used. In fact, impact is unlikely unless it is integrated into the design from the outset, including – crucially – the identification of research questions, timeline and process.

So, what is an equitable partnership? ESPA proposes a framework based on three constituent dimensions of equity, namely recognition, procedure and distribution, as shown in Table 2.

Table 2: An ESPA framework for equitable partnerships

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Equity dimensions</th>
<th>Key factors to consider in a research partnership</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Recognition</td>
<td>Who has a say in designing, planning and implementing the research project? How are the various partner priorities, incentives and practical constraints factored into this?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Procedure</td>
<td>Are there clear and transparent procedures for accountability and for everyone to have a voice?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Distribution</td>
<td>Is there agreement on responsibilities and cost? Is there agreement on how the expected benefits of the partnership will be distributed?</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Successful partnerships are built on mutual trust

Many ESPA researchers attributed their partnerships’ successes to positive interpersonal relations, which ranged from purely professional collaboration to personal friendships. Conversely, ‘lack of trust’ often appears among the challenges cited for less successful partnerships. Trust, however, is as elusive as it is important: it develops mostly at the interpersonal level, and is very vulnerable to staff turnover. Time seems to be an essential condition: meeting face-to-face, particularly outside formal meetings, allows trust to flourish, although it does not guarantee it.

While trust itself cannot be engineered, a strong focus on the procedural dimension of equity can go a long way to promote transparency and accountability, giving all partners the confidence that their voice and interests are taken into account. A written Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) can play a crucial role here, clearly spelling out roles and responsibilities, as well as mechanisms for dispute resolution (a crucial, but often ignored, component). Process matters: one project team noted that, in their enthusiasm for interdisciplinary collaboration, they immediately started to discuss methods and sampling techniques – while, with hindsight, it would have been beneficial to spend more time reflecting on the (perhaps less exciting, but critically important) procedural dimensions of partnership.
MoUs should also establish clear agreement on sensitive issues such as intellectual property, data-sharing and authorship. While the increasing emphasis on data-sharing and open data can have clear benefits for Southern researchers, there are also concerns that it could result in a ‘data drain’: structural inequalities between research systems may mean that academics in the Global South are not in a position to translate data into publications at the same speed as their partners in the Global North. For example, the MoU for the ESPA-funded ASSETS project included a comprehensive publication protocol, regulating data use and authorship. In particular, the protocol stipulated that any team member intending to write a paper using project data had to share a one-page concept note with the whole of the ASSETS team in advance, to allow any other team member to participate in the paper if they so wished.

**Capacity-building and South-South exchanges are unlikely unless they are planned (and budgeted for) from the outset**

Capacity-building is often seen as one of the ‘inherent’ benefits of partnership. However, it is a controversial concept, as it is often taken to assume a one-way transfer from Northern institutions (assumed to ‘have’ capacity) to Southern institutions (assumed to ‘lack’ capacity), rather than a two-way exchange.

ESPA projects varied markedly in the way in which they conceived and implemented capacity-building. The P4GES project, for example, trained researchers in Madagascar on how to publish in international journals, covering issues such as targeting the right journal, avoiding common errors and addressing reviewers’ comments – alongside training on social-research methods, research ethics, data management and analysis. Yet capacity-building was not a systematic priority for ESPA projects overall, and in most cases suffered from lack of dedicated time and budgets.

Many ESPA projects had a multi-country focus, including partners in different Southern countries (and often in different continents). This was a valuable opportunity for South-South exchange and, where this happened, it was greatly appreciated by Southern researchers. However, South-South exchange was constrained, once again, by lack of time and budgets.
Community engagement

The ultimate aim of ESPA research was to alleviate poverty and enhance wellbeing for poor people in developing countries. The 2016 ESPA impact strategy recognised that, while researchers are able to directly target their ultimate beneficiaries as research users in some cases, it is more common to target intermediary users, such as policy-makers, company owners and development-agency managers. Yet, as we look back at the programme as a whole, it is worth reflecting on the extent to which project teams have engaged directly with local communities, the form of this engagement and the lessons learned.

Because of the nature of ESPA research, most ESPA research projects (although not all) have interacted with local communities as sources of data and information through, for example, surveys, interviews and focus group discussions. Our interest, however, is in forms of engagement that went beyond the purely extractive, and that could be placed at some point of the ‘co-production ladder’ discussed earlier.

Community engagement is vital to say thank you, to avoid research fatigue, to inform decisions at a local level, and to empower communities to influence decisions that are made elsewhere.

Julia Jones, Principal Investigator

Researchers from the ESPA-funded MOUNTAIN-EVO project worked with local communities to map resources in Huamantanga in the Peruvian highlands.

Photo credit: MOUNTAIN-EVO
In this respect, several ESPA projects have explored the ‘information’ requirements, both before and after the research. A limited number of projects were on the ‘consultation’ rung of the ladder, as they provided communities with a structured opportunity to provide feedback on research findings, and such feedback was taken into account by the research team. However, we found no evidence of projects that could be categorised as being ‘involving’, let alone examples of fully fledged co-production.

Rather than a specific flaw of the ESPA programme, this should probably be seen as a confirmation of the inherent challenges of co-production. It also illustrates the gap between the growing co-production rhetoric, on the one hand, and the persistent challenges of changing criteria and modes of research, on the other.\textsuperscript{62}

**Box 7: Insights from the online survey on researchers’ views on community engagement**

Asked about the modalities of involvement of communities in their project, most respondents stated that communities were informed about the purpose and objective of the project (n=30) and were involved in the research itself through participation in interviews and research findings (n=31).

Research team members met communities to get feedback and discuss research findings (n=32), and in most of those cases, findings were ‘validated’ through these feedback sessions (n=23). However, there were only a few cases where communities played a significant role in defining research questions and methods (n=3) or were consulted in this process (n=6).

**Figure 5: Researchers’ views on community engagement**

- Communities were informed about project objectives (n=30, 78.95%)
- Communities participated in interviews (n=31, 81.58%)
- Communities discussed research findings with research teams (n=32, 84.21%)
- Research findings were ‘validated’ by discussions with communities (n=23, 60.53%)
- Communities played a significant role in defining research questions and methods (n=3, 8%)
- Communities were consulted when research questions and methods were defined (n=6, 16%)

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“We went to the community to collect data on ecosystem services. The community said ‘You, again?’. We kept going, and when we went to share our results they started asking ‘when are you coming back?’.

They gave us the nickname \textit{mwadyanji} – which means ‘what did you eat today?’ in reference to the food diaries research. When they joked with us about this, we knew that we had gained their trust.”

\textit{Sosten Chiotha, ESPA researcher}
Feeding results back to communities is crucial, but often underfunded

Feeding results back to communities can be seen as a ‘minimum condition’ for ethical engagement. Where communities have low levels of literacy or low levels of fluency in the official research languages, this requires innovative ways to communicate, beyond the written word. Several ESPA projects fed back the results of their research to participating communities in various forms – ranging from the more traditional workshop format to the creative use of alternative mediums such as comic books, songs and community theatre. In many cases, however, there were not enough resources in the project budget to fund feedback activities, and they were only possible if local partners were already engaged in development work at the location and could absorb the costs of the trip. One researcher estimated the ballpark figure for feedback costs about 25% of the data-collection costs. If feedback sessions have more ambitious aims to ‘validate’ results – opening up a genuine discussion (with potential for disagreement) rather than simply presenting the results – the implications are more significant, in terms of both resources and project timeline.

Project example 4: ESPA project team returns to communities to provide feedback in Madagascar

Two years after the P4GES (‘Can paying for global ecosystem services reduce poverty?’) fieldwork in rural Madagascar, the project team returned to the communities concerned to share preliminary results and discuss the way ahead. This took significant advance planning, with most of the project sites inaccessible by vehicle, and some more than a day’s walk from the nearest road. It also required flexibility in dealing with adverse weather conditions and other logistical challenges.

The project produced a booklet in Malagasy to summarise the research’s objectives and its findings, working with a local cartoonist to communicate complex ideas in an attractive and accessible way. To show the practical relevance of one of the findings, the hydrology team used plastic bottles with soil layers from different land-cover types (from closed-canopy forest to degraded land) to demonstrate how the rate of water infiltration depends on the quality of the soil and the amount of vegetation cover. This was very well received in all villages, resulting in lively discussions about how land degradation could influence flooding and water availability, and why it was important to keep the forest intact.

The feedback sessions also revealed community concerns about the research. Confidentiality came up as a particular issue: in particular, some participants were worried that information would be passed to local authorities about who in the community was involved with ‘tavy’, a controversial local ‘slash-and-burn’ agricultural practice. The team reassured them that this information would not be shared, and that no more details would be shared in regional workshops than had been shared in the community feedback sessions.

Efforts by the P4GES team to share preliminary results and discuss options for the future were well received within local communities.

Photo credit: P4GES
Community involvement challenges traditional research methodologies and presents trade-offs

The involvement of communities as fully fledged participants in research poses fundamental challenges to conventional ideas of what counts as ‘good’ research. People do not see themselves as ‘case studies’ and, if they are genuinely involved in defining research questions and methods in each location, the results across the research are likely to vary significantly, with implications for synthesis, comparability and the generalisability of findings.

Take, for example, the selection of study sites. From a researcher’s perspective, selection must suit the sampling strategy of the project, and (for multi-site projects) allow for comparability. However, communities where local partners have already worked offer the advantages of trust and credibility, which may lead to more meaningful community involvement. There are no right or wrong answers, but these tensions need to be recognised.

Communities are not monoliths, and issues of inclusion and exclusion should be given careful consideration. There is a risk of elite capture of the research process: ‘local elites (who are less poor and more influential locally) will tend to capture the attention of outsiders and push their view of “community needs”’.65 This is an issue that is familiar to development practitioners working on community-driven development projects, but it may not necessarily be on the radar screen for academic researchers.

Researchers should confront the question of ‘what’s in it’ for local communities

Given the nature of the ESPA research, communities are not likely to feel its benefits in the foreseeable future, and not at a scale that they might attribute to the project. Multiple iterations with a community can strengthen the quality and value of research findings, but can also lead to saturation and research fatigue on the part of local participants. As noted earlier by Simon Willcock (Box 6), the interdisciplinary team for one ESPA project produced a very long questionnaire for the household survey to accommodate the priorities of each discipline. As a result, community members had to sit through a whole day of questioning. Genuine co-production may mean compromising on the length or frequency of interaction – possibly at the expense of prospects for publication.

At a basic level, this raises the question of whether, and how, local communities are to be compensated for their involvement in the research. There are well-known arguments in favour of and against compensation. On the one hand, community members spend time away from productive activities to engage with researchers – so compensation seems fair. On the other hand, there are concerns that compensation may create expectations in communities (making the work of future researchers more difficult) as well as causing jealousy and resentment between those who are selected to participate and those who are not (even when this is the result of random sampling). Compensation may also influence respondents if they believe that certain responses are more likely to provide rewards.66

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**Box 8: Insights from the online survey on whether communities received compensation for participation in ESPA research**

In all, 5 respondents said that participants received monetary compensation, while 7 said that they received compensation in forms other than money, 10 said that they did not receive any compensation, and 12 that the provision of compensation depended on the type of engagement and/or the specific site. The remaining 3 respondents did not know.

**Figure 6: The receipt of compensation by communities**

Did not know (8.11%)

Monetary compensation (13.51%)

Compensation depending on task/site (32.43%)

Non-monetary compensation (18.92%)

No compensation (27%)

Note: Figures may not tally precisely, due to rounding errors.
Different ESPA projects came to different conclusions, based on contextual factors. Some provided monetary compensation while others provided token gifts to participants, and some did not provide compensation at all. Researchers have stressed the need for cultural sensitivity when taking decisions on compensation, and the importance of relying on advice from local partners: what is a welcome gift in one context may be perceived as deeply offensive in another.

In principle, the need for compensation can be seen as inversely correlated to the depth of co-production. In research that is genuinely co-produced, the relevance and benefits of that research will be more readily evident for communities. If communities are only involved as informants, there is a stronger case for compensation.

**Community involvement raises ethical issues**

Community involvement does not lend itself to standardised tick-box procedures of ethical reviews. It blurs boundaries around intellectual property, and calls for careful consideration of how various contributions should be acknowledged, attributed and rewarded. As noted in an ethical review commissioned by ESPA in 2012, the conventional principle of informed consent assumes that “research participants are individuated subjects who are more-or-less autonomous of social ties and obligations, literate, adult, and accustomed to relating to others in the context of formal contractual agreements”, and may therefore be ill-suited to addressing community-level concerns.

Similar considerations apply to the issues of anonymity and safety. Research on the use of ecosystem services deals with very sensitive questions, and can often unveil illegal activities, such as illegal entry into protected areas to collect firewood and water; or unsustainable agricultural practices that are against local regulation. Recent years have seen the increasing use of research methods designed specifically to enable researchers to ask sensitive questions, and ensure that confidential information is not linked to any individual respondent.

Guaranteeing individual anonymity does not automatically mean that no harm will come to the community as a whole. There are clearly difficult decisions to be made: research methods must be transparent and information about the location of the research is often important for the interpretation of the results. While there is no simple answer about where the balance lies between transparency in research and protecting participants, it is clear that the question needs to be asked more openly and forcefully than has been the case so far.
Conclusions

ESPA was an ambitious experiment to produce research that met academic standards of excellence and, at the same time, resulted in concrete improvements in the way that ecosystem services contribute to poverty alleviation. At the crossroads between diverging notions of ‘academic’ and ‘development’ impact, ESPA struggled in its initial years to provide consistent guidance to grantees, and the resulting sense of constantly moving goalposts was, at times, a source of frustration for researchers and partners. Yet, at the end of its decade-long journey, ESPA can show significant progress towards conceptualising and operationalising impact and, in the process, has gathered important insights that can inform other current and future programmes.

Overall, there is marked variation in the impact pathways envisaged by ESPA projects, and the degree, type and level of impact that they have actually achieved. An overview of ESPA projects covers the full spectrum of possible impacts: from influencing international policy processes, for which results will only be visible in the long term, to providing tangible benefits to the wellbeing of local communities, where small-scale effects can emerge within a shorter timeframe. The way in which impact has been accrued confirms the rationale and assumptions of the ESPA ToC, while highlighting the non-linear and often unpredictable trajectories that link research and impact.

‘Impact’ takes time

Achieving impact is both a long-term and time-consuming process. One challenge repeatedly noted by respondents was that of funds running out just as impact was starting to accrue, leaving project teams scrambling to find funding elsewhere, or forcing them to ‘move on’ – forgoing potential impact. Several researchers felt that the expectations placed on individual projects to deliver visible impact were unrealistic, and that projects were therefore doomed to be unable to achieve what they had promised.

There is also an issue of scale. When impact is visible in the short-term (within the timeframe of a project) it is typically small-scale – felt at the community level. Large-scale impact, such as changing paradigms that affect policy processes, is often long-term and of an aggregate nature: findings from a research project will join the findings of many other projects to change the body of evidence and paradigms.

Impact depends on relations with partners and stakeholders

Possibly the single most consistent finding that emerges from our learning process is the importance of building relations and trust with a variety of key stakeholders. Projects that were very successful in achieving impact were, broadly speaking, those where the research team had a previous engagement in the local context, well-established working relations with local partners, and a long-term vision beyond the ESPA project. The high level of turnover in many Southern research institutions and NGOs was often quoted as a challenge – requiring more time to rebuild relations with different individuals.

Impact occurs in the elusive sweet spot where ‘demand’ for and ‘supply’ of evidence meet, making it crucial to establish relations with users of research. As Duncan Green has said, ‘impact is about relations more than paper. Decision-makers want to be able to pick up the phone and ask advice of experts who they have learned to trust,’ rather than being told to read a policy paper. The implications are far-reaching. If impact is about ‘not what you know, but who’, should local research partners be chosen on the basis of their existing networks and ability to ‘open doors’? How can the importance of ‘relations’ be recognised without compromising the values of academic independence and equity? These dilemmas have been tackled only marginally in impact discussions to date.
‘Impact’ is not simply an add-on – it challenges conventional research paradigms and academic culture

ESPA’s experience shows that achieving excellent research with development impact is not only desirable, but also possible. However, it also defies 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 and value for money). Instead, it challenges funders and researchers to be realistic in their assessment of the conceptual and practical implications that come with the additional demands placed on academic research.

Similarly, co-production is often presented as a key dimension of impactful research. But a genuine commitment to co-production would run counter to many well-established ideas of what constitutes sound (and publishable) academic research, including assumptions around sampling techniques and comparability of findings. This requires a shift beyond buzzwords, and a clear and open discussion on what ‘involving local stakeholders’ means in the context of each specific project, and how it can be achieved in a way that is open, respectful and ethical.

While academia is changing, its current system of recruitment, promotion and reward is not aligned with the impact agenda (at least not in its most ‘substantial’ form). It does not recognise the effect of ‘doing research differently’ on conventional indicators of academic success, such as publications: in a verbal paradox, research with the highest ‘development impact’ may not make it into journals with a high ‘impact factor’.

Trade-offs exist – and should be recognised openly

While this paper has dealt with the issues of impact, interdisciplinarity, North-South partnership, co-production and community engagement in different sections, it is important to remember that, in practice, these agendas co-exist in the context of the same project. Many ESPA projects have dealt with multiple levels of complexity – managing large interdisciplinary collaboration 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.

Experience from ESPA shows that addressing all of these levels of complexity within the timeframe of an individual project, while producing excellent research and development impact, can be a naïve ambition. Each additional layer comes with a time penalty: it takes longer to work in interdisciplinary teams; it takes longer to establish and sustain equitable partnerships; and it certainly takes longer to reframe methods and approaches so that they enable the participation of non-academic local stakeholders, leading to results that have meaning for them.

This calls for a realistic assessment of priorities for each specific project, depending on the type of impact that is envisioned. For example, a project that aims to address community-level concerns may focus more on climbing the co-production ladder, while a project that aims to influence global-level policy processes may opt for a more conservative approach to community engagement.

One clear implication for funders is the way in which projects are selected. Guidance for panels should encourage consideration of the proposal as a whole (rewarding, rather than penalising, an honest recognition of limitations), rather than as an aggregate sum of requirements. During project implementation, it is important for project teams to be supported in navigating the challenges that will almost inevitably emerge as they pursue research with development impact.

In its current form, the impact agenda raises both hopes and worries in the ESPA community. It opens up opportunities for research to make a real difference in tackling development challenges, and this can only be a good thing for academics working on issues of environment and poverty. There are concerns, however, that the impact agenda is promoted in a way that is overly mechanistic, donor-driven and oblivious to the complexities of social change – and that it may, ultimately, deny the very value of scientific investigation. As one ESPA researcher put it, rather poignantly, ‘if you have to demonstrate impact for each single project, you don’t go for the crazy research ideas anymore’. This could, therefore, prevent the emergence of the paradigm shifts that can have the greatest impact.

Each project faces a tension between being ‘functional’ to achieve specific outputs within the lifetime of a project, and having a ‘transformational’ footprint where the difference will be only evident well after the end of its timeframe. A programme approach, as shown in the experience of ESPA, can add value by providing a long-term vision and going beyond the ‘project’ as an imperfect unit of analysis for the measurement of impact.
Endnotes

1. Ecosystem services can be defined as the benefits people obtain from the natural environment. These include provisioning services such as food, water, timber and fibre; regulating services that affect climate, floods, disease, wastes and water quality; cultural services that provide recreational, aesthetic and spiritual benefits; and supporting services such as soil formation, photosynthesis and nutrient cycling. See Millennium Ecosystem Assessment (2005) Ecosystems and human well-being: synthesis. Washington, DC: Island Press.


3. The overall value of the programme was £43.9 million.

4. www.millenniumassessment.org

5. ESPA also funded eight Fellowship projects to support researchers around the world to develop the skills and experience to generate and apply world-class research.

6. The End of Programme Review was commissioned by DFID to assess the programme’s overarching impact, specifically the programme’s focus on the two key areas of science and developmental impact. The Review aimed to guide the application of lessons learned to future DFID research funding and to provide recommendations to improve the quality, impact and value of the programme’s legacy. The Review focused on three key areas of the ESPA programme: (1) programme processes and institutional model; (2) an assessment of research performance under the programme; and (3) a review of the programme’s contribution to development impact.


19. DFID and ESRC had a longer history of working jointly, including through the ESRC-DFID Joint Fund for Poverty Alleviation Research, launched in 2005. Similar collaborations between DFID, ESRC and NERC were launched after ESPA, specifically Unlocking the Potential for Groundwater for the Poor (UpGro, 2012-2019), and Science for Humanitarian Emergencies & Resilience (SHEAR, 2015-2020).

20. Wells et al., op. cit., v.


23. These include the Evidence and impact research grants (2012), the Research-into-use grants (2012), the Small grants (2015), the Regional opportunity fund (2016), and the Impact activity fund grants (2017).

24. The Directorate was set up in September 2010 following a competitive tender process, and was awarded to the University of Edinburgh through its wholly-owned subsidiary Research into Results Ltd. (RIR), established in 2010.

25. Research into Use (RIU) refers to a planned process by which findings from a research are used to influence relevant practices and/or policies.

26. https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/57a08b2440f0b649740009ba/ESPA_Impact_Framework.pdf

32. This definition is based on www.theoryofchange.org/what-is-theory-of-change/.

33. For more on the impact of this project, see the ESPA Impact Story ‘ESPA research informs local citizens’ action to protect critical water sources’. Edinburgh: Research into Results (www.espa.ac.uk/publications/espa-research-informs-local-citizens-action-protect-critical-water-sources).


35. For more on the impact of the Mikoko Pamoja project in Kenya, see ESPA’s Impact Story ‘Mangrove conservation is protecting both livelihoods and carbon stores’. Edinburgh: Research into Results (www.espa.ac.uk/publications/mangrove-conservation-protecting-both-livelihoods-and-carbon-stores).


37. For more on the impact of the DELTAS project in Bangladesh, see ESPA’s Impact Story ‘Integrated environment and development modelling to benefit the poorest in coastal Bangladesh’. Edinburgh: research into Results (www.espa.ac.uk/impact-story/deltas).


39. Dupar, M. (2017) ESPA communication and engagement strategy. Edinburgh: Research into Results. The strategy emphasises the importance of making research evidence ‘easy to access, easy to use, easy to share’, for a variety of audiences. It also stresses the important role of knowledge brokers and advocates, who may need materials of certain technical depth for their own use, but different materials to use in training, persuading or influencing others. The strategy also emphasises that achieving good research uptake often calls for a combination of: (a) ‘packaging’ research material into various communications products, together with (b) face to face engagements and (c) digital outreach strategies. Pursuing only one of these elements in isolation will yield lesser results.

40. The term ‘co-production’ is one of a series of ‘co-’ words often used interchangeably: co-creation, co-design, co-construction, co-innovation. Co-processes contrast with more traditional approaches to research, where the main involvement of non-academics is as the subjects of investigation or as users of research findings. Such processes assume mutual respect and a normative concern with action. The terms originate from the context of UK public service delivery, and have been examined mostly in a UK domestic context, while fewer resources exist on co-production of academic research with non-academic partners in the Global South. The applicability of the UK experience to these international processes is likely to be limited, given the additional levels of complexity, including practical challenges, cross-cultural communication and embedded asymmetries of power and resources between co-production partners. See Campbell, H. and D. Vanderhoven (2016) Knowledge that matters: Realising the potential of co-production, Manchester: ESRC N8 Research Partnership; Ghosh, D. and M. Weatherhead (2015) Value for money study of the CASH project in Tanzania, London: New Economics Foundation; Metz, A. (2015) ‘Co-creation, co-design, co-production, co-construction. Same or different? Integration and Implementation Insights (https://i2insights.org/2015/12/10/building-consensus-on-co-processes/).


42. ESPA impact strategy 2016-2017, p.4.


44. Campbell and Vanderhoven, op. cit.

46. In examining one particular type of co-production (the NGO-academia interface), Duncan Green identifies the dilemma of ‘impact versus publication’ as a key obstacle to collaboration: ‘While funding incentives push academics towards collaboration with INGOs [international Non-governmental organisations] and other actors able to deliver the elusive “impact”, other disciplinary and career pressures appear to push in the opposite direction. The rather closed nature of academia’s epistemic communities, buttressed by shared and often exclusive languages and common assumptions, deter would-be collaborators, while the pressure to publish in peer-reviewed journals and acquire a reputation within a given discipline shifts incentives away from collaboration with outsiders.’ Green, D. (2017) ‘The NGO-academia interface: Realising the shared potential’, in Georgalakis, J., N. Jessani, R. Oronje and B. Ramalingam (eds) The social realities of knowledge for development. Brighton: Institute for Development/Impact Initiative, pp.32-51.

47. This point was raised by several interviewees as a general ‘cautionary tale’, based on their broader experience, not necessarily related to ESPA.


54. Wells et al., op. cit, p.67.

55. See Leahey, E. (2017) ‘Interdisciplinary research may lead to increased visibility but also depresses scholarly productivity’, LSE blog (http://blogs.lse.ac.uk/impactofsocialsciences/2017/01/19/interdisciplinary-research-may-lead-to-increased-visibility-but-also-depresses-scholarly-productivity/); Leahey, E., C.M. Beckman and T.L. Stanko (2017) ‘Prominent but less productive: The impact of interdisciplinarity on scientists’ research’, Administrative Science Quarterly 62(1): 105-139.


58. This section refers specifically to the partnership between universities and other research institutions. It does not cover partnership in a broader sense, as interaction between researchers and research users.


60. The term ‘developing country’ has been defined to include all low-income and middle-income countries, as listed by the World Bank.


64. The SPACES project in Kenya used an array of methods for community feedback and dialogue – ranging from standard presentations, to role play, to a theatre performance by a local group (www.espa-spaces.org/community-dialogues-in-kenya/).


66. For a reflection on the pros and cons of compensation, see ESPA P4GES video ‘Should social researchers compensate participants for their time? Views from the field in Madagascar’ (www.youtube.com/watch?v=W3BN6s48KA, accessed 19 March 2018).


