Research Uptake in a Humanitarian Context: Insights on Designing and Implementing a Research Uptake Strategy

Summary on the Panel Discussion

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Depart for International Development (DFID), London

REFANI
Research on Food Assistance for Nutritional Impact

ODI
Research & Policy in Development

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Context

Dissemination, communication and uptake are concepts which seem to get used interchangeably, even though they are quite different. In fact, many actors use the word research 'uptake' to imply dissemination, communication or both; however, according to the DFID 2013 Research Uptake Guide, 'uptake' has much larger implications for how one plans to share project information and results, by way of continuous engagement with key stakeholders.

The principles and theories behind research uptake have been detailed; however the actual implementation of such a strategy, what it looks like on a daily basis and the myriad of practical considerations that are involved in designing the strategy are not as documented. There are several lessons and experiences that would be beneficial to learn from and share more widely from those who are currently working to implement research uptake. For this reason, the panel discussion on 'Research Uptake in a Humanitarian Context: Insights on Designing and Implementing a Research Uptake Strategy' was organised by the Research on Food Assistance for Nutritional Impact (REFANI) Consortium, a 3-year research project funded by DFID, with specific co-funding provided by ECHO for the explicit purpose amplifying research uptake.

Hosted by DFID on 2 February 2016 in London, United Kingdom, the discussion was intended to benefit those who work on research and research uptake, but also benefit DFID and other agencies like it; all those working to design and provide better humanitarian programming. Panellists included members from REFANI, Oxfam, the Overseas Development Institute (ODI) and DFID, who spoke to the core components of a research uptake strategy – stakeholder engagement, communications, capacity building, and monitoring and evaluation. By highlighting the challenges and opportunities they have faced when implementing a research uptake strategy in humanitarian contexts, the panellists provided productive methods and ideas to work around the key difficulties.

The report below summarises the presentations of the four speakers and the discussions stemming from questions from the audience. For a complete list of those that attended and dialled-in included, please see Annex 2.

For a link to the PowerPoint Presentations and the recording of the event, as well as any questions or comments, please contact REFANI@actionagainsthuger.org.

Panellists

Moderator: Silke Pietzsch

Silke opened the panel discussion by welcoming everyone to DFID. She then explained the increased importance that is being given to research uptake, and how it can ultimately lead to more effective humanitarian and development programming. She introduced all the speakers: Dr. Eleanor Ott, Humanitarian Evidence Programme and Communication Manager – Oxfam, Zvia Shwirtz, Communications and Research Uptake Officer – REFANI Consortium, Jessica Mackenzie, Research Fellow at RAPID - ODI and Tarah Friend, Research Uptake Manager - DFID.

Dr. Eleanor Ott – Stakeholder Engagement

Eleanor began by identifying some of the key questions one should ask when beginning to engage with stakeholders: what is the context in which evidence will be used? (For the humanitarian sector, it may be one in which decisions will be made quickly, often based most on prior experience.) How do we design research to meet affected populations' needs? We are frequently asking for two behavioural changes: 1) asking for policy makers and practitioners to change their behaviours to access and engage with research and/or evidence differently; and 2) asking for policy and practice change – sustained behavioural change – based on research findings.

The Humanitarian Evidence Programme conducted a survey and key informant interviews about humanitarian research uptake and examined relevant literatures. Briefing papers and conversations with colleagues were the top two sources for accessing humanitarian research. The humanitarian sector appears to be a very social sector – with key individuals acting as nodes to filter what findings are worth examining. It is important to build in meaningful consultation from the beginning of a project and ask the right questions. Eleanor reflected on experience in deciding on evidence synthesis questions for the Humanitarian Evidence Programme and the different way the eight review teams are engaging with stakeholders in their topical areas: nutrition, WASH, markets, pastoralist livelihoods, child protection, mental health, shelter and urban identification.

While stakeholder mapping is an iterative process, requiring updating and systems thinking, having meaningful consultations is key, as is targeting leaders and leveraging existing platforms. All of this will hopefully lead us in getting closer to the ultimate goal of reshaping aid to be more responsive, impartial, efficient and effective for affected populations.

Zvia Shwirtz – Communications

Zvia began her presentation by explaining the multiple constraints that are inherent to working on a research project, especially when they are related to communicating updates to stakeholders: need for confidentiality, results only come at the end of a project, researchers are very busy, staff is remotely based, stakeholder fatigue, etc. An overarching strategy for communicating research updates is to be very organized, flexible and always offer support to project colleagues.

She emphasized that it is very important to work with the whole team in order to learn what is possible to share before results are ready, as well as learn the timeline of when new information will be available and ready to be publicised. She discussed how there are always related topics that one can share with stakeholders that would not hinder project results, and would also allow them to discuss their own work and interests. Engaging with stakeholders early in the project cycle will ensure that future materials sent to them will be exactly what they have requested to know more about.

Finally, Zvia emphasized that fostering an environment of sharing and ownership over the project will ensure that all partners contribute to creating materials, and also tracking where their research may go, beyond the scope of the project. This ownership will also lead local field offices to engage with stakeholders and beneficiaries in their respective countries, where perhaps the research results will have most impact.

Jessica Mackenzie – Capacity Building

Jessica started by stressing the importance of integrating research findings into government policies and practitioner activities, explaining that it will lead to better decision-making and policy initiatives. For this reason, donors, researchers, think tanks, CSOs, NGOs, should all work together, however it is difficult to decide where one starts to influence, as everyone is trying to influence everyone, and it all looks complicated from the outside.

While it may be complex, Jessica explained how there are processes and rhythms that can be uncovered among all of these networks, and we should plan around them in order to get the information into the hands of the right people at the right time. It is vital to build the capacity of researchers and evaluators, to make sure that they are aware of how to get their research taken up quickly. Jessica cited RAPID's ROMA guide as a useful online guide for how to go about policy engagement.

Jessica emphasized the importance of diagnosing what works well and what hasn't, discussing key challenges, mapping stakeholders in terms of their interest and influence and mapping which groups may disagree and which may need to undergo behaviour change. Once all of this is delineated, it will be easier to craft a message that will stick, and one that will get the most attention. She further detailed that ODI has several case studies and tools which help researchers or project teams to: (i) diagnose their context; (ii) develop a policy engagement strategy; and (iii) then monitor their influence or research uptake. It is very doable and just requires the investment of time and energy – it can be done. And we help people to do just that. If you have a project that has a policy objective, it's often central to achieving sustainability – within government practice - and worth getting right.

Tarah Friend – Monitoring and Evaluation

Tarah begin by reiterating what the other three panellists had said: research doesn't magically find its way into the hands of the people who need it. She explained that that is why DFID is explicit about the need to plan for uptake in projects, and making resources available for monitoring and evaluating (M&E) uptake. Simple expectations, articulating assumptions and risks and clarifying what kinds of behaviours and potential outcomes are desired, is a good way to start an M&E plan. Tarah continued to explain that identifying indicators that are measurable and realistic for the timeframe is crucial to the success of the project.

The constraint to research uptake of evidence indicates that a lack of time to use, access, understand and appreciate evidence is the biggest barrier to uptake. Tarah acknowledged that the research cycle might not even fit different policy windows and the pace of policy decision-making. That is why she believes stakeholder engagement throughout the research cycle is crucial, and helps identify possible connections and opportunities that may become possible down the line.

Tarah also spoke about the humanitarian context, and how it is comprised of a variety of actors and organisations, with huge potential to make connections within the spaces that already exist. Many of these actors are also invested in learning and carrying out their activities in a more efficient manner. So while there are challenges to M&E, experience indicates that time and resources dedicated to uptake are essential throughout the research cycle, right from inception phase, and difficulties are not insurmountable.

Question and Answer

After the panellists wrapped up their presentations, the floor was opened to questions from the attendees. The following questions were asked and then discussed by the speakers[1].

1. *Who is best placed to actually do research uptake (RU)? Is there a danger that it won't include synthesis in looking across different perspectives and backgrounds?*

   Discussion: There does not need to be just one person doing research uptake; it could be a combination of researchers and practitioners, all working together to distinguish networks for engagement. Working within existing networks and project partnerships will broaden the scope of the project's target audience. If there is a need for synthesis of research, then working with partners and networks will also increase access to available research. However, even if there is one person dedicated to doing the research uptake, building capacity on the team and institutionalising ideas of RU will help create a culture of ownership and involvement in RU across partners and their networks.

2. *Is there a way of approaching the research differently in terms of methodology, to have the research team think about this and conduct their research differently, especially if funds are limited? And what are the needs of the stakeholders that we are trying to influence, specifically in the humanitarian sector?*

   Discussion: Research in humanitarian contexts is very different from other kinds of research: it is harder to conduct randomised control trials in these difficult contexts, it's harder to have a set protocol ahead of time, staff turnover, and many other constraints.

[1] The individuals who asked and answered these questions are not identified. Answers have been combined in this document to give an overview of the entire discussion.

For those reasons the way research is produced in humanitarian sectors is simply different than a lot of other sectors, so we cannot always expect the same kind of research nor have the same standards. The stakeholders, however, still want to respond better in those contexts and have a lot of questions related to those complicated areas: what works, why does it work, how does it work, and so on. Given the challenges around conducting research in humanitarian settings, there is still a lack of primary research on many important issues, and for that reason, evidence syntheses are much harder to achieve.

3. *What is the process of devising recommendations from the research, when it's not self-evident and doesn't lend itself to nice, neat conclusions? And how do you negotiate resistance from researchers to extrapolate broader recommendations from the results?*

   Discussion: There is push back and apprehension from researchers on how the evidence will be used, but we do need to have results out there, and it needs to be in language that policy-makers understand. It is hard to communicate the nuances and the caveats effectively, without losing the reader. Researchers and their broader teams should have discussions about synthesizing evidence and communicating that effectively as well. Even when a study has been inconclusive and/or inconsistent, we can at least say that there is a need for more research. If you do have conclusive evidence then it would also be useful to bear in mind the behaviour change that you want to see, and ask yourself, what is your policy objective? Answering that question will inform your main strategy and the activities that will lead you to accomplish your goal.

4. *If we are going to engage the right stakeholders, we also need to include the "unusual suspect stakeholders," so how do you identify them?*

   Discussion: Sometimes putting your work out there will lead people to contact you, however one can never be sure to find all the right people. ODI has a tool, the Alignment, Interest and Influence (AIIM) Matrix, which helps you map stakeholders on a matrix of influence/interest. Plotting them out in that way will clarify which stakeholders are the priority group, and how to engage with each different set of stakeholders, based on where they lie on the matrix.

5. *There is a possibility of getting inputs from policy-makers in the host country and from international players, but its challenging trying to work on an international basis with limited time, without actually traveling, can you offer any tips on how review teams can engage more widely, to design and package their work so that it will speak to the people who might use it, when it needs to be done internationally?*

   Discussion: We need to build a programme to involve the actors from the countries we wish to target, even before we think about how we want to package the information.

Members of advisory boards may be useful in reaching those local communities, especially of southern-based organisations. Another useful resource to tap into is the group experts who are part of the external peer-review process; those who review protocols of a project. Looking at reviews and research from southern-based organisations, and even holding Skype conversations, is two ways in which one can try to overcome being based internationally, with limited funds for travel. There are a lot of great people working internationally, on quality programmes, but without sufficient funds for capacity building, one is indeed limited. There are organisations out there, like 3ie and Cochrane Collaboration who provide great trainings and workshops, but ideally it would help to bring someone out to the field.

6. *Participatory research makes a strong commitment to reporting back to participants but often it is the first thing to be forgotten about; how do we engage affected communities themselves at a different scale?*

   Discussions: Everyone agrees that we need to do better work at that, especially on the humanitarian response side. It is indeed obvious that from a global headquarter-producing evidence perspective, we haven't been doing so well. But we need to think if we are asking the right questions. Also, are we ensuring that secondary research is considered in the local contexts? How is the research interacting with the local population? The last thing we want to do is to cause harm, and there is a risk of that in doing humanitarian work. Once we ask ourselves those questions, we put local communities at the centre of our research, and we begin to ask the questions that would benefit them the most.

Closing Remarks

Silke offered Tarah the opportunity to make a last comment, based on the questions and discussion. Tarah then emphasized that everyone needs to take the opportunity to lay out his or her uptake intentions in a new project, and to really think about what is most important. If something a real priority for the research uptake strategy, then you will set out the resources needed to accomplish it. Related to that note, one should remember that research uptake happens on all sorts of levels; international, local, across different organizations, etc. For that reason it is important to unpack your objectives, map out how you will engage within the levels of uptake and identify the bits that are within your resources and context of programmes, and clarify exactly what it is you expect to achieve.

Silke wrapped up the panel discussion by noting how there are many ideas floating around, but one message is clear: timing is everything for research uptake. Think about everything from the beginning, before you have results. Engage stakeholders early enough, even before you think of research questions. Engage as many people as possible, including a diverse group of stakeholders, and get them all on board. Be creative and flexible, think out of the box. Think of new approaches to how we get the right messages out there, and how we can really change behaviours. Silke reflected that perhaps we should be talking more to social behaviour change experts and ask them how to get our objectives accomplished. In any event, this discussion demonstrated that there are structures and frameworks within which we can manoeuvre our needs, so hopefully there are practical steps for each of us to follow-up on after today.

Conclusion

While a variety of issues and topics were touched upon during the discussion, including a number of challenges and lessons learned in designing and implementing a research uptake strategy in humanitarian contexts, many questions still remain. For example, is there a system that could be set up in order to monitor research uptake after the end of a project? If funds are limited, what are they key considerations in budgeting for publications, conferences, launch events, etc.? How can we actively engage researchers in research uptake activities, especially those that take place early in a project cycle?

Despite these questions and a myriad of others, the panel discussion has reconnected portions of the existing network of research uptake practitioners. In addition, it also has become clear that there is a clear interest in participating in these types of discussions and high willingness to share ideas and practises. Therefore, there could be great benefit and opportunity in finding the appropriate spaces to further share experiences and discuss how to advance research uptake strategies within the community of practice as a whole.

Annex 1 – Panellist Biographies

Silke Pietzsch, Moderator - Action Against Hunger USA - Technical Director
Silke Pietzsch has worked in the humanitarian and development sectors since 1998, specializing in food security & livelihoods and emergency nutrition programs. Silke has worked in Action Against Hunger USA headquarters since 2008, initially as the agency's Senior Food Security & Livelihoods Advisor, and later as the organization's Technical Director. She currently oversees all technical and research aspects of the organization's work in Sub-Saharan Africa and Central Asia, providing policy expertise, positioning, and representation in international forums, and leadership in emerging sectors like cash transfer programs in emergency and recovery contexts. Silke is also currently the chair of the the Integrated Food Security Phase Classification (IPC), sits on the steering committee for the Cash Learning Partnership (CaLP) and the Technical Development Group of the REFANI Consortium.

Dr. Eleanor Ott - Oxfam – Humanitarian Evidence Programme and Communication Manager
Dr. Ellie Ott manages the Humanitarian Evidence Programme in Oxfam's Global Humanitarian Team, including leading on research uptake. The programme aims to improve humanitarian policy and practice, through commissioning a series of rigorous evidence syntheses in the humanitarian sector and focusing on research uptake. Prior to joining Oxfam, Ellie worked for UNHCR, for a refugee empowerment NGO in Kala Refugee Camp in Zambia, and for the US federal government overseeing rigorous anti-poverty research and policy, including managing systematic reviews and randomised controlled trials. She has served as the co-policy editor for the Oxford Monitor of Forced Migration, on the executive board of the Rhodes Scholars' Southern African Forum, and as the UK coordinator for the Truman Scholars' Association.

Zvia Shwirtz - Research on Food Assistance for Nutritional Impact (REFANI) – Communications and Research Uptake Officer
Zvia is the Communications and Research Uptake Officer for the REFANI project. REFANI is a consortium funded by DFID and co-financed by the European Commission, comprised of Action Against Hunger, Concern Worldwide, the Emergency Nutrition Network and the University College London. REFANI aims to strengthen the evidence base on the nutritional impact and cost-effectiveness of cash and voucher-based food assistance programs, as well as identify the mechanisms through which this effectiveness is achieved. She manages the day to day engagement with stakeholders, as well as produces materials for all consortium partners. Prior to joining the REFANI team, Zvia worked as a communications officer for the Crisis Management Centre – Animal Health (CMC-AH) at the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations, leading all communication work, externally and internally, for rapid response missions to countries facing animal health emergencies in Asia and Africa.

Jessica Mackenzie - Overseas Development Institute (ODI) – Research Fellow at RAPID
Jessica is a Research Fellow in the Research and Policy in Development (RAPID) Programme at ODI. Her work focuses on decision-making in policy formulation, research uptake and how to improve the role of knowledge in policy-making particularly within developing countries, with expertise in Indonesia and broader South East Asia. She has advised and led on a variety of projects, capacity building and training for organisations such as Commonwealth Secretariat, WinRock International, World Health Organisation, the Knowledge Sector Initiative, and the London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine. Prior to joining the ODI, she worked for 11

years for the Australian Aid Programme on governance, education service delivery and designs for evidence-based policy and practice programmes.

Tarah Friend - UK Department for International Development (DFID) – Research Uptake Manager
Tarah Friend has been a Research Uptake Manager in the Evidence into Action Team at the UK Department for International Development since she joined DFID in 2010. She manages the Humanitarian Evidence Synthesis Programme for DFID's cross-cutting Humanitarian Innovation and Evidence Programme (HIEP). In addition to managing a number of programmes designed to make research and evidence more accessible, Tarah provides advisory support to DFID funded research teams on research communication and uptake to strengthen evidence informed policy and practice. Prior to joining DFID, Tarah worked for civil society and consultancy organisations on a variety of themes such as programme and organisational development, child protection, natural resources management, and vaccine study logistics. Tarah holds an MSc in Development Management and a Professional Diploma in logistics and administration of humanitarian aid and development from the Institut Bioforce (France).

Annex 2 – Participant List

Approximately 30 people attended the discussion, coming from the following organisations:

Action Against Hunger
Adaptation at Scale in Semi-Arid Regions (ASSAR) Consortium
Cambridge University
Cash Learning Partnership (CaLP)
Centre for Economic Policy Research (CEPR)
Children's Investment Fund Foundation (CIFF)
Communicable Diseases (COMDIS) - Health Service Delivery Research Programme - Nuffield Centre for International Health and Development - University of Leeds
Concern Worldwide
Enhancing Learning and Research for Humanitarian Assistance (ELRHA)
Institute of Development Studies (IDS)
International Centre for Diarrhoeal Disease Research, Bangladesh
International Network for the Availability of Scientific Publications (INASP)
Manson Unit – Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF)
Overseas Development Institute (ODI)
ReBUILD Consortium - Liverpool School of Tropical Medicine
Research for Health in Humanitarian Crises (R2HC)
Research Into Results Limited
Research on Food Assistance for Nutritional Impact (REFANI)
SaME Group at STRIVE Consortium - London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine (LSHTM)
Save the Children
SHARE Consortium - LSHTM
Transform Nutrition Research Programme Consortium - IFPRI
UK Collaborative on Development Sciences (UKCDS)
UK Department for International Development (DFID)
University College London (UCL) - Institute of Education
Wellcome Trust

Dial-in participants come from the following organisations:

Action Against Hunger
Active Learning Network for Accountability and Performance in Humanitarian Action (ALNAP)
Christian Aid
Devex
DFID
Girls' Education Challenge
Giving Evidence
Humanitarian Innovation Fund - (ELRHA)
International Medical Corps UK
London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine
MARCH Centre - Public Health in Humanitarian Crises Group - LSHTM
National Foundation for Educational Research
Oxfam
Policy Lab

Annex 3 – Useful Links

http://static1.squarespace.com/static/5167f6a2e4b0f1cbdee8d1c0/t/5239a82ae4b0a981d2a07897/1379510314660/DEGRP+Impact+and+Communications+Strategy+September+2013.pdf

http://r4d.dfid.gov.uk/PDF/Outputs/Communication/2010-11_Insights-into-RC-final-formatted.pdf

https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/research-uptake-guidance

https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/67757/research-strategy-08.pdf

http://r4d.dfid.gov.uk/PDF/Outputs/Consultation/ResearchStrategyWorkingPaperfinal_communications_P1.pdf

http://www.who.int/management/partnerships/overall/en/index1.html

http://www.ukcds.org.uk/sites/default/files/content/resources/AusAID-DFID-workshop-background-paper.pdf

http://www.elrha.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/01/ELRHA-Uptake-Diffusion-Guidelines.pdf

http://policy-practice.oxfam.org.uk/our-work/humanitarian/humanitarian-evidence-programme#17566c20-3a6d-478d-931a-302a8d6cbecc

http://www.odi.org/programmes/rapid

http://www.actionagainsthunger.org/refani/communications-research-uptake

http://www.researchtoaction.org/howto/uptake-strategy/

http://www.ids.ac.uk/opinion/five-steps-to-achieving-impact-with-research

http://www.nwo.nl/en/about-nwo/organisation/nwo-divisions/wotro/Impact+toolkit/Impact+toolkit+-+Research+Uptake