



Creating an enabling environment for research impact

Discussion document

Summary

Research should benefit society: that is widely accepted. There has been much written on how to design research to deliver impact through equitable partnerships, co-production, and more. However, there has been less reflection on the enabling environment that funders and universities create to support research to have impact. In this brief we explore the experiences of creating impact through research in international development, and the ways in which the enabling environment facilitated impact drawing on perspectives of researchers, research users from government and UN agencies, and funders. We highlight three areas for funders to focus on strengthening enabling environments: (1) foster science-practitioner networks, (2) enhance collaborative research environments based on equitable partnerships, and (3) shift financing and incentives to sustain partnerships for impact at scale.

Introduction

There are many different forms of impact, and different pathways by which research gets converted into impact. Impact is included as an explicit consideration in research funding and made up 25% of the outcome awarded by the UK Research Excellence Framework (REF) in the 2021 exercise. REF2021 defined impact as an 'effect on, change or benefit to the economy, society, culture, public policy or services, health, the environment or quality of life, beyond academia', and can range from conceptual impact to those on learning and development.

How to design and implement research programmes to foster impact is well understood. There are different models of research-policy relations and impact pathways can shift rapidly, but broadly they are underpinned by engagement of end users and practitioners, strengthening capacity to deliver and use research, communication to build interest and engagement and share outputs, and monitoring and evaluation of impact strategies. Even with this understanding, impact is not assured as the decision-making processes involved are complex and outside the control of the researchers. However, less evidence is available on how to create an enabling environment for research to have impact.

In this brief, we share experiences of how funding from the UK Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office (FCDO) has supported research impact through REACH, a global research programme to improve water security. FCDO set a tangible impact metric, requiring the programme to deliver improved water security for 10 million poor people in South Asia and Sub-Saharan Africa, which informed the design and implementation of the programme and the research, including development of science-practitioner partnerships with government and UNICEF. We also draw on other examples of ODA and/or FCDO-funded research and research to use programmes.

Measuring impact is not always straight forward. It is important to assess the relative merits of pathways to impact to inform investments, and to demonstrate value for money for applied international development research (Chapman et al., 2020). Attributing impact can be difficult; many pathways do not involve direct citation of research papers but may be associated with less tangible routes based on influencing decisions through capacity strengthening or advising for which there are fewer appropriate metrics (e.g. Pulford et al., 2020). Measuring impact should not be confused with solely valuing the scale of impact, as the authors recognise the importance of blue skies research, and the value of research that might have more specialised or local impact.



Research impact in international development research has unique ethical considerations for how the benefits of research are distributed, and in the requirements for achieving impacts (Picot & Grasham, 2022). Equitable partnerships are recognised as a pre-requisite for research impact in global North-South research partnerships (Fransman, Newman, & Bharadwaj, 2019), a point that was reiterated in an analysis of REF2021 impact case studies in development research (UKCDR, 2023). However, critical reflection on inequity in such partnerships in UK funding models suggests there is still work to be done (Flint et al., 2022), particularly to avoid inadvertent tokenism in collaboration with researchers from the global South (The Humanitarian Health Ethics Research Group, n.d.). For impact, equitable partnerships must extend to those partnerships with practitioners, recognising the complex institutional environments, and the representation and legitimisation of diverse voices, which requires navigating power dynamics at different scales (Reed & Rudman, 2023).

This brief focuses on the enabling environment for that research and how we can improve the opportunities to deliver research that meets these designs to support development of impact. The brief has been developed through conversations between the authors who represent funders, practitioners and researchers, as well as wider participants at the 'Within REACH': A Water Secure World international conference, held in Oxford in September 2023, and drawing on experiences across multiple research programmes. The focus of these pathways has been on impact at scale through science-practitioner partnerships, working with professionals who are employed to make decisions about programming and policy at various scales and from a range of organisations e.g. government, NGO, INGO and CBOs. It does not address pathways working with community members. The brief covers three areas:

- Captures learnings from science-practitioner partnerships and pathways to demonstrated impact across REACH and other research programmes.
- Summarises initiatives funders have implemented to help strengthen the enabling environment for research impact.
- Presents recommendations for funders to help explore how to strengthen the enabling environment for research impact.

REACH

The [REACH programme](#), funded by FCDO since 2015, has been researching how to improve water security in sub-Saharan Africa and South Asia. Over that time, it has achieved impact for >10 million people on water security from a diverse range of impact pathways. Our [Stories of Change](#) characterise how our science-practitioner partnerships with government, donors, UNICEF and NGOs have supported changes to policy and practice to improve water security in areas from sustainable land management, to building climate resilience, to gender equity

REACH Stories of Change

REACH has been documenting the impact it has had, and the pathways. Below we summarise a few examples, with more available on the website.



The SafePani model: Delivering safe drinking water in schools and healthcare centres in Bangladesh

WHAT Implementation of professional service provider model for safe, reliable water in schools and healthcare

IMPACT Government co-funding operational costs of safe water services in the national budget for schools and clinics

HOW

- Research to build contextual knowledge with situation assessment of rural water security
- Experience with water safety approaches with professional service providers in other contexts
- Development of trusted relationship with government



Open source tools and skills for climate information flows

WHAT Building “Python Skills for Meteorology” with embedded, long-term training

IMPACT Improved water allocation in the Awash River basin through easily accessible and relevant climate information

HOW

- Research to understand bottlenecks in climate information flows and uptake in Ethiopia
- Stakeholder engagement to understand demand for training both in terms of skills but also logistics
- Strong, trusting relationships with individual practitioners



Protecting groundwater for climate resilience and water security in Turkana

WHAT Novel hydrogeological studies to delineate aquifer, understand surface-groundwater links and water quality dynamics

IMPACT Improved aquifer monitoring, management and sustainable development for vulnerable lives and livelihoods

HOW

- Science leadership by University of Nairobi with uptake by national and county governments
- New provision to monitor and protect recharge areas through land reform
- Influence multi-country World Bank groundwater programme and input to AMCOW



Making water safe for maternal & neonatal care in Bangladesh hospitals

WHAT Water quality analysis in Bangladeshi hospitals

IMPACT Transformative WASH improvement through REACH-UNICEF partnership

HOW

- Identifying appropriate engagement window through UNICEF
- Repeated engagement with Ministry of Health and building trust with hospitals
- Sensitisation of healthcare stakeholders to environmental hazards



Fit for purpose labs

WHAT Laboratories providing operational data for water service provider decision-making

IMPACT Integration of lab data in service provide activities and wider uptake by Nepal government and Helvetas.

HOW

- Demonstrating model through action research
- Building local leadership
- Small grant, with success leveraged through additional investment at key points

Reflections on pathways to impact from researchers and practitioners

Practitioners and researchers shared insights from multiple projects and pathways to impact about what helped to deliver impact, across different examples and approaches.

Building partnerships that benefit practitioners

Practitioners reflected that they gain value from engaging with researchers. Research partnerships offer longer relationships for exchange and co-development, create a space to facilitate international, evidence-based learning, and build capacity within the practitioner's organisation that helps to create pathways to impact. Research partnerships are beneficial for practitioners; practitioners do not necessarily need funding, but they gain value from thinking differently about the service they are providing. Practitioners are often focused on the day-to-day delivery of a service, making informed decisions about what infrastructure to provide, or how to manage a crisis; partnerships with academic researchers can help them consider areas outside their everyday priorities and address longer-term, strategic issues.

GCRF African SWIFT

[GCRF African SWIFT](#) delivered a step change in African weather forecasting capability and communication, from hourly to seasonal timescales, to protect the lives and livelihoods of African people while improving the economies of their countries. One way in which practitioners benefited was from the opportunity to collaborate with other practitioners across Africa, and from the development of investment-ready research that allowed them to demonstrate economic benefits to forecast users.

A key part of mutually beneficial partnerships is time. It takes an investment in time to understand the needs of the practitioner or their organisation, time that is often not built into research grants. Building capacity in an organisation requires regular engagements in the research process, not just for one-off trainings, and to build awareness and understanding. Building institutional relationships are often interrupted by changes in personnel, requiring renewed commitments to developing and maintaining relationships. Where research hasn't invested this time, practitioners considered it was more likely to be extractive.

Practitioners often have to navigate multiple approaches from researchers associated with a particular research call. This can lead to stakeholder fatigue, and difficult decisions to choose partners. Practitioners need to know the researchers recognise the incentives and demand when they are working with an operational agency, and that research programmes will be able to flex to their priorities to keep the research relevant.



Building equitable partnerships

From the perspectives of the researchers and practitioners involved in this brief, building equitable partnerships relies on building trust and communication. Values and roles differ between researchers and practitioners but the synergies between them offer the potential to deliver impact. Trust helps to build an environment to move between research and impact through ease of communication and data sharing, and communication on complex topics.

Co-design of research questions can be an important part of building trust. Co-design involves exploring synergies between research expertise and practitioner needs. It can help researchers to understand the practitioner's perception of the issue. Projects with inception periods and flexibility to enable genuine co-design form a strong basis for equitable partnerships and a chance to define and recognise the different roles and values.



As results are generated, relationships built on trust can help researchers have confidence to share early results rather than waiting for publication of journal papers. The exchange of information about job roles and organisational processes can help stimulate researchers to develop solutions, rather than just generating data. It also strengthens capacity among practitioners to use evidence in their decision making.

The impact realised through the SafePani work is an example of trust built over time, through multiple engagements over years from co-development of the model, to regular meetings with government at national and District scale to share updates and discuss challenges, and collaboration on development of policy briefs and conference sessions. The relationship with UNICEF and across different areas of government has ensured that the partnership and the research is valued. It has also created a basis for further collaborations towards impact on managing water systems for safe water in hospitals.

These institutional relationships are critical to delivering impact, but they are driven by individuals. Many practitioner roles will have periodic changes in personnel. These can create opportunities to expand impact as people move onto new related roles, or can create challenges requiring rebuilding relationships with and strengthening capacity in individuals new to the role.

Flexibility of funding

Many of the researchers recognised the flexibility in the funding to maximise opportunities as they arise. These opportunities arise at different points in the research requiring flexibility to develop the work, such as supporting small pieces of work to scale, or the ability of researchers with expertise to respond to opportunities that arise, including to devote the time and resources to impact activities such as relationship building. Research funding often focuses on the development stage, but researchers will have to look for other funding to deliver investment-ready research.

Within REACH, allocation of funding for external research partners could be designed and delivered in responsive approaches. This enable the funding to be allocated to what was showing promise, when there was interest. Our Fit-for-Purpose Labs Story of Change is an example of a collaboration that started with a one-year small catalyst grant, was supported based on progress to accelerate for two more years, and then was further supported to ensure the team could leverage the potential for impact, resulting in continued support for the practitioner partners to grow as leaders in design and implementation of rural water quality labs in Asia.

The Hygiene Hub arose from the needs of organisations and governments in response to the COVID-19 pandemic. Whereas the example above was based on accelerating an impact pathway for an individual research project, the Hygiene Hub was developed to draw together the rapidly evolving evidence on COVID-19 epidemiology and prevention; provide practical; evidence based recommendations for the design and implementation of COVID-19 prevention programmes, and response to the information and data needs of government and civil society actors. The flexible funding allowed engagement to be customised and responsive to user needs, supporting the reach and scope of the Hygiene Hub's services.

The HygieneHub: Responsive impact pathways

Need Rapidly evolving COVID-19 guidelines, particularly in the early pandemic, and challenges translating guidelines into implementation

Response Over 200+ technical resources published on the Hygiene Hub website to synthesise guidelines and provide practical recommendations on their recommendation

Uptake Hygiene Hub resources accessed over 750k from launch in 2020 through March 2024

Need Timely feedback and support on technical issues limited, particularly during the preliminary stages of the pandemic

Response On-line support tool embedded on the Hygiene Hub website

Uptake Over 320 organisations requested rapid technical support with an average response time < 1 hour

Need On-going demand from government partners and civil society organisations for extended technical support on COVID-19 prevention programmes and their evaluation

Response In-depth technical and research support provided to partners through engagement with global network of researchers and expert organisations

Uptake Over 75 organisations and government partners received on-going technical support from April 2020 throughout 2021

Need Limited opportunity for reflective action and developing transferable lessons and best practices

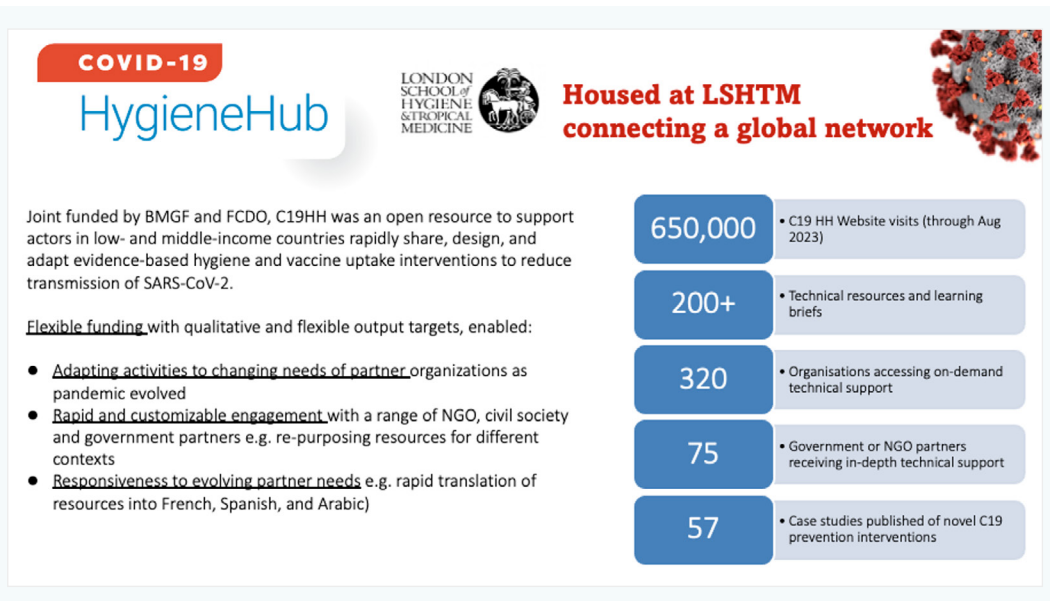
Response Rapidly learning briefs developed in collaboration with global partners to addresses insights from organisational response to the pandemics

Uptake 8 learning briefs developed and published on the COVID-19 Hygiene Hub website

Need Lack of resources and technical support for non-English speaking populations

Response All COVID-19 Hygiene resources translated into French, Spanish and Arabic and available on the COVID_19 Hygiene Hub website

Uptake Over 2/3 of all COVID-19 resources views for non-English language resources, with Spanish and Arabic resources more widely viewed than English language resources.



Partnerships at scale

From the shared experiences of REACH, SWIFT and the Hygiene Hub, working at a scale that includes multiple countries and across multiple regions, had a number of benefits for developing impact.

Firstly, the economics of scale simplify some pathways to impact. Partnerships with research that are simultaneously working with multiple country offices helps to build the organisation's knowledge base more effectively. This is partly because the multiple advocates help to increase the visibility of the research across the organisation. It is also because working across multiple geographies and cultures can improve the transferability and legitimacy of the research recommendations.

International development research impacts pathways are often dynamic, and can rapidly change based on political changes or security or climate events shifting the feasibility of the research and partnerships. Working at scale, with a range of impact partners, enables the project to flex to where the impact opportunities are greatest and creates resilience to the political change and interruptions to research that are common across the sector.

Secondly, scale increases the value of the partnership for the practitioner, through providing broader opportunities for networking and learning. Increased visibility of the research within an organisation can also increase the recognition for those involved in the research, supporting their career development opportunities.

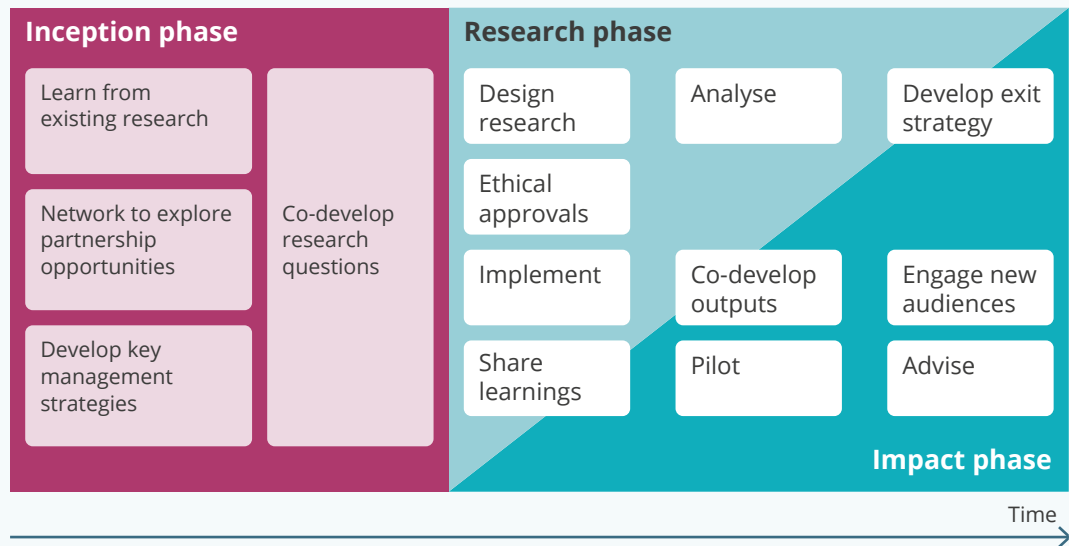
The elephant in the room: the time and cost to deliver impact

A common factor in most of these pathways is the time, and therefore resource, taken to build relationships and wait for windows of opportunity in policy change or programming. It is recognised that impact takes time, and may occur well beyond the completion of a project. Recognising the time taken, it is not enough just to fund the developmental research. The ‘time’ part of impact is not just a passive process. Researchers need funding to continue to manage relationships with policy makers to enable them to engage at the right time. Pilots might need funding to continue until government investment can be operationalised. These on-going costs may be small and inconsistent, but critical to facilitate impact.

The metrics to understand the importance of time are poorly developed in how we measure impact and we measure effort. At present, the way research impact is evaluated and measured often does not capture these longer-term impacts, so the value of research to society and development is poorly quantified. The other metric that is overlooked is the researcher time needed to sustain partnerships; this is not well recognised in career development metrics and academic time accounting.

Longevity in research programmes remains a key mechanism to deliver impactful research. Longevity enables multiple stages of research and development of relationships with policy makers and practitioners, as well as building of capacity in global research teams creating careers for future leaders in research, policy and practice, and strengthening practitioner capacity.

Figure 1: Multiple stages of research for impact.



Funding initiatives to support impact

Allocating long-term funding for research can be challenging in an environment where funding streams can change at short notice and shifting priorities require rapid design of new funding calls. Funders have developed different approaches to fund these different stages for research impact.

Inception phase. Development programming typically incorporates an inception phase to ensure the team are up to date on latest knowledge in the area, grow network with relevant actors, develop and implement management policies and co-develop research questions. For research programmes, this is mostly required to have been completed before the funding proposal is submitted. Funders address this gap through providing networking grants and proposal development grants to facilitate inception phase activities.

Supporting local research leadership and transdisciplinary engagement. For international research, funders have adopted approaches to encourage building of capacity of research teams in country for impact to support sustained impact. These include more funders allowing leadership of research from outside the UK and requiring practitioner partners for co-production of research to reduce extractive research.

Impact funding. Funders recognise that the impact pathways demonstrated at submission are indicative, and that research needs to be able to adjust to target emerging pathways within the limitations of the funding agreement. Specific impact funds are available, often setup with a practitioner partner, to support on-going impact. ESRC commissions impact support functions to facilitate impact in international development programmes, leveraging other practitioner networks and including impact workshops, production of policy briefs or synthesis across grants.

ESRC Celebrating Impact Prize competition

An annual opportunity to recognise and reward ESRC-supported researchers who have created or enabled outstanding impact. We celebrate social science researchers at all career stages whose actions have supported changes in practice, thinking or capacity that create a positive impact in society, economy and in our lives, in the UK and internationally. The prize includes an award to spend on knowledge exchange, public engagement or other impact-related activities, with finalists given an opportunity to attend media training and have a film made about their work and impact.

Wellcome's call on Heat adaptation

[Evaluating interventions](#) to help manage the health effects of heat, was designed to support local research leadership, transdisciplinary engagement, and integrated capacity strengthening. Teams led by researchers from low- or middle-income countries (LMIC) were funded to test interventions to manage heat-related health risks in real settings. They were required to co-produce the research with local partners from policy and/or practice-based institutions and develop project capacity strengthening plans to enhance research impact.

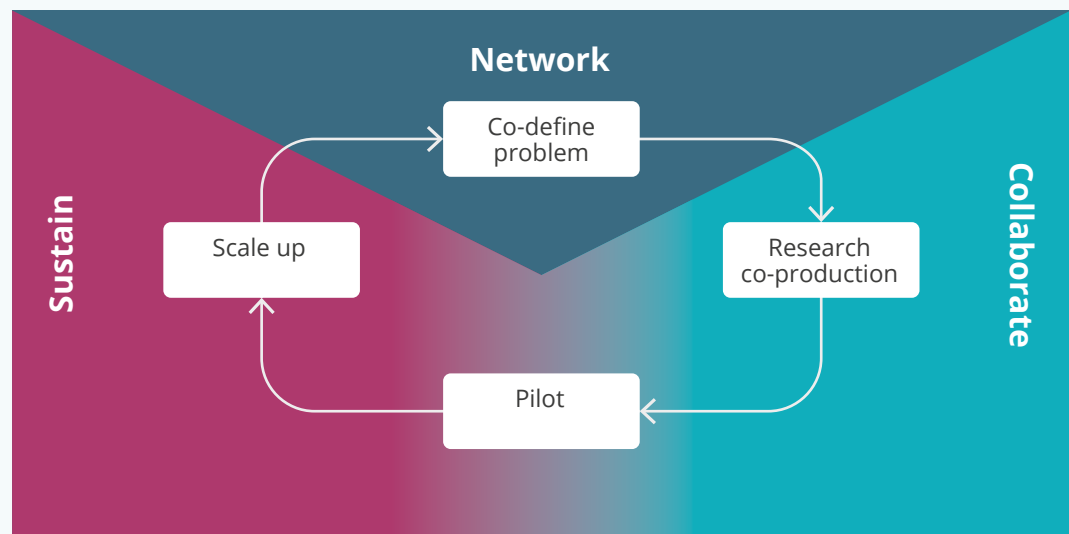
These approaches offer the funding at each stage, however, they can create additional burdens for researchers and partners to navigate them including identifying the appropriate calls at the right time, and the effort to prepare applications with low success rates, that may not fit the policy cycles they are trying to influence. For funders, multiple stages also require multiple review processes and additional contracting.

The above approaches have focused on direct opportunities from funders. Another mechanism that addresses these research needs is block grants distributed to universities. These grants can be allocated to help universities to develop the capacity to support impact activities and rapidly respond to the research needs. Universities receiving funding have similar needs to researchers outlined above in needed flexibility to adapt to changing needs and situation, and sufficient stability of funding to support institutional relationships and build services to support researchers deliver impact.

Recommendations: strengthening the funding enabling environment

Across programmes and funders, three key areas to strengthen the enabling environment to promote impact emerged: to build science-practitioner networks, to deliver collaborative research, and to support sustained engagement for impact.

Figure 2: The three areas required for an enabling environment.





NETWORK: Foster a collaborative science ecosystem with practitioners

The need for early engagement of practitioners in research design is well recognised to ensure demand for the research that leads to impact. However, the research grant application requires that the research is already defined, and that relationships have been built prior to getting that funding. This limits the opportunities to explore new partnerships. To address this gap, funders offer networking or catalyst grants that can develop emerging partnerships or create speed dating across a range of partners to foster new partnerships; universities use block grants to provide similar opportunities. However, the transaction costs remain high for practitioners and researchers as many new partnerships won't develop further or get further funding. This can contribute to practitioner fatigue, reducing their interest in further partnerships.

Recommendations:

1. Create a structure for longer-term research-policy ecosystems that facilitates practitioner engagement, reducing the potential for fatigue. Institutional relationships need to be defined where extensive collaboration potential exists, such as between universities and agencies like Kenya Met Department, with support from universities to maintain these science-practitioner partnerships.
2. Explore funding approaches that allow for an inception period, evaluated on how they will work with practitioners to deliver impact, not on pre-defined scientific deliverables.
3. Test new models that facilitate collaborative environments. These might include shifting funding design to allocate funding to a pool of researchers and practitioners, facilitating collaborative research design.

COLLABORATE: Support equitable and appropriate collaboration

The importance of equitable partnerships is well recognised, but defining and evaluating them is much more challenging. Practitioners will have limited time to engage with research projects, requiring the researchers to commit time to facilitating rapid engagement. Funders encourage equitable partnerships, capacity strengthening, equality and diversity through requiring applicants to complete dedicated sections in application forms; however, they recognise that these methods are prone to gaming and fall short of incentivising these behaviours.

Recommendations:

1. Fund research to explore new methods to measure and evaluate equitable partnerships, recognising the need to be realistic in reporting requirements.
2. Encourage expansion of research on ethical frameworks of engagement of stakeholders, and explore potential for appropriate ethical processes.
3. Encourage approaches to improve research culture to consider how university environments incentivise behaviours that support equitable partnerships by e.g. establishing frameworks, guidelines, code of conduct and incorporate metrics in existing performance review processes to evaluate staff on their approach to partnership working.



SUSTAIN: Incentivise and operationalise sustained engagement

Impact takes time. This is widely understood, but the enabling environment doesn't readily support sustained engagement to help foster that impact. Research funding focuses on the development of new approaches, but the funding in international development rarely continues to ensure researchers can maintain relationships during piloting and into scale up phases. In universities, there is considerable effort expended on maximising potential profits from research through spin out companies, however there is less funding available to support applications that are impact driven rather than profit driven. As researchers chase funding and move on to new projects, it reduces the time and resources they have to sustain partnerships and advise on on-going implementation. Impact takes many forms, but one key area relates to open access data. While all data should be open access, investment to maintain the usability and accessibility is needed over time to keep it represented on key portals. In REACH, an Exit Strategy was developed to plan for sustainability and scale up; similar approaches at earlier stages of co-development are needed to discuss how practitioners can sustain partnerships and products beyond the project.

Recommendations:

1. Expand opportunities for staged funding calls and follow-on funding approaches that enable quicker, easier transitions for a project to build on successes and adapt the effort and intensity required over a longer impact pathway.
2. Explore collaborations between funders that can help researchers and practitioners to navigate funding pathways across different stages, including identifying sources of funding to support operationalising research outcomes and ensuring eligibility remains broad.
3. Work with universities and government to expand incentives for impactful research through recognition, career path advances and prizes, and help protect researcher time for impact activities. This includes efforts to promote data accessibility, and to recognise a more diverse range of research outputs.
4. Map open access to data improve searchability.
5. Develop a mechanism for practitioner partners to request funding for time and travel for project researchers to undertake short secondments or advisory roles to support on-going pathways to impact.

Across all these recommendations, it is important to consider the equity in relationships, to ensure in-country researchers are leading these relationships with in-country practitioners where appropriate.

Authors & acknowledgements

REACH is a global research programme to improve water security for the poor by delivering world-class science that transforms policy and practice. The REACH programme runs from 2015-2024 and is led by Oxford University with international consortium of partners and funded with UK Aid Direct from the UK Government's Foreign, Commonwealth & Development Office, Project code 201880.

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- **Anna Nileshwar** | Foreign Commonwealth and Development Office, UK
- **Meriel Flint-O'Kane, Robert Dreibelbis** | London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine
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- **Kitka Goyol** | Regional Adviser WASH at UNICEF, ESARO region
- **Alex Lewis** | Director of Research at the British Academy
- **Modi Mwatsama** | Head of Capacity & Field Development, Climate & Health at Wellcome Trust
- **Patricia Nyiring'uro** | Principal Meteorologist at Kenya Meteorological Department, Government of Kenya

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Supported by:

