RESEARCH IMPACT: BACKGROUND FOR R2HC RESEARCH TEAMS

ABOUT THIS DOCUMENT

This note is designed to prepare R2HC research teams to plan for research impact, whether as part of a Research Impact Workshop or webinar with R2HC or preparing to do the work on their own. It explains the Outcome Mapping approach to research impact, defines key terms and concepts for research impact planning, and outlines important questions for research teams to consider before they progress to developing an engagement and communications strategy for research impact.

Our Research Impact Toolkit is based on the Outcome Mapping approach and was developed with the Overseas Development Institute (ODI), in response to demand from R2HC-funded research teams for guidance on how to achieve impact with their research findings.

INTRODUCTION: OUTCOME MAPPING AND RESEARCH IMPACT

Impact for the international aid and humanitarian sector can be broadly defined as _long-term improvements in wellbeing of a group of 'beneficiary' stakeholders_. **The Outcome Mapping approach** is a methodology for planning and assessing projects that aim to bring about real, tangible change or 'impact'. The approach is based on an understanding that real-world impact happens in an inherently complex environment, with the contribution of a wide range of actors. When adapting the concept to think about research impact, impact can be considered as _long-term changes for a group of beneficiaries arising specifically as a result of use or uptake of research_. Or, to use a definition more aligned to the academic setting: Research impact is _the effects of change which research has on 'the world beyond academia'_.

While it's not possible to control such eventual impact, a pathway towards research impact can be mapped out, and a plan for getting there can be created. **Outcome Mapping** is about recognising the complex context for change and becoming a part of that context for change, through your research. Effective and strategic planning starts by defining the end point and working back from there - the starting point, therefore, is defining the specific impact you want your research to achieve. **This will be your _research impact objective_**.

You then proceed to map back through the change process, identifying the *key stakeholders* who have influence in the context in which your defined objective will be delivered.

From here, **outcomes** are planned for each stakeholder, which will show how research uptake, use and adoption by your target stakeholders can lead to your defined impact. Working towards these outcomes with each stakeholder, each step is broken down into intermediate achievements which show you are making progress towards your outcomes. These are called **progress markers**. In this way you will 'map' a path from activities (such as dissemination workshops) towards impact. In essence, the approach is about planning for the step *beyond* 'putting your research out there', making sure it actually gets into the hands of the intended research users in a way that delivers change.

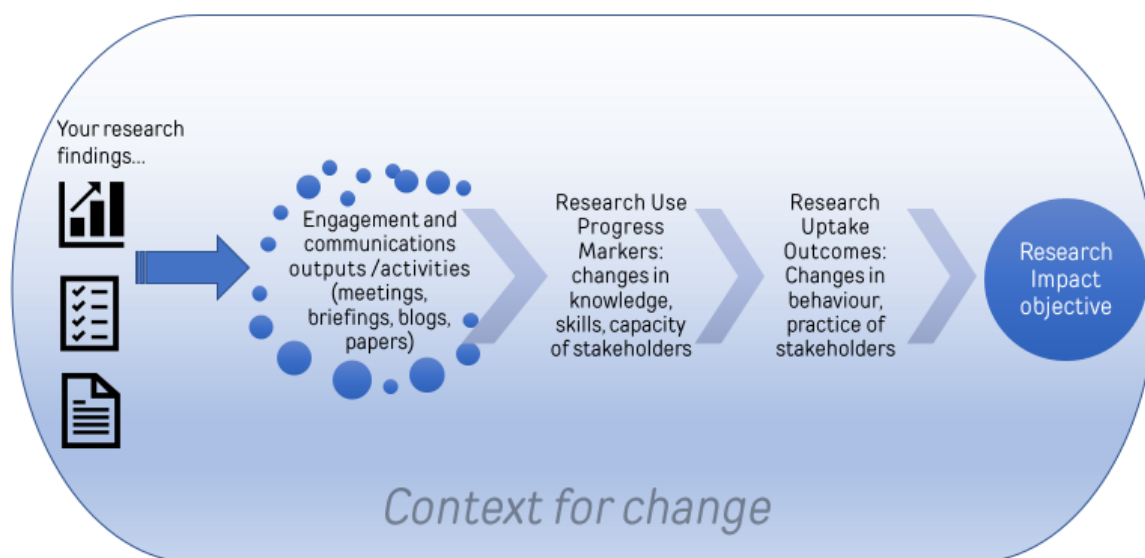## Mapping the pathway: from producing research to delivering impact

Your research findings...

Engagement and communications outputs /activities (meetings, briefings, blogs, papers)

Research Use Progress Markers: changes in knowledge, skills, capacity of stakeholders

Research Uptake Outcomes: Changes in behaviour, practice of stakeholders

Research Impact objective

Context for change

*Figure 1: To **plan** for impact, flip the pathway! Start by defining the end point (impact objective)- and work back from there (right to left)*

RESEARCH IMPACT: DEFINITIONS AND KEY CONCEPTS

As mentioned, 'research impact' in academic circles is broadly understood to be *any perceived change* in the world outside academia. Of course, this change is generally taken

to mean *positive* impact. However, in evaluating humanitarian action, Beck states that impact can be immediate or long range, intended and unintended, positive and negative.[i] Positive change for one stakeholder may be a negative change for another; or perhaps no change at all for those you would most like to help. Your research might even positively impact on one particular stakeholder, but that positive impact still wouldn't necessarily deliver the overall change you want to see.

What this means is that when we say that research has 'had impact' in the humanitarian health sector, it does not really tell us much. We need more specificity: **who, what, where, how, when.** That's why defining a research impact objective, which reflects a specific change that affects the intended beneficiaries of your research, is important. It's also important to ensure your research team is working towards *the same* impact objective, so that you can make good decisions together about resources, deliverables and timelines.

Two arenas for change: where impact happens

There are two 'arenas' in which research can have an impact: 1) within academia, and 2) outside it - the second being considerably bigger and more complicated for planning! Academic recognition is important for many reasons, including ensuring credibility and recognition by other experts and adding to the evidence base. However, the second arena - outside academia - is the primary focus of impact planning for our purpose, though the important step of publishing journal articles is factored into this approach. Publication is often - though not always - necessary for impact in humanitarian health. It will be a critical step towards impact; but is also unlikely to be sufficient for driving change on its own.
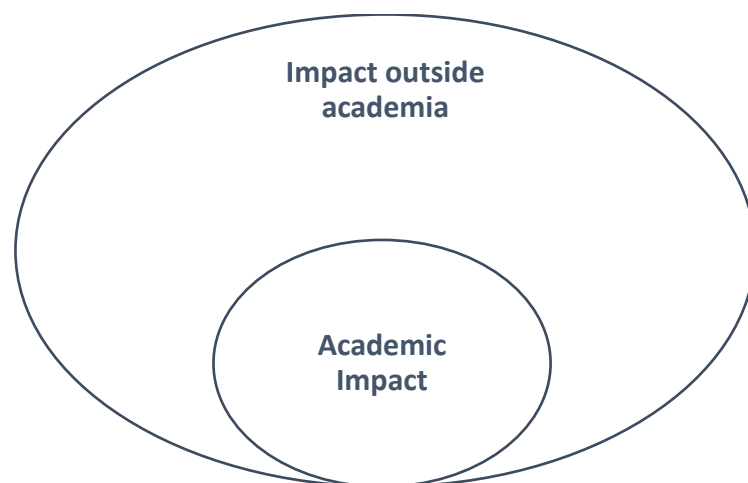

Figure 2: The two arenas for impact

What is the bigger circle made up of? That's the 'change context' in which other people will hopefully change 'something' as a result of your research. This second arena for impact can be broken down across various dimensions. The contexts for change may include social, cultural, economic, technological, legal, health/wellbeing or political impacts, for example[ii]. There are also different levels at which stakeholders may be situated, across change contexts (local, organisational, regional, national, global). The 'humanitarian system' itself is particularly complex[iii]; ideally one would break it down into both change contexts (right down to specific organisations) and the various levels at which change may need to take place to deliver impact.

The second arena can (even once you break it down into different 'areas' and 'levels' of impact) feel overwhelmingly large. Again, this is why creating an impact objective is helpful. It encourages a focus on the specific change you want to see (avoiding too-vague targets like 'the humanitarian community'); and provides a starting point for situating and mapping the key stakeholders. In amongst all this, the impact objective has another important role. It recalls the importance of engaging and listening to the 'beneficiaries' of your work, responding to their needs, listening to their views, and respecting their rights, which otherwise may be lost in amongst the natural drive to raise profile with and 'have influence' on high-level, 'important' stakeholders who may use your research in the short term. The impact objective has, at its core, the people you hope will benefit from your research, and so provides an important guiding light for impact planning.

Stakeholders and why they matter

Delivering real impact involves changing the knowledge, practices and behaviours of *people* and often, convincing them that your evidence is to be trusted. This is often not easy and may require sustained effort from your team in building relationships and credibility, and where necessary, formal or informal partnerships. For this reason, it's important to consider your own situation. Where do you and your study team have existing relationships or influence? Where do you need to build relationships or partnerships, to influence others and reach into areas where you want to have impact?
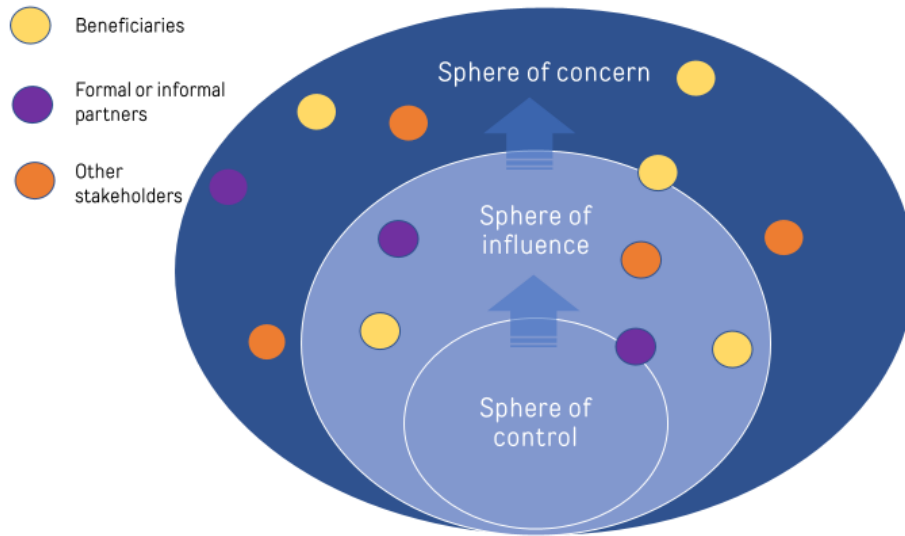
Figure 3: The path to impact is all about people. Where do you already have influence and relationships?

What does impact look like? 'Types' of impact

When people think of research impact, they often take it to mean 'changes in policy or practice'. In reality, impact can be considered much more broadly. It is more helpful when thinking about what, realistically, one research study can achieve, to consider the different ways various types of impact contribute to your target stakeholders' behaviour change over time.

The below table describes the different types of research impact and what changes you might see as a result. Which type you should plan for depends on many variables, including: the topic of your study, the change context, the quality of your relationships and the maturity of an existing change process, amongst others! You might decide to attempt all of them in sequence over time, or several in an overlapping fashion, or just one.

Impact type	What it looks like	Impact it could lead to
Conceptual	Impacts on understanding and attitudes, knowledge or awareness, often through sustained engagement over time.	May lead onwards to changes in policy or practice as key stakeholders build their ability to make informed decisions.
Instrumental	Impacts on changes in policy and practice.	Changed policies, guidelines; increased funding or staffing for a particular approach; new or improved interventions or programmes
Capacity-building	Usually looking at building capacity of the overall research field, not just of the study team or partners. Eg, new understanding of how to study a particular community or group; data collection, protocols, measures etc.	Increased ability of researchers to conduct similar work in future and build evidence base. Increased awareness /ability of key stakeholders or partners to use the knowledge or research or develop new knowledge for the field.
Enduring connectivity	New community mailing list or regular meeting; web platforms or active forums; working groups, annual conferences etc.	Increased existence of /strength of networks of people and organisations who understand and can use and apply the research.

Figure 4: Types of impact. Adapted from the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC)iv and DFID-ESRC Growth Research Programme (DEGRP) definitions of impact types.v

HOW TO APPLY THESE CONCEPTS

Plan for impact, not 'communications or advocacy'

Many might think that 'research impact' planning is only relevant if you will undertake a public communications or advocacy campaign based on your research. As Figure 4 shows, 'research impact' types are much broader; not all of these impacts require advocacy campaigns, and not all of them require policy change. - think about the different 'areas' of impact as well: how much of an impact on 'culture' does a change in the law have, for example?

In fact, some studies may require very little public communications (behind-closed-doors

influencing may be more appropriate). It all depends *what your team is trying to achieve* with the research - your impact objective. Breaking down the types of impact you could achieve can help you strategise about **where, how, who and when** to engage in order to achieve your objective.

Early engagement to strengthen research for impact

It is clear that delivering research impact involves early consideration of how to approach key stakeholders, those who have influence over the uptake of research and can encourage behaviour change as well as policy and practice changes. They might be Ministry officials or politicians, agency policy-makers, practitioners, community leaders, advocates, and so on. That's why it is best to undertake your planning for impact early, as it gives you the best chance of building relationships with stakeholders during your research timeline.

Many of you have probably already planned to engage key stakeholders in your research. If so, it is worthwhile testing your plans against your impact objective to check whether engagement might be needed at an earlier stage to maximise impact. Early engagement can add value to research: it can enhance the relevance of a research question for policymakers, improve data collection by informing your understanding of cultural context, and shape targeted messaging of your findings.

Understand the change context and where your research fits in

Again, consider the importance of context. The more you engage in the context and with key stakeholders, the more you influence and shape stakeholder behaviour simply through being part of the conversation. In doing so, you are also positioned to act on opportunities. Rarely, if ever, does impact require creating an entirely new movement for change from scratch. It is more often about engaging in a context in which change is already nascent or burgeoning, and spotting an opportunity to feed evidence into this process. This is very hard to achieve *if* you don't think about or engage in the external environment until your research is finished. Engaging in the context throughout and building relationships can flag up policy or technical reform debates, change-focused communities and networks, social media conversations, national meetings, consultations and other opportunities for influence in which you can engage and build a receptive audience for your findings.

Involve your whole team in planning for impact

Planning for research impact, as we now know, requires a deep focus on the *context for change.* The humanitarian health sector is a large and complex arena for delivering impact. It involves a range of stakeholders and decision-makers at multiple levels, who don't always act - or interact - in a predictable way. Meanwhile, your research team will be varied, comprising multi-disciplinary partnerships from different institutional and cultural contexts. Team members will likely have diverse ideas about research impact and how it should be delivered.[vi] Such diversity is important so as to be able to maximise the impact of your research - no one person has a complete view of the context for change, or can reach every stakeholder on their own.

For this reason, take only what's useful for you from these concepts and work with your team to adapt the approach to suit your study. The best plans will be informed by a synthesis of the knowledge within the group rather than one person planning alone. Make sure your mapping of the context takes into account all the existing relationships that your team is able to leverage and, when you start mapping out activities, consider who in your team is best placed to lead on engaging various stakeholders.

WHERE TO GO FROM HERE?

Consider the following questions:

- What problems is your research trying to solve?
- What kind of change would you like to see happen one year after your research finishes? Five years? Ten years?
- What area/s within the 'second impact arena' do you see your research having most impact?
- What type of impact might your study team have? (Conceptual? Instrumental? etc)
- Who are the target users of your research? Where do they sit (sphere of control, influence, or control?)
- Who are your target 'beneficiaries'?
- How well engaged are you with the context in which your intended changes will take place?

NOTES AND REFERENCES

[i] Beck (2003) *Evaluating humanitarian action*.

[ii] University of York, *What is Research Impact?* https://www.york.ac.uk/staff/research/research-impact/impact-definition/

[iii] Knox Clarke, P. (2017) Transforming change. ALNAP Study. London: ALNAP/ODI, p27. https://www.alnap.org/system/files/content/resource/files/main/alnj5622-transforming-change-report-web.pdf

[iv] For the ESRC-preferred definitions of impact, see ESRC (n.d.) 'What is impact?' Swindon: Economic and Social Research Council https://esrc.ukri.org/research/impact-toolkit/what-is-impact/

[v] See Shaxson, L. (2018) *Achieving policy impact*. DEGRP guidance note. London: DFID, ESRC and ODI https://www.gov.uk/dfid-research-outputs/achieving-policy-impact-guidance-note

[vi] The Elrha Guide to Constructing Effective Partnerships, https://www.elrha.org/researchdatabase/elrha-guide-to-constructing-effective-partnerships/