



*Community mapping with a young men's group in an Indonesian community in a UTS research project (Jeremy Kohlitz)*

# International development research impact: 10 key insights

**By Avni Kumar, Danielle Logue, Diana Gonzalez Botero, George Goddard, Juliet Willetts, Keren Winterford, Mel Dunn and Michele Rumsey**

Now more than ever, decision-making needs to be informed by evidence. The current global pandemic highlights the need for politicians and bureaucrats to 'listen to science' and be informed by experts.

In light of this 'importance of evidence', we turn to consider the value of

international development research in shaping policy about Australia's overseas development assistance.

International development researchers at the University of Technology Sydney (UTS), together with those who commission and use research to inform programming and policy, recently explored these ideas. Here we present ten key takeaways to consider for your own practice, and also reflect on how we could construct our sector and funding so that these could be best realised in practice.

**1. Partnerships should be at the foundation of international development research.** [Partnerships](#) are best underpinned by an understanding of local contexts and strong relations with in-country actors. [Partnership](#) is demonstrated by a balanced involvement of Australia-based and in-country partners, including as co-authors and through equitable budget allocations.

**2. Meaningful participatory processes enable local actors to inform the research agenda and be involved in the research design.** Local actors have perspectives on the issues to be explored and on ways in which the research can provide an evidence base to inform local decisions. Research commissioners and researchers agreed that when the owners and generators of knowledge are local, research processes and outcomes are more likely to be impactful and sustainable.

**3. Research should always come with the 'so what?'** Research impact is enabled by identifying clear opportunities for impact, and the corresponding steps towards achieving this, from the beginning of a research project. Stakeholder engagement, understanding of local policy, and local ownership of the research agenda and research dissemination are all crucial to realising research impact. The pathways by which research evidence reaches and influences policy and practice are central to the concerns of research commissioners.

**4. Strengthening local capacities and skills for research is an important contribution of international development research.** Research should

include investment and processes to strengthen local systems – in particular, to strengthen in-country research and evidence-based decision-making and policy development. International development research should be looking to support the next wave of in-country researchers, by identifying and building the capacity of early career professionals.

**5. Valuing diversity within a research team brings multiple perspectives and contributions to research findings.** [Diversity](#) can include dimensions such as gender and inclusivity, shared involvement of in-country and Australia-based researchers, as well as a diversity of research disciplines. Researchers need to be willing to learn from others and be informed by other disciplines and actor groups different from their own.

**6. Impactful research is grounded in empirical evidence, and seeks to inform and influence change at multiple scales.** Research commissioners value research that is connected to pathways to enable uptake of research findings at national and subnational levels, with relevant government and non-government actors. This requires researchers to have multiple sets of relationships, trust and respect, and understanding of the local contexts to support longer term influence.

**7. Research can be informed by multiple and diverse data sets to create new meaning, insights and research impact.** There is already so much existing data, we need to utilise it and build on knowledge generated to date. For instance, the [Pacific Data Hub](#) provides data through a wide and diverse range of tools and visualisation techniques. Similarly, existing evaluations can be aggregated and re-examined through a particular lens (e.g. gender and social inclusion) as part of meta-evaluations. Aggregation of existing data requires transparency and publication by commissioners of international development research.

**8. Researcher competency, research rigour and use of ethical principles**

**provide confidence to commissioners of research.** In addition to robust research practice, commissioners of research greatly value the use of collaborative processes, which enable partnership and centrality of local actors in the research practice and uptake of research findings. The cultural competence of international development researchers is a key ingredient to this process. Conducting research in a safe and respectful manner, and application of [ethical principles for human research](#), are core values of international development research and research impact.

**9. The best funding arrangements support long-term partnerships and research co-design from the outset.** Partnership is a long-term agenda that reaches well beyond short-term research grant cycles, and is best enabled through ongoing institutional relations as well as personal commitments. If long-term partnerships are a recognised foundation to research impact, then this begs the question why research grants are most often provided by commissioners through short-term funding windows. A longer timeframe would support the stakeholder engagement and local ownership needed to maximise the impact of research and for participatory processes. Funding arrangements that enable partnerships and research [co-design and co-production from the outset](#) are preferable.

**10. Research impact often happens long after ‘the research project’ has finished.** This presents a quandary to commissioners and researchers alike – how can they know of and value the contribution that funded research has made in support of evidence-based decision-making, and to policy and programming improvements? How, as a sector can we better monitor and measure the contribution of research to development effectiveness?

The insights shared by the external research commissioners in discussion with the international development researchers at UTS provide a valuable framework when thinking about future research, and how international development

research has the potential (and indeed the moral imperative) to generate impact in the countries where it is implemented. Research impact goes beyond the research project, and it requires strong partnerships, capacity building, and grounding in local contexts.

So, if this seems self-evident and non-controversial, then how could our sector rethink how we conceive of and structure the commissioning of research and the mobilisation of research expertise, and do so in more diverse and creative ways that can best enable our ten key points above to be operationalised in practice? We leave you with that open question and hope it prompts new directions for us all to take!

## **About the author/s**

### **Avni Kumar**

Avni Kumar is a Research Consultant at the Institute for Sustainable Futures, University of Technology Sydney.

### **Danielle Logue**

Danielle Logue is the Director of the Centre for Business and Sustainable Development, UTS Business School, University of Technology Sydney.

### **Diana Gonzalez Botero**

Diana Gonzalez is a Senior Research Consultant at the Institute for Sustainable Futures, University of Technology Sydney.

### **George Goddard**

George Goddard is the Research, Learning and Influence Specialist at Engineers Without Borders Australia.

### **Juliet Willetts**

Juliet Willetts is a Research Director at the Institute for Sustainable Futures, University of Technology Sydney.

**Keren Winterford**

Keren Winterford is a Research Director at the Institute for Sustainable Futures, University of Technology Sydney.

**Mel Dunn**

Mel Dunn is Vice President, Strategy & Innovation at DT Global - a global role focused on the development and delivery of innovative, shared value solutions to enduring global challenges.

**Michele Rumsey**

Michele Rumsey is Director, WHO Collaborating Centre for Nursing, Midwifery and Health Development, University of Technology Sydney.