

# IMPROVING RESEARCH USE IN INTERNATIONAL DEVELOPMENT

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An RDI Network

Action Research Project | October 2020

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RESEARCH FOR  
DEVELOPMENT  
IMPACT NETWORK

A collaboration between  
the Australian Council for  
International Development  
and Australian universities

The RDI Network acknowledges the Traditional Custodians of the land of which we work, play and live, and pay our respects to Elders past, present and emerging.

We wish to recognise the ongoing inter-generational trauma suffered by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families and communities as impacted by colonial invasion and control.

The RDI Network values the experience and contribution of people from all cultures, genders, bodies and abilities. We celebrate diversity and respect for all.





The Enhancing Research Use in International Development Action Research Project was implemented by the Institute for Human Security and Social Change at La Trobe University and Praxis Consultants.

The Facilitation Team consisted of Chris Adams, Maya Cordeiro, Anna Roche, Elisabeth Jackson, and Lisa Denney.

## **About the RDI Network**

The Research for Development Impact Network (RDI Network) is a network of practitioners, researchers and evaluators working in international development, supporting collaborative partnerships to improve the uptake and use of evidence in policy and practice. Working in close partnership with the Australian Council for International Development (ACFID), the RDI Network functions as a key cross-sector platform for shared learning and action in the international development sector. The RDI Network is supported by the Australian Government Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (DFAT).

## **About the Institute for Human Security and Social Change**

The Institute for Human Security and Social Change is a not-for-profit initiative located within the College of Arts, Social Sciences and Commerce at La Trobe University. We work for inclusive social change by undertaking research, monitoring and evaluation, and outreach and engagement. We work alongside development practitioners and organisations to support them to be more effective, making use of the latest thinking in international development and social change. We seek to learn from development practice and to share that learning in Australia and internationally. At the core of what we do is the recognition that addressing complex problems in our region will require new practices and different relationships.

## **About Praxis Consultants**

Praxis Consultants is an established company with more than 17 years in monitoring and evaluation, design and strategic support for DFAT and other aid and development organisations, both in Australia and overseas. Praxis Consultants specialises in supporting and assessing aid practice, with extensive experience in training, capacity development, co-design and collaborative monitoring and evaluation.

## **Citation**

Cordeiro M, Jackson E, Adams C, Roche A (2020). Improving Research Use in International Development: An RDI Network Action Research Project. Research for Development Impact Network, Canberra.

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# Acknowledgements

The facilitation team would like to thank the RDI Network, the Steering Group, and Research Advocates involved in this project. All generously contributed their ideas and time to develop, reflect on, and make changes to the way their organisations value and support the use of research and evidence in practice and policy.

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# Acronyms

<b>DFAT</b>	Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (Australian Government)
<b>FHF</b>	Fred Hollows Foundation
<b>HAG</b>	Humanitarian Advisory Group
<b>IWDA</b>	International Women's Development Agency
<b>NGO</b>	non-government organisation
<b>RDI Network</b>	Research for Development Impact Network
<b>SPC</b>	The Pacific Community
<b>UNSW</b>	University of New South Wales
<b>UTS</b>	University of Technology Sydney

# Glossary

<b>Action research</b>	an approach to organisational change utilising a systematic and cyclical process of observing, planning, acting, reflecting, learning and sharing
<b>Political economy analysis</b>	analysis of the political, economic, social and cultural factors that shape how power and resources are distributed between different groups and individuals and how this changes (or stays the same) over time
<b>Research</b>	a process of investigation for the purposes of gaining knowledge, understanding or evidence to contribute to change in theory, policy or practice
<b>Research use</b>	the application of research findings to practice and policy

# Executive summary

The *Improving Research Use in International Development, RDI Network Action Research Project* aimed to bring together policymakers, practitioners and researchers to better understand the individual and organisational drivers, incentives and ways of working that contribute to, or inhibit research use, and to help shift them. Over a 10-month period, small teams of research advocates from 12 different organisations – including government and intergovernmental organisations, managing contractors, non-government organisations (NGOs) and universities – undertook action research projects designed to trial different strategies for improving research use within their organisations.

This report synthesises the findings that emerged from the project. It outlines a framework for improving research use based on insights generated through the action research projects. The framework identifies five **organisational factors** which are the basis for improved research use within organisations:



## Authorising Environment

includes both 'formal' authority, such as an organisation's legal mandate, as well as 'informal' authority, such as organisational norms and practices



## Research Culture

the values, ideas and assumptions about research and research use which shape how people within the organisation – and the organisation as a whole – behave



## Relationships

the formal and informal connections between research producers and research users



## Capabilities and capacity

an organisation's human resources – the skills and knowledge of staff, staffing levels, and whether staff have enough time to facilitate research use



## Systems and funding

includes formal policies, procedures and processes as well as informal methods ('the way we do things here') on how knowledge is managed and shared, how decisions are made, how teams work together, and how funding is allocated and channelled

Linked to each of the above five factors are 15 practical **strategies for improving research use** which have been tested within different types of organisations.



### Authorising environment

- Encourage formal commitments to research use
- Involve individuals with influence and/or authority in efforts to improve research use
- Communicate the value of research within organisations and to the broader sector



### Research culture

- Facilitate explicit discussions on research use
- Reward or incentivise research use



### Relationships

- Jointly design and implement research with potential users
- Establish or contribute to cross-organisational working groups to bring
- Build understanding of what practitioners see as the challenges to research use
- Demonstrate the value of research to practitioners



### Capabilities and capacity

- Facilitate peer to peer learning about research use
- Develop practical tools and guidelines for staff who commission or use research



### Systems and funding

- Strengthen knowledge management and knowledge sharing
- Integrate research use into organisational processes
- Establish new systems for research coordination and collaboration
- Demonstrate the added value of time spent on research

Analysis of the portfolio of action research projects provided important insights into the process of improving research use and implementing organisational change:



### Start small

While changing organisational norms and practices can seem like an overwhelming challenge, there is value in starting with a single issue or a small activity to test organisational appetite and see what might work.



### Work on organisation-specific challenges

Analysing the specific challenges and opportunities for research use within organisations can help identify realistic entry points for triggering change and stimulate wider conversations about research use.



### **Take advantage of change and disruption**

Processes of organisational change such as strategic planning processes, organisational restructures or program and policy reviews provide opportunities to influence strategic decisions or introduce new ideas and practices around research use.



### **Build on what's there**

Efforts to improve research use are more successful when they build on existing organisational goals or workplans, strengthen existing activities or practices, or exploit current openings.



### **Work across the research cycle**

Strategies to improve research use need to be built into all stages of the planning and implementation of a research project.



### **Bring others along**

Involving others within and outside an organisation can improve research use, encourage collaboration, help spread ideas and build broader ownership of change.



### **Get 'the right people' involved**

Bringing together individuals from different parts of an organisation helps 'unpack' different understandings of research, challenge values, beliefs and behaviour undermining research use, and diffuse ideas. Involving senior staff in efforts to improve research use provides authority and legitimacy, but support for research use also needs to be embedded at several levels to facilitate organisation-wide changes in behaviour and practices.



### **Reflect and adapt**

Action research can be a useful approach to organisational change, as it can support teams to reflect on what they are learning and adapt their strategies accordingly. An 'outsider' can help keep teams on track and prompt critical reflection.

The findings presented in this report are intended to provide ideas and starting points which those in the international development sector can use to strengthen research use in their organisations.

# 1. Introduction



# Introduction

## 1.1. The challenge

Over the last few decades, there has been an increasing emphasis in many parts of the world on using evidence – including research evidence – to inform policy and practice (see White 2019). The international development sector is no exception (see e.g. Court et al. 2005). As a result, there is now greater understanding of the factors that support or inhibit the use of research in different contexts and the multiple influences on decision-making (see Breckon and Dodson 2016; Walter, Nutley, and Davies 2005; Oliver and Cairney 2019; see also Muirhead 2017; Kung and Kamp 2018).

For example, it is now understood that research use is not a linear process, and concepts such as knowledge ‘transfer’ are being replaced by discussions of the complex range of factors that shape how and when research is used to inform policy and practice (Davies, Nutley, and Walter 2008; Smith and Joyce 2012). There is also a growing recognition that research use – including the kinds of knowledge that are valued and ‘whose knowledge counts’ – is closely linked to issues of power and politics (e.g. Eyben et al. 2015; Pankhurst 2017; Weyrauch 2016). Policymakers and practitioners who want to use research therefore encounter a range of challenges to doing so. Researchers who want to use their findings to influence policy and practice likewise face a variety of constraints.

Many of these challenges are about how organisations – and individuals within them – value and use research. In recognition of this, the Research for Development Impact Network (RDI Network) initiated the Enhancing Research Use in International Development Action Research Project. The project brought together practitioners and researchers to investigate the individual and organisational drivers, incentives and ways of working that contribute to, or inhibit, greater use of research in international development organisations. A central aim of the project was to contribute to tangible changes in how organisations approach the production and use of research.

## 1.2. Outline of the report

This report synthesises the findings that emerged from the project. It showcases a range of practical strategies for improving research use which have been tested within different types of organisations. These are intended to provide ideas and starting points which practitioners and researchers in the international development sector can use to strengthen research use in their organisations.

The report is structured as follows. The remainder of this section describes the project and outlines the action research approach. Section 2 introduces a framework for understanding the key organisational factors influencing research use and briefly outlines each of the research projects. Section 3 uses the framework to present the key challenges that research advocates identified for each of these organisational factors and the strategies they tested through their action research projects. These are illustrated with examples from different action research projects. Section 4 looks across the project to identify key lessons about improving research use in organisations, the process of organisational change, and the project’s experience of using action research as an approach to organisational change.

### 1.3. About the project

#### Box 1: Organisations involved in the project

- a government agency – the Australian Government Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (DFAT)
- a social enterprise – Humanitarian Advisory Group (HAG)
- a regional intergovernmental organisation - The Pacific Community (SPC)
- two universities – University of New South Wales (UNSW) and University of Technology Sydney (UTS)
- four NGOs – Fred Hollows Foundation (FHF), International Women’s Development Agency (IWDA), Plan International Australia, and Oxfam Australia
- three managing contractors – Abt Associates, DT Global and Cardno Emerging Markets

In October 2019, the facilitation team convened a group of 12 organisations that fund, produce and use development research,<sup>①</sup> drawn from across government and intergovernmental organisations, managing contractors, non-government organisations (NGOs) and universities (Box 1). Over a 10-month period, teams of three or more ‘research advocates’ from each organisation undertook action research projects, to trial different strategies for improving how research is used to inform practice and policy within their own organisation.

Each team of research advocates was accompanied by one of four members of a facilitation team from the Institute for Human Security and Social Change at La Trobe University and Praxis Consultants. The facilitation team was responsible for the delivery of the overall project. This included planning and facilitating three project-wide workshops, accompanying research advocate teams as they implemented their action research projects, supporting critical reflection, learning and knowledge exchange across all the action research projects, and documenting insights and lessons throughout the project. The RDI Network Secretariat and a Steering Group comprising representatives from the Australian development sector provided high-level oversight of the project as well as support, input, ideas and guidance at key points.

This project is unique in several ways. Over the last few years, the RDI Network has produced a range of resources to support better communication of research and engagement of research users with the aim of enhancing the impact of research on development policy and practice (e.g. Muirhead 2017; Kung and Kamp 2018; Georgeou and Hawksley 2020). These resources provide practitioners and researchers with tools and strategies for promoting research findings and encouraging research use.

① 1 - In the international development sector, organisations that fund research include government departments such as DFAT (either directly or through development programs managed by NGOs or managing contractors), other government agencies such as the Australian Research Council and the Australian Centre for International Agricultural Research, and international NGOs. Organisations that produce research include universities and university-based centres and institutes, international NGOs, and managing contractors. All of these organisations also use development research.

However, this is the first time that the RDI Network has brought together researchers and practitioners from different organisations to systematically trial and critically reflect on these strategies using an action research approach. This cross-sector collaboration has enabled analysis of the drivers and challenges for research use – and testing of what works to shift these – across a range of organisational contexts.

In addition, although the focus of the project was on the challenges and opportunities for research use within organisations, these were set in the context of the challenges and opportunities across the sector as a whole. At each of the three workshops, facilitated discussions enabled the research advocates to lift their gaze above their own teams and organisations and reflect on how drivers, incentives and ways of working at the sector level shaped research use within their own organisations.



**“The project has provided a space for regular reflection and discussion which may not otherwise have occurred” - Project Participant**

#### **1.4. Action research as an approach to organisational change**

Action research is a systematic and cyclical process of observing, planning, acting, reflecting, learning and sharing (Coghlan and Brannick 2010; Greenwood and Levin 1998; Reason and Bradbury 2001). It is based on the premise that informed and incremental practical changes undertaken as part of an inquiry process can generate knowledge to improve practice. Doing action research in organisations can contribute to new ideas about organisational change and provide a way of trialling practices that contribute to this change.

Within this project, action research cycles were implemented at two levels (Figure 1). Within individual organisations, the action research process was led by teams of research advocates, with support from the facilitation team. The facilitation team also led a process of action research across the project as a whole. This project-level action research involved iterative cycles of planning, action, reflection, learning and sharing with research advocates and the Steering Group.



The Process



home





A range of different action research methods were used in the project.



### **Team-based design and analysis**

At the three workshops, different types of organisations worked together to brainstorm sector-wide barriers to research use, identify opportunities to change these and analyse what they were learning. Individual teams conducted a similar process within their organisations, bringing together people from different departments and levels in the organisation.



### **Iterative linking of theory to practice**

The facilitation team introduced ideas and frameworks from academic and grey literature to help research advocates think about research use within their organisations and used practical insights from the action research projects to refine and adapt these frameworks.



### **Accompaniment**

Facilitation team members worked with research advocate teams to support their projects and facilitate learning across the projects. This included supporting teams to analyse the barriers and enablers within their organisations and develop realistic action research goals and project plans. The facilitation team set up regular 'check-ins' with the teams to support them to reflect on what they were learning from their projects as they progressed, prompt further action, and help trouble-shoot challenges.



### **Journaling and shared documentation**

The facilitation team encouraged the research advocate teams to document their learning through journaling and record-keeping. Some research partners – with support from the facilitation team – used key questions to track the progress of their projects (see Annex 1). The facilitation team also kept action research logs for each action research project to track emerging insights, lessons and challenges.



### **Facilitated learning**

The facilitation team provided prompts, frameworks and questions to support research advocate teams to critically reflect and systematise documentation. All organisations – together with the Steering Group – had opportunities to participate in three facilitated workshops at the beginning, middle and end of the project, in which team presentations and group brainstorming and reflection sessions enabled cross-sector learning.



## 1.5. Phases of the project

The action research 'cycles' at the organisation and project level consisted of three phases: design; planning, action and reflection; and learning and knowledge sharing (Figure 1). At the project level, these phases took place at three facilitated workshops at the beginning, middle and end of the project.

Within individual organisations, the action research projects evolved on independent timelines, depending on the scope of the projects and the availability of the research advocates. In some cases, the action research projects had a narrower focus, such as identifying ways to strengthen research use for a single research or development project. In other cases, teams of research advocates moved incrementally to working at an organisational or inter-organisational level through, for example, establishing an organisation-wide working group on improving research use. research use for a single research piece or development project.



### Design

- Expressions of interest were sought from organisations and 13 were selected to participate in the project. One organisation withdrew from the project shortly after it commenced.
- The facilitation team designed and delivered a project launch workshop in October 2019 for the selected organisations. At the workshop, research advocates used a simple political economy analysis framework to identify barriers and enablers to research use at a sector level. This helped frame discussions on barriers and enablers within their individual organisations.
- Research advocates were also introduced to the methodology of action research



### Planning, action, and reflection

- The research advocates, working in teams of three or more in their organisations, undertook organisation-specific political economy analyses to identify specific enablers and challenges for research use, which they intended to strengthen or shift. They also established short, medium and/or long-term goals for improving research use at the team or organisational level.
- The research advocate teams implemented the activities they had planned, meeting regularly as a team to plan and reflect on progress. Regular discussions with their facilitation team member also provided opportunities to reflect on their work. Some teams modified their activities as a result of these reflections.
- At a second workshop in February 2020, teams shared what they were learning through their individual projects. Emergent ideas about key factors driving research use across different organisations were compiled and categorised by the facilitation team and tested and refined with research advocates.



**“The It has been very useful to have an external mentor to support reflection.” - Project Participant**



### **Learning and knowledge sharing**

- The facilitation team synthesised lessons and reflections from across the projects and used these to develop a framework to describe emerging findings. This was shared with research advocate teams to seek feedback.
- Some teams produced blogs or short internal reports to document and share their learning.
- The facilitation team designed and delivered a final workshop in July 2020 to reflect on the lessons emerging from the project. These reflections informed the final project report.

# 2. Understanding research in organisations



# Understanding research in organisations

## 2.1 Unpacking ‘research use’

In this project we adopted an applied understanding of research, defined as a process of investigation for the purposes of gaining knowledge, understanding or evidence to contribute to change in theory, policy or practice (adapted from Georgeou and Hawksley 2020, 3). This definition recognises that for most organisations involved in the project, the purpose of research is to develop new knowledge in international development and to inform how development is understood and practiced.

Although there are a range of terms to describe how research is used, in this report we use the term ‘research use’ in a broad sense to refer to the application of research findings to practice and policy (e.g. Morton 2015; Muirhead 2017, 7; Kung and Kamp 2018, 2; Georgeou and Hawksley 2020, v). Applying research to practice and policy assumes that users have engaged with the research findings in some way; for example, by reading a briefing, hearing about it at a conference or seminar, or being involved in the research itself. It requires research users to undergo a cognitive change: the research needs to add to their knowledge and understanding or shift their attitudes or perceptions. It also requires users to take some action based on this new knowledge or changed attitude. This could include referring to research findings to justify policy positions, using research findings to argue for (or against) additional funding, or drawing on findings to design new programs or adapt activities in existing programs.

Importantly, however, research is rarely the only factor informing decisions. Alongside research evidence, users must also take into account factors such as organisational imperatives, stakeholder perspectives, and available resources. Research use therefore ‘involves complex processes over time, whereby research ... [findings] are adapted, built upon and operationally applied’ (Australian Research Council 2018).

## 2.2. Using political economy analysis to understand research use

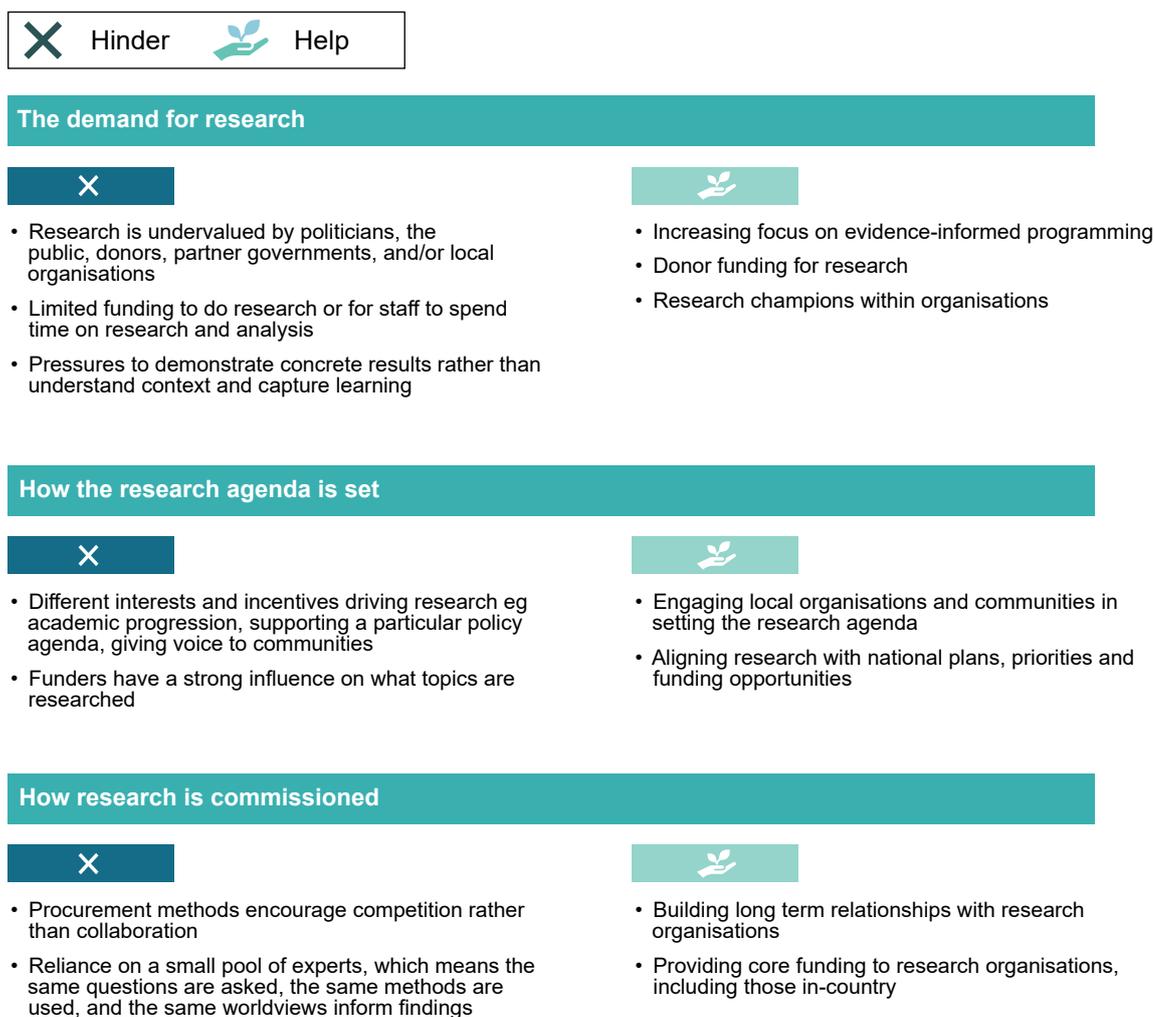
To help research advocates unpack the constraints and opportunities for research use within their organisations – and design their action research projects – we introduced a problem-driven approach to political economy analysis (Harris 2013; Fritz, Kaiser and Levy 2009) (see Annex 2). Political economy analysis is concerned with the political, economic, social and cultural factors that shape how power and resources are distributed between different groups and individuals and how this changes (or stays the same) over time. A problem-driven approach to political economy analysis is helpful for understanding the underlying features of practical problems and for identifying pathways to change.

At the project launch workshop, research advocates used this approach to analyse the political economy of research use in the international development sector in Australia, contributing insights from their own knowledge and experience.

This included identifying structural or systemic constraints such as organisational processes, practices and norms that limit research use, as well as how individual and organisational incentives and behaviours shape how and when research is used. Participants also identified possible ways to address these constraints. These were summarised by the facilitation team and presented back to participants in the second workshop. A modified version is presented in Figure 2.

Within their individual organisations, the research advocate teams also used a political economy lens to analyse the opportunities and constraints around research use within their own organisations. Some teams undertook this analysis themselves, while others used surveys and interviews to seek input from across their organisations.

**Figure 2:** Factors that hinder or help research use in the Australian international development sector



## How research is designed and delivered



- Privileging of 'expert' knowledge and quantitative research methods
- Research outputs matter more than how research is done: 'publish or perish'
- Limited engagement of potential end users in designing research



- Co-creating research with potential end users
- Supporting greater valuing of local knowledge, including by developing partnerships with local research organisations and engaging marginalised groups in research

## What research outputs are produced



- Different types of research outputs are valued differently: length and complexity matter to academics; brevity matters to bureaucrats
- The volume of research on a topic can be overwhelming



- Asking end users what kind of research products will be most useful for them
- Synthesising existing research in an accessible way
- Tailoring research products and using a range of communication channels to reach different audiences

## How research is used to influence policy and practice



- Findings and/or recommendations are not practical or actionable
- Researchers have limited understanding of when and how to engage in policymaking processes
- Policymakers and/or practitioners are not aware of research or have limited time to engage with it

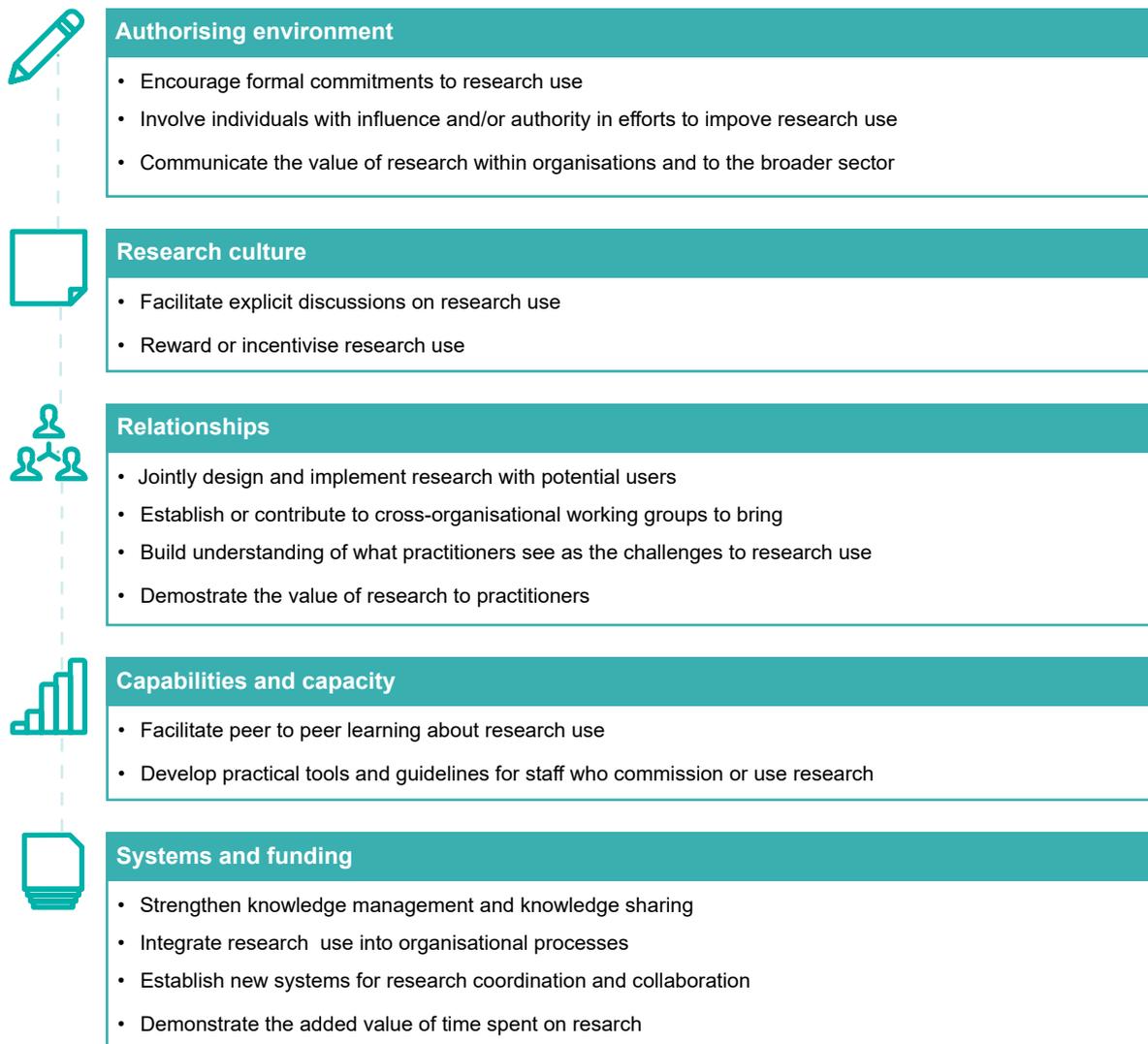


- Planning for impact from the start of the research project
- Building 'ownership' of the research among end users by engaging them in all stages of the research
- Using knowledge brokers who can help bridge research and practice or policy

### 2.3. A framework for improving research use

As the action research projects progressed, the facilitation team began looking across the projects – and to existing literature – to identify commonalities and differences in the challenges or opportunities research advocate teams were addressing in their action research projects, and how they were addressing them. From this, the facilitation team identified the main organisational factors which shape how organisations use research. This analysis was presented at the second facilitated workshop and tested through the facilitation team’s regular ‘check-ins’ with teams of research advocates. Research advocates also commented on a second version of the framework in the third facilitated workshop. The finalised framework (presented below) is the result of this iterative process (Figure 3).

**Figure 3:** A framework for improving research use.





The framework outlines five **organisational factors** which are the basis for improved research use within organisations: authorising environment; <sup>3</sup>research culture; relationships; capabilities and capacity; and systems and funding. These factors shape what research and research use means in organisations and influence the likely success of efforts to improve research use.

The framework also presents 15 **strategies for improving research use** in organisations, derived from the project experience. These are building blocks for strengthening research use. In some cases, the strategies directly target challenges linked to one or more of the organisational factors. For example, engaging end users in research design is a pathway to strengthening the relationships that sustain research use. In other cases, the strategies are a means to ‘test the waters’ and begin a conversation on strengthening research use.

The framework is not intended to fully capture the complex range of factors influencing research use. The challenges and opportunities for research use may be different in other organisations. There are also other strategies that were not tested through the action research projects. The framework does, however, help researchers and practitioners identify starting points and possible pathways for improving research use in their own organisations, based on what other organisations have found useful.



**“Understanding challenges and experiences of other organisations and situating our own challenges within that wider context; has been useful” - Project Participant**

<sup>3</sup> - Following Andrews, Pritchett and Woolcock (2016), ‘authorising environment’ refers to both ‘formal’ authority such as an organisation’s legal mandate as well as ‘informal’ authority such as organisational norms and practices and the support that key individuals provide for what organisations do and how they do it.

Table 1 summarises the action research projects using the framework. It outlines the challenges and opportunities for improving research use identified by research advocates through their organisational political economy analysis, along with the organisational factors they sought to address and the strategies they used. Examples of some of the actions that the research advocates initiated, which serve as useful starting points for other researchers and practitioners, are also included.

**Table 1:** The 12 organisation-based action research projects

 Research project

### Fred Hollows Foundation ///

#### CHALLENGES

No systematic way of using evidence generated through innovative projects in the field to inform decisions on scaling up or sustaining successful innovations

Evidence generated by innovative projects does not have the same legitimacy as other forms of evidence (eg quantitative studies)

#### OPPORTUNITIES

Organisational strategy supports research & innovation, including a dedicated research and innovation team

#### STRATEGIES

Strengthen **capabilities and capacity by developing practical tools and guidelines**. Included developing and testing an evidence-informed decision-making framework for innovation projects.

Improve **systems and funding by integrating research use into organisational processes**. Included integrating the decision-making framework into the program management manual.

### International Women's Development Agency ///

#### CHALLENGES

Gaps in internal use of IWDA's research findings

Limited planning for research use, including funding for activities to promote research use

#### OPPORTUNITIES

Recent organisational restructure has led to creation of knowledge translation team and recognition that promoting research use is an organisation-wide function

#### STRATEGIES

Strengthen **relationships by establishing or contributing to cross-organisational working groups**. Included establishing a knowledge translation working group involving staff from different departments, including senior staff.

Strengthen **systems and funding by integrating research use into organisational processes**. Included using a planned piece of research to test and model ways to integrate research use into organisational processes for research projects.

## Oxfam Australia ///

### CHALLENGES

Perceived value of knowledge and learning fluctuates with organisational changes (eg leadership) and sectoral trends

Lack of common understanding among staff of how knowledge and learning has improved policy and practice and served wider organisational interests

Sector pressures result in knowledge and learning being seen from the perspective of efficiency and value for money rather than contribution to understanding how change happens

### OPPORTUNITIES

National strategic planning process underway provides opportunities to promote greater valuing of research

### STRATEGIES

Improve the **authorising environment** by **encouraging formal commitments to research use**. Included contributing to staff and management discussions about the strategy to raise the importance of knowledge and learning as a key organisational value.

Strengthen the **research culture** by **facilitating explicit discussions on research use**. Included initiating conversations to explore diverse perspectives and organisational drivers that influence how research is used and valued.

## Humanitarian Advisory Group ///

### CHALLENGES

Limited understanding of whether research is being disseminated or used

No approaches in place for assessing reach, use and impact of research

### OPPORTUNITIES

Existing research partnership and good relationship with NGO partner in the Pacific, PIANGO

### STRATEGIES

Strengthen **relationships** by **jointly designing and implementing research with potential users**. Included jointly designing and undertaking a study and developing an approach to assessing research use with PIANGO.

Strengthen **capabilities and capacity** by **developing practical tools and guidelines**. Included testing and refining an approach to assessing reach, use and impact of research to support staff to understand pathways to impact and integrate this into planning for research projects.

## Plan International Australia ///

### CHALLENGES

Lack of clarity and oversight of what research is being conducted, for what purpose, and who should be engaged for greater impact

Diverse views on best practice approaches to research  
No consistent guidance on how and when to commission and use research and lack of planning for knowledge dissemination phase of a project

Minimal sharing of research findings or lessons learned

### OPPORTUNITIES

Informal research committee already established

New organisational strategy includes a commitment to improve use of research and evaluation findings in developing programs and advocacy initiatives and better integrating programming, influencing and advocacy work

Internal pockets of good practice in using research for policy and practice change

### STRATEGIES

Improve the **authorising environment by involving individuals with influence and/or authority in efforts to improve research use**. Included formalising a Research Committee with staff from across the organisation, including senior staff.

Strengthen the **research culture by facilitating explicit discussions on research use**. Included jointly developing a framework that sets out core principles for research.

Strengthen **relationships by contributing to cross-organisational working groups**. Included using the Research Committee to build links between staff playing different functions in the organisation

Strengthen **capabilities and capacity by developing practical tools and guidelines**. Included jointly developing practical guidance for staff on commissioning research, minimum standards for research and assessment of research proposals.

Improve **systems and funding by establishing new systems for research coordination and collaboration**. Included using the Research Committee as a central point of coordination and outlining clear processes for integrating research use at different stages of a research project.



## Abt Associates ///

### CHALLENGES

Use of research by in-country programs is variable and depends on individuals

Canberra-based technical team is keen to support programs with research and analysis and contribute to wider sector discussions but struggles to find time given cost-recovery model



### OPPORTUNITIES

Internal support for evidence-informed approaches to programming

### STRATEGIES

Improve the **authorising environment** by **communicating the value of research within organisations and to the broader sector**. Included producing blogs and analysis to contribute to broader discussion of research use.

Strengthen **relationships** by **building understanding of what practitioners see as the challenges to research use and demonstrating the value of research to practitioners**. Included conducting a survey and interviews with program teams and producing on-demand research and analysis.

Strengthen **systems and funding** by **demonstrating the added value of time spent on research**. Included using billable and non-billable days to produce research and analysis.

## Cardno Emerging Markets ///

### CHALLENGES

Good practices and lessons not systematically shared between programs or with corporate staff



### OPPORTUNITIES

Internal support for knowledge sharing and recognition of its value to program quality

Better systems and technology to support knowledge sharing across geographically disparate teams

### STRATEGIES

Improve **systems and funding** by **strengthening knowledge management and knowledge sharing**. Included contributing to an online platform on gender and surveying internal community of practice members to understand how they source and use research.

## University of New South Wales ///

### CHALLENGES

A need to deepen and broaden understanding of research impact and pathways to impact among staff to support reporting on the impact of research

### OPPORTUNITIES

Good examples of research impact from diverse areas on which to draw

### STRATEGIES

Strengthen **capabilities and capacity by facilitating peer to peer learning**. Included hosting workshops using case studies of research impact within the university to explore different understandings of research impact and pathways to impact across different disciplines.

Strengthen **research culture by facilitating explicit discussions on research use**. Included bringing together researchers from different disciplines to explore different understandings of and pathways to achieving research impact.



## University of Technology Sydney ///

### CHALLENGES

Staff involved in international development research dispersed across the university and disconnected from each other

A need to improve staff skills and capacities in research translation

Absence of specific support to international development within the university-wide context

### OPPORTUNITIES

Strong alignment between applied focus of international development research and university's strategic focus on public purpose and commitment to social justice

### STRATEGIES

Improve the **authorising environment by involving individuals with influence and/or authority in efforts to improve research use**. Included establishing a working group with members from multiple faculties, institutes and functions of the university, including senior university administrators.

Improve **systems and funding by strengthening knowledge management and knowledge sharing**. Included re-establishing an on-line forum/ collaborative space for the UTS International Development Network.

Strengthen **capabilities and capacity by facilitating peer to peer learning**. Included organising networking forums for researchers to share experiences and discuss ways to strengthen of research engagement and impact.



## DT Global ///

### CHALLENGES

Research and learning not systematically undertaken or used to inform practice

### OPPORTUNITIES

Learning-informed practice is a key principle of the organisation

### STRATEGIES

Improve the **research culture** by **rewarding or incentivising research use**.

Included introducing a peer-voted employee award to incentivise sharing and use of research and learning and promote this as a key organisational value

## Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade ///

### CHALLENGES

Variable demand for and use of research across the organisation, including Canberra-based and in-country staff

Research 'competes' with other drivers for decision-making

### OPPORTUNITIES

Good examples of sharing and use of research among Canberra-based sector teams

### STRATEGIES

Improve the **authorising environment** by **involving individuals with influence and/or authority in efforts to improve research use and communicate the value of research within organisations and to the broader sector**. Included synthesising research in one area of education programming and sharing this widely to demonstrate the value of research to programming

## The Pacific Community ///

### CHALLENGES

Size and structure of the organisation can inhibit knowledge flow

Variable interest among member country governments in driving research agenda and using findings

### OPPORTUNITIES

Organisational strategic objectives include strengthening knowledge and improving learning and innovation

Several cross-organisational programs and research initiatives underway

Direct mandate from member countries to carry out research that supports decision making. Teams involved in high quality research to directly service country member needs

### STRATEGIES

Strengthen the **research culture** by **facilitating explicit discussions on research use**. Included talanoa (conversations) with technical staff to unpack internal challenges and opportunities for research use and stimulate action.

# 3. Strategies for improving research use in organisations



# Strategies for improving research use in organisations

This section uses the framework developed in the project to outline the key challenges that research advocates identified for each of the organisational factors and the strategies they tested through their action research projects. These are illustrated with examples from different action research projects.

## 3.1. Promoting a more supportive authorising environment

The authorising environment for research use encompasses the formal and informal authority and support for research use within organisations (Andrews, Pritchett, and Woolcock 2016). In NGOs, for example, a mission statement or organisational strategy may provide formal authority for research use by referring explicitly to how the organisation will use knowledge. In universities, the increasing emphasis on reporting research impact in university evaluations is providing greater formal authority for academics to spend time and funding on research use.<sup>4</sup> Similarly, informal authority may come from individuals or groups of individuals within an organisation who value research and therefore provide greater support for program or policy staff to spend time on research and analysis.

Research advocates made the following observations about the authorising environment in their organisations:

- Formal authority and informal support for research use varies between organisations, and within organisations.
- Support for research use within individual organisations is linked to the value placed on research in the wider international development sector, including by donors and others who fund research, as well as in-country partners, beneficiaries and the general public. Valuing of research is not consistent across the sector.

While some research advocate teams felt the authorising environment within their organisations supported research use, others thought a stronger mandate and high-level commitment was needed. Strategies these teams used to promote a more supportive authorising environment included:

- encouraging formal commitments to research use in existing organisational policies, procedures or processes, or promoting its inclusion in new policies and procedures
- involving individuals with influence and/or authority within the organisation in efforts to improve research use
- communicating the value of research within organisations and to the broader sector.

<sup>4</sup> - For example, in 2018 the Australian Research Council conducted the first Engagement and Impact assessment, examining how universities are translating their research into economic, environmental, social, cultural and other benefits. The assessment was a companion exercise to the Excellence in Research for Australia assessment process (see <https://www.arc.gov.au/engagement-and-impact-assessment>). The Times Higher Education World University Rankings also recently introduced an impact ranking, which measures universities' contributions to the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals through their research, stewardship, outreach and teaching (see <https://www.timeshighereducation.com/rankings/impact/2020/overall>).

## Promoting a more supportive authorising environment: some examples



### **Oxfam Australia**

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The Oxfam Australia team identified that Oxfam's national strategic planning process provided an opportunity to promote greater valuing of research across the organisation. Their action research project therefore involved the team engaging in this process with the aim of encouraging a strategic commitment to research and learning in the new plan.

The project demonstrated that this can be an effective way to get research and research use on the agenda. The Oxfam team was able to raise the importance of knowledge and learning as a key organisational value in staff and management discussions about the strategy, and initiate conversations to explore the diverse perspectives and organisational drivers that influence how research is used and valued in different parts of the organisation.

The new strategic plan refers to knowledge and learning at a high level, with the wording of the underlying policy and procedure documents giving a mandate and scope to further embed specific commitments to knowledge and learning in practice.



### **Plan International Australia**

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Plan International Australia's Plan International Australia's action research project demonstrated the value of engaging with individuals who have the authority to make change happen.

The project involved formalising an existing informal Research Committee comprising staff from across the organisation. This included Directors of two different departments, both of whom were members of the Executive Team, as well as senior advisers and program managers from different teams within these two departments.

In seeking members for the Research Committee, the action research team sought out individuals in management positions who would be able to provide support and legitimacy for the work of the committee and potentially influence behaviours and processes around research use within their teams.

Although the Research Committee is now formalised, the Plan team has reflected that including an even more senior individual may enable them to fully institutionalise the committee (for example, by including it in Plan procedural manuals or giving it decision-making powers).



## **The University of Technology Sydney**

The University of Technology Sydney's action research project aimed to leverage existing interest in research impact across the university to strengthen organisational support for research use in international development.

The team established a working group with members from multiple faculties, institutes and functions of the university, including senior university administrators. The working group organised networking events and developed an online platform for UTS researchers working on international development topics across the university.

The networking events and online platform have helped highlight the university's existing capabilities and drawn attention to examples of research impact. As a result, the UTS Research Office has committed dedicated support for the working group.



## **Abt Associates**

Abt Associates' action research project took a more outward-looking approach. One of the aims of the project was to use what the team was learning to raise awareness and contribute to the broader debate about research use within the international development sector. In doing so, the team aimed to influence the authorising environment for research use at the sector level.

Over the course of the project, the team produced four blogs for the Abt Associates' Governance and Development Practice blog, 'Governance and Development Soapbox' (Take and Tyrrel 2019; Chatter and Tyrrel 2020; Tyrrel 2020; Tyrrel and Chatter 2020a), and a publicly available Briefing Note (Tyrrel and Chatter 2020b).

The team also took advantage of the increased attention within the sector on responding to COVID-19 to produce a working paper on the implications of the pandemic for monitoring, evaluation, research and learning (MERL) and how to use information collected through MERL processes to respond effectively (Tyrrel, Kelly, Roche and Jackson 2020).

Although the team felt that the blogs were being read (and hits on the blog confirmed this), they reflected that influencing views within the broader sector was a significant challenge, particularly given the focus on the impacts of COVID-19 during the project period.

### 3.2. Building a culture that supports research use

The **research culture** of an organisation can be understood as the values, ideas and assumptions about research and research use which shape how people within the organisation – and the organisation as a whole – behave (adapted from Cartwright and Cooper 1993, 60). Key issues raised by research advocates about the research culture within their organisations centred on differences in understanding and valuing of research, and a lack of incentives:

- Individuals and organisations have diverse and sometimes conflicting understandings of the purpose of research.  
For example, research advocates from NGOs and managing contractors felt that there was often too much of a focus on producing research evidence to meet reporting or compliance needs, rather than as a way of incorporating learning into programs or giving voice to community concerns. They also noted that research was sometimes used to re-affirm existing plans, assumptions or approaches. University research advocates noted that research in academic settings did not always have a strong focus on application, although this was changing, with performance metrics now focusing more on the ‘impact’ of research (see also Muirhead 2017, 24).
- The status or value assigned to different forms of evidence and ways of knowing within and across organisations is uneven.  
For example, research advocates reported that indigenous knowledge was often seen as less credible than western forms (see also Althaus 2020) and that evidence produced by researchers or technical specialists was given greater weight in decision making than the knowledge of practitioners working on the front line. Research advocates also discussed the fact that quantitative research methodologies, such as randomised control trials, were often seen as more reliable than qualitative or participatory approaches.<sup>5</sup> This was linked to what research advocates saw as a preference for firm answers or clear lines of causation between programs and their impacts, which provide decision makers with more certainty.
- There are few formal incentives for staff in NGOs or managing contractors to use research.<sup>6</sup>  
For example, research use is often not included in the position descriptions of program and/or policy staff or in their work plans and is not assessed as part of performance appraisals.

Strategies that research advocate teams used to promote the development of a culture supportive of research use included:

- facilitating explicit discussions on research and research use and what this means to the organisation as a whole and to staff at different levels of the organisation, or in different departments and teams



**“The project has motivated staff to come together to discuss and improve practice” - Project Participant**

- rewarding or incentivising dissemination or use of research through, for example, publicly recognising staff for sharing useful research with others or applying research effectively in their work or including research use in staff performance assessments.

<sup>5</sup> - This topic is very much a live debate in international development (e.g. Bédécarrats, Guérin, and Roubaud 2019; Barrett and Carter 2010; Ravallion 2012).

<sup>6</sup> - This challenge was also identified in Kung and Kamp (2018, 22–23).

## Building a culture that supports research use: some examples



### Plan International Australia

Plan International Australia's team of research advocates identified a key challenge as being the different views within the organisation about the best approaches to doing research.

To help address this, Plan's Research Committee worked together to develop a framework that sets out core principles for research conducted by the organisation. This includes how research connects to programming and advocacy, how and why Plan partners with different types of research organisations, and what kinds of research approaches Plan considers important.

A strong principle that emerged in the committee's discussions was the importance of doing research in a way that empowers women, rather than being extractive. The involvement of staff from across different departments and sections helped disseminate these principles and develop a more coherent understanding of how Plan's values of equality and empowerment apply to its research.



### The Pacific Community

Acknowledging The Pacific Community's research capability across a range of technical specialisations, the SPC team of research advocates sought to unpack the different strategies and approaches used across the organisation to support research use and uptake.

Using a Pacific storytelling methodology, the starting point for the team was to facilitate talanoas (conversations) with three teams engaged in research on how they understood research and research use and how research could be used more effectively in their work.

These discussions helped identify some of the common practices and enablers that support research use and uptake by member countries and territories.



### DT Global

DT Global's action research project aimed to strengthen the organisations' commitment to 'learning-informed practice'.

The team initiated an employee award for 'Best bit of learning shared with a colleague', nominated and voted for by staff, which was presented at a monthly staff meeting.

This introduced an incentive – in the form of peer recognition – for staff to share knowledge and learning as well as signalling to staff that this is something that the organisation values.

### 3.3. Strengthening relationships to enhance research use

The **relationships** needed to encourage and sustain research use include the formal and informal connections between research producers and research users. For research advocates, the key challenges were around strengthening such relationships:

- There are limited links or collaborations between researchers, practitioners and policymakers, including in the countries in which organisations work.
- In NGOs and managing contractors, there is often a structural separation between research and policy or programming. For example, staff who commission or produce research often work in different teams to staff engaged in policy development, advocacy or programming. This is sometimes compounded by geographical separation, such as when Australian-based staff are working with teams in other countries.
- An ‘us and them’<sup>7</sup> view that can inhibit collaboration, with researchers, practitioners and policy makers thinking of each other as ‘outsiders’ or ‘different from us’ (see also Kung and Kamp 2018, 8–9; Newman, Cherney and Head 2016).

At the sector level, although research advocates felt there was a ‘disconnect’ between researchers and practitioners, they noted that this was changing, with greater collaboration between universities, NGOs and research organisations in other countries. They also pointed to forums which aim to bring together researchers, policymakers and practitioners working in international development, such as the Australasian Aid Conference and the RDI Network Conference.<sup>8</sup> However, research advocates felt that more could be done to create stronger relationships between research producers and research users to support more effective use of research.

Strategies that research advocate teams used to strengthen the relationships needed to encourage and sustain research use included:

- jointly designing and implementing research with potential users, including collaborative arrangements between faculties and universities and between program and technical teams in NGOs and managing contractors (see also Kung and Kamp 2018, 3, 12–13).
- establishing or contributing to cross-organisational working groups or communities of practice involving staff whose roles encompass research, programming and/or policy, to bring together users and producers of research and build understanding, foster connections and encourage collaboration



**“The project has prompted us to take a cross-team approach, which is counter to the ‘siloing’ between programs and teams that is quite typical in our organisation” - Project Participant**

- building understanding of what practitioners see as the main challenges to using research so that efforts to address these are based on evidence and can be built into the design of research projects
- demonstrating the value of research to practitioners by developing useful and timely research outputs to inform programming.

<sup>7</sup> - The idea of ‘us and them’ derives from social identity theory (e.g. Scheepers and Ellemers 2019, Ashforth and Mael 1989).

<sup>8</sup> - See <https://devpolicy.crawford.anu.edu.au/annual-australasian-aid-conference> and <https://rdinetwork.org.au/rdi-conferences/>

## Strengthening relationships to enhance research use: some examples



### Humanitarian Advisory Group

The Humanitarian Advisory Group (HAG)'s action research project involved joint research with the Pacific Islands Association of NGOs (PIANGO). The research aimed to explore the impact of research studies that HAG and PIANGO have undertaken through their institutional partnership. This included how the research was used by various stakeholders, its impact on policy, discourse and practice, and how the partnership influenced the impact of the research.

For both HAG and PIANGO, the process of undertaking the joint research and the research studies themselves were as important as the outcomes. HAG and PIANGO worked together to design the scope and methodology for the research, collect and analyse data, and develop research outputs. They found that this local ownership of the research studies had improved dissemination of the findings and contributed to impact (Muirhead 2017, 27, 41), suggesting that more equal partnerships with local organisations support research use.



### International Women's Development Agency

The International Women's Development Agency team built on the opportunity afforded by a recent organisational restructure to strengthen internal relationships which facilitate research use.

In recognition of the fact that research use is an organisation-wide function, the team established a knowledge translation working group involving staff from different departments, including senior staff. This has helped build links between staff responsible for research, policy and advocacy, and programming.



### Abt Associates

One of the aims of Abt Associates' action research project was to strengthen the links between the Governance and Development Practice team in Canberra and programs Abt Associates manages in Southeast Asia and the Pacific. The Governance and Development Practice team provides technical advice to program teams and conducts research and analysis on governance issues. However, their knowledge does not always reach practitioners based in program teams.

The team's approach was to better understand what program teams felt were the constraints to using research so that efforts to address them were based on evidence. To this end, they conducted a survey with 80 program staff on the key challenges to research use and shared the findings both within the organisation and through a public Briefing Note and blog.

They also used the increased demand for rapid research and analytics within their programs resulting from the COVID-19 pandemic to produce several analytical outputs for one of their programs. In doing so, they were able to demonstrate that research can be useful to program implementation, potentially encouraging programs to draw on their knowledge more regularly.

### 3.4. Building capabilities and strengthening capacity for research use

The **capabilities and capacity** for research use reside in an organisation's human resources – the skills and knowledge of staff, staffing levels, and whether staff have enough time to facilitate research use. These were the challenges that research advocates identified:

- Often there was limited time to engage with research, reflect on its implications, or engage with potential users of research (see also Kung and Kamp 2018, 23).  
For example, staff from NGOs and managing contractors mentioned that it was difficult to find time to digest research and to think about how it applies to their work. University staff noted that the pressure to produce research and publications limits the time they have for engaging with practitioners and policymakers.
- There is a need to continuously build staff knowledge and skills in understanding, facilitating and assessing research use (see also Kung and Kamp 2018, 21).  
For example, NGOs and managing contractors felt they needed a better understanding of research design and research methods to help them assess how much weight to give to findings from different research studies.

Strategies that research advocate teams used to build capabilities and strengthen capacity for research use included:

- facilitating peer-to-peer learning about research use and impact across teams or organisations



**“Sharing of ideas and seeing how others are addressing their challenges – learning from others has been of particular interest for us as it allows us to review and improve our own approaches and thought processes” - Project Participant**

- developing practical tools and guidelines for staff or partners who commission or use research.

#### Building capabilities and strengthening capacity for research use: some examples



##### University of New South Wales

The action research projects of the two universities involved in the project included activities to develop researchers' skills and knowledge in understanding and promoting research use. The key strategy in both projects was peer-to-peer learning.

The University of New South Wales (UNSW)'s action research project, for example, aimed at generating a discussion among UNSW academics around the use of research to achieve impact in the context of international development.

The UNSW team hosted a series of three 2-hour workshops in early 2020 entitled *Enhancing Development Impact through Research Use* with the purpose of exploring how academics actually understand and operationalise ideas of impact through their research. Each workshop explored different case studies of research impact, selected by the team through an expression of interest.

The UNSW team found that the workshops provided a space for participating researchers to build their understanding of research impact and facilitated conversations between researchers from different faculties.



### **University of Technology Sydney**

Similarly, the University of Technology Sydney's action research project involved organising networking forums at which researchers shared their experiences of research engagement and impact and considered ways to strengthen their approaches. This aimed to address the need to improve staff skills and capacities in research translation.

Three of the practice-based organisations (two NGOs and a social enterprise) took a different approach. Their action research projects involved developing and testing tools and frameworks to support staff who commission or use research.



### **Fred Hollows Foundation**

One of the challenges identified by the Fred Hollows Foundation team was that the organisation did not have a systematic way of using evidence generated through innovative projects in the field to inform decisions on scaling up or sustaining successful innovations. Their action research project therefore aimed to develop and pilot a tool to guide staff in using evidence to make decisions about future investments.

The team undertook a rapid review of the literature and developed a simple tool that decision-makers and those involved in project implementation could use to decide whether to replicate, scale-up, adapt or abandon innovative research or program interventions based on research findings.



### **Humanitarian Advisory Group**

The joint research that Humanitarian Advisory Group carried out with PIANGO was part of a larger effort to develop a framework, methods and tools for monitoring and evaluating the reach and impact of research undertaken through their partnership. The framework, methods and tools were jointly developed and piloted, and aimed to provide guidance on assessing research use and impact for both HAG and its partners.



### **Plan International Australia**

The framework developed by Plan International Australia's Research Committee included practical guidance, such as processes for commissioning research, minimum standards for research and a detailed framework against which to assess research proposals. The committee plans to 'stress test' this against real research proposals.

9 - The tool asks teams to rate how confident they are that their innovation meets specific criteria, including whether there is evidence that the innovation works. The team hoped to pilot this tool with one or two innovative projects, but was unable to do so because of the COVID-19 pandemic and an internal restructure.

10 - Monitoring and evaluating how research is used has been found to increase the influence of research (Muirhead 2017, 41–42). conferences/

### 3.5. Strengthening systems and funding for research use

The **systems and funding** to enable research use include formal policies, procedures and processes as well as informal methods ('the way we do things here'), encompassing how knowledge is managed and shared, how decisions are made, how teams work together, and how funding is allocated and channelled. Challenges for research advocates ranged across these issues:

#### Systems

- An organisation does not always have the full picture of the research conducted across the organisation, limiting the potential to draw on this to inform policy or practice.
- Knowledge is not always shared regularly or systematically across organisations.
- In NGOs and managing contractors, research functions are often separate from policy or programming functions.
- Timeframes for policy or program development can be limited or not well-aligned with research timeframes or funding cycles.

For example, university staff noted that it takes time to produce robust academic research, which may mean that researchers miss opportunities to influence practice or policy. NGO and managing contractor staff felt that they had limited time to devote to program design, which made it difficult to integrate research.

- There are few organisation-specific policies, procedures and guidance on how and when to undertake, commission or use research, or how to promote research use, particularly in NGOs and managing contractors.
- Consideration of research use is often not well-integrated into research projects.<sup>11</sup>

For example, intended users may not be involved in identifying research topics, determining research questions, or selecting research approaches or methodologies. This can impact on whether research is used because intended users may not feel that research meets their needs or aligns with their interests

#### Funding

- There is limited funding for activities designed to promote research use (see also Muirhead 2017, 41), including for collaborative or co-produced research. NGOs and managing contractors in particular noted that funding for the co-production of research was scarce. This was less of a challenge for universities who noted that collaborative research is encouraged, including in research grant schemes funded by the Australian government.
- Funding is often focused on individual research projects rather than on longer term partnerships that would support better use of research (see also Muirhead 2017, 41).
- It can be difficult to recover the costs of time spent on research. This is a particular challenge for managing contractors or other organisations where staff positions are paid for through external contracts or grants, and staff salary costs need to be recovered through billable days charged.

<sup>11</sup> - During the second workshop, research advocates mapped out the key stages of a research project. These were: framing the research (its goals and intended audience and use), commissioning the research, designing the research and undertaking data collection and analysis, producing research outputs, and using the research to influence policy and practice. Although this was represented linearly, research advocates emphasised that research projects often did not proceed in this way. Some research advocate teams found that mapping these stages helped them to identify useful entry points for improving research use.

Strategies that research advocate teams used to strengthen systems and funding to enable better use of research included:

- strengthening knowledge management and knowledge-sharing mechanisms, tools and practices
- integrating research use into organisational processes around research, monitoring and evaluation, including funding for activities related to research dissemination and use (see also Muirhead 2017, 30–34)
- establishing new systems to strengthen coordination and collaboration around research, including with partners and field offices or programs
- demonstrating the added value of time spent on research to produce better knowledge and development outcomes and to build an organisation's reputation.

### **Strengthening systems and funding to enable better use of research: some examples**

A number of action research projects included activities designed to strengthen systems and funding to support better use of research.



#### **Cardno Emerging Markets**

The Cardno Emerging Markets team's action research project, for example, aimed to strengthen mechanisms for sharing knowledge between head office and in-country staff by contributing to an organisation-wide community of practice on gender, including through an online forum. Using this platform, the team was able to encourage discussion about how members of the community of practice use research, and what they find most useful.



#### **International Women's Development Agency**

Similarly, the International Women's Development Agency (IWDA)'s project focused on demonstrating ways to improve sharing and use of research findings both within the organisation and externally.

The team built on IWDA's newly created Knowledge Translation Team to establish a Knowledge Translation Working Group involving senior representatives from three different departments within the organisation. The team then used a specific research project within a large women's empowerment program in the Pacific to test ways to improve research use. This included mapping potential research users (internal and external), adding tasks and funding for research use in the terms of reference for the study, and recruiting a local researcher to ensure that the perspectives and experiences of southern women's rights activists were prioritised through the research process, and to encourage research use and sharing of findings locally (see also Muirhead 2017, 28–29).



### **Plan International Australia**

Plan International Australia's action research project involved establishing systems to support a more coordinated and consistent approach to research. A key function of the Research Committee was to serve as a central point of coordination. The research framework and practical guidance developed by the committee aimed to make Plan's approach to research explicit and outline clear processes for integrating research use at different stages of a research project.



### **Abt Associates**

One of the aims of Abt Associates' action research project was to demonstrate the commercial value of staff engaging in research and analysis, to address the challenges in recovering the costs of time spent on research. The team used a combination of 'billable' and 'non-billable' days to do literature reviews for evaluations and scoping studies that they had been contracted to undertake.

The team felt that this enabled them to provide more evidence-informed analysis and advice. More broadly, the team reflected that this strategy helps build Abt Associate's 'brand' as an organisation which uses research and evidence to inform programming, which is more likely to attract funding from those who value this approach.

# 4. Lessons & reflections



# Lessons & reflections

## 4.1. Progress and results

This project has contributed practical insights into the organisational incentives, drivers and ways of working that support or inhibit the use of research in international development organisations. Importantly, it has also identified a range of strategies that individuals and organisations wanting to improve research use can apply to help address these challenges and shift individual and organisational behaviours, norms and practices. Across the 12 action research projects:

- five projects encompassed strategies to encourage a more supportive authorising environment
- five projects aimed to promote the development of a culture that supports research use
- five projects included strategies for strengthening the relationships needed to encourage and sustain research use
- five projects involved activities designed to build capabilities and strengthen capacity for research use
- seven projects sought to strengthen systems and funding to enable better use of research.

Most of the projects addressed two or more of the key organisational factors influencing research use. This reflects the fact that the determinants of research use are often interlinked, and that improving research use requires a multi-faceted approach. Some projects addressed these simultaneously, while others proceeded in a more incremental way, trialling strategies to address one factor before moving on to another.



**“Using a reflective approach has helped us shape and re-shape how we have tackled this assignment and re-calibrate for a better approach” - Project Participant**

Inevitably, some action research projects were more successful than others in introducing tangible changes to how organisations value and use research. One of the main reasons for slower progress in some action research projects was the significant impact of the COVID-19 pandemic, which resulted in a major diversion of human and financial resources, as well as staff movements and loss of staff positions. This meant that some projects struggled to get started or were not able to progress beyond initial steps. However, this disruption also created some opportunities.

The following section outlines key lessons on improving research use and implementing organisational change. These draw together the main factors that enabled the research advocate teams to successfully initiate change. However, it should be noted that the changes introduced as part of the action research projects are only the first steps in the process of organisational change. New systems, processes, tools and mechanisms will need to be sustained over the medium to longer term for these changes to result in sustainable shifts in how research is used within these organisations.

## 4.2. Key lessons

### Start small

Changing individual behaviour and organisational norms and practices can seem like an overwhelming challenge. This project has demonstrated that there is value in starting with a single issue or a small activity to test organisational appetite and see what might work. Most of the action research projects were not overly ambitious in their initial aims and scope. Rather, they involved activities or adaptations that teams could integrate into their day-to-day work. This was particularly important given that all teams took on the action research projects in addition to their existing workloads.

### Work on organisation-specific challenges

Although many of the challenges to research use were common across organisations, they looked quite different in different organisational environments. Using a problem-driven political economy analysis approach helped organisations to understand the specific challenges for research use in their own organisations and identify realistic entry points for triggering change.

Several of the action research projects involved initial interviews, conversations or surveys to ‘map’ the needs and expectations of different stakeholders. For many project teams, the process of undertaking this analysis was useful in stimulating wider conversations, surfacing different viewpoints, and challenging assumptions. It also helped to identify small, practical changes that could be implemented within organisations, rather than trying to confront larger obstacles in the wider sector.



**“Looking at the impact of research is always challenging. We don’t have a single solution for this, and it is a process we are working through” - Project Participant**

### Take advantage of change and disruption

Experience from the action research projects suggests that processes of organisational change provide opportunities to influence strategic decisions around research and research use. Several of the action research projects took advantage of recent or ongoing strategic planning processes, organisational restructures or program and policy reviews to introduce new or strengthen existing ideas and practices around research use.

Some action research projects were able to use the disruption caused by the COVID-19 pandemic productively. Abt Associates, for example, was able to demonstrate the usefulness of research in developing effective responses to the pandemic, while in the Fred Hollows Foundation, the integration of the research and innovation team enabled new and closer collaboration.

Disrupted environments offer opportunities where previously ‘unthinkable’ options can become realistic possibilities, but they also require research advocates to be prepared to adapt and refocus as situations unfold.

### **Build on what's there**

As part of the political economy analysis, research advocates were encouraged to identify opportunities to improve research use. The action research projects that progressed beyond initial design and testing of ideas were those that were motivated by existing organisational goals or workplans, strengthened existing activities or practices, or exploited current openings.

Oxfam Australia's action research project, for example, used a concurrent strategy process to put research use on the organisational agenda, while Plan International Australia's project built on the inclusion of research as a focus in its strategic plan and used the consequent 'ripe' environment and high-level organisational support as it established its Research Committee. Similarly, the university of Technology Sydney's action research team took advantage of a more supportive environment to push for greater focus on the impact of international development research.

### **Work across the research cycle**

Internal research use advocates or lead researchers need to work across the research need, production, sharing and use cycle, rather than focusing their attention solely on research production. The challenge, however, is that many development agencies lack the staffing resources to adopt this full-cycle approach. By implication, this means that if they are resourced to initiate change in one domain (research need, production, sharing or use), teams need to think creatively about developing strategies to address the others.

The initial political economy analysis by research partners of their own organisations suggested that it is important to address research demand before, or in addition to, acquiring new knowledge and research. At the same time, the partners that did focus on research production also attempted to address other components of the research cycle – for instance, by including dissemination strategies in terms of reference for new research projects.

### **Bring others along**

The action research projects suggest that efforts to improve research use need to be undertaken in a way that engages meaningfully with others within and outside the organisation. Meaningful engagement helps encourage collaboration, spread ideas and build broader ownership of change.

One approach to this is to jointly design and pilot new tools or mechanisms for improving research use with those who are expected to use them. Another approach is to co-produce research with in-country researchers or practitioners. As several of the action research projects have shown, this can be crucial in ensuring that research reflects local perspectives and priorities and facilitates local dissemination and use of findings. However, systems and funding need to be in place to support co-production in practice.

### Get ‘the right people’ involved

As the diversity across the action research projects shows, there is considerable variation between individuals and within and between organisations in perceptions of what constitutes ‘good’ research and the purpose of research, as well as in capacity to engage potential users of research. This needs to be addressed incrementally. The project experience suggests that forming teams which bring together individuals from different parts of an organisation can be useful in ‘unpacking’ the different understandings and views within organisations and challenging some of the values, beliefs and behaviours which undermine research use. Engaging staff from different departments can also help diffuse ideas and create a ‘critical mass’.

A number of projects also demonstrated the importance of having senior staff directly involved in efforts to improve research use. This made it easier for research advocate teams to change direction or expand outreach, gave them access to decision-makers, and provided authority and legitimacy for their work. However, the results of the research projects also suggest that authority at the top alone is not enough. Rather, support for research use needs to be embedded at several levels, including with senior and middle managers, technical staff or advisers, and program managers, to result in organisation-wide changes in behaviour and practices.

### Reflect and adapt

Action research involves cycles of planning, implementing, reflecting and adapting. This means that teams needed to be open to changing their assumptions about key challenges and opportunities – and what strategies might work – and adapting accordingly. Almost all the action research projects underwent revision along the way. Short and medium-term goals were modified, and several partners altered the scope of their action research projects based on new insights and understandings of research and research use in their operational contexts.

The facilitation team played an important role in supporting teams to reflect and adapt, although the type of support varied considerably between partners. For some teams, the regular check ins kept them on track. For others, their facilitation team member acted as a critical friend, asking questions which prompted them to re-examine their assumptions, and supporting them to be realistic about what they could achieve. Some teams wanted to involve their facilitation team member more deeply in their action research project, while others preferred to work more independently.



**“The mentoring has been really helpful in progressing our thinking and in shaping ... our [action] research” - Project Participant**

### **4.3. A concluding recommendation**

This report has detailed insights into the key constraints to research use that emerged from across the action research projects. It has also described a range of practical strategies for improving research use which have been tested by practitioners and researchers within different types of organisations. These are intended to provide ideas and starting points which practitioners and researchers can use to strengthen research use in their own organisations.

One of the unique aspects of this project was that it brought different organisations together to try out different things and learn together. This project has provided some additional momentum and opportunities to learn from others. Rather than recommend specific strategies as 'what works', this report concludes by suggesting that researchers and practitioners use the strategies and examples outlined in this report to encourage conversations about research use in their own organisations and to develop and test some strategies of their own.

# 5. Annexes



# Annexes

## Annex 1: Key questions to facilitate reflection on action research projects

These questions are intended as a light touch guide to help you and your team track progress and reflect on what you are learning from your action research project. Try to answer these questions before the first check in with your facilitation team member and then in the lead up to each monthly check in.

This guide should be used flexibly. It may be that not all questions are relevant at every check in, or you might want to add additional questions relevant to your project or organisation. You can also decide whether each member of the team answers the questions individually or whether you do so as a team.

1. What is the problem you are addressing? or What is the positive example of research use you are trying to understand and build on?
2. What sustains the problem or enables the positive example? (Think here about the political economy concepts of structure and agency. You can use the 'iceberg' diagram to map the structural features or the stakeholder map to identify supporters and blockers of change.)
3. What opportunities for change exist? (It can be useful to develop a long list of these to get ideas flowing and then narrow them down.)
4. What are your strategies to improve research use?
5. What activities will you undertake/have you undertaken?
6. What will you do next?
7. What are you learning (about barriers and opportunities to research uptake, about what's working and what's not as you try to improve research use)?
8. What changes are you seeing in your organisation as a result of your action research?
9. What questions do you have for your facilitation team member? What are the areas where you need support?

## Annex 2: Problem-driven political economy analysis

At the first workshop, the facilitation team presented a framework for problem-driven political economy analysis and introduced several tools to guide this. Participants used this framework to analyse the key constraints and opportunities for research use within the international development sector in Australia as well as within their organisations. The framework and tools are provided below.

**Figure A:** A framework for problem-driven political economy analysis (adapted from Harris 2013)

Step 1: Identifying the problem		
	Key questions	Think about
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>What is the specific problem to be addressed?</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>What impact does the problem have?</li> <li>What strategies have others used to address it?</li> <li>How effective have these strategies been?</li> </ul>

Step 2: Diagnosing the problem		
	Key questions	Think about
Structure	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>What are the structural features that sustain the problem?</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>How do fixed contextual features such as geography, historical legacies, features of the sector shape the problem?</li> <li>How do institutions or the 'rules of the game' (formal laws and regulations and informal social, cultural and political norms) shape the problem?</li> </ul>
Interaction	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>How does the interaction of structure and agency shape the persistence of the problem and opportunities for change?</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Are the structures changing? How?</li> <li>Are stakeholders, relationships and their level of agency changing? How?</li> <li>What change (either structural or interaction between structure and agency) is on the horizon?</li> </ul>
Agency	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>How do the power, interests and incentives of different actors influence the problem?</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Who are the relevant actors, both internal and external?</li> <li>What are their interests and incentives related to the problem?</li> <li>What are the power relationships between those actors?</li> <li>What level of influence do they have over the problem?</li> </ul>

Step 3: Determining the prognosis		
	Key questions	Think about
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>How might the problem be resolved (that is, what are the possible pathways of change)?</li> <li>Given these pathways of change, how can external actors support a resolution to the problem?</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>What strategies could be used to resolve the problem?</li> <li>How realistic are these, given the constraints and opportunities identified in Step 2?</li> <li>What actions or interventions could facilitate change?</li> </ul>

**Figure B:** Mountains and icebergs: mapping the structure 'landscape'

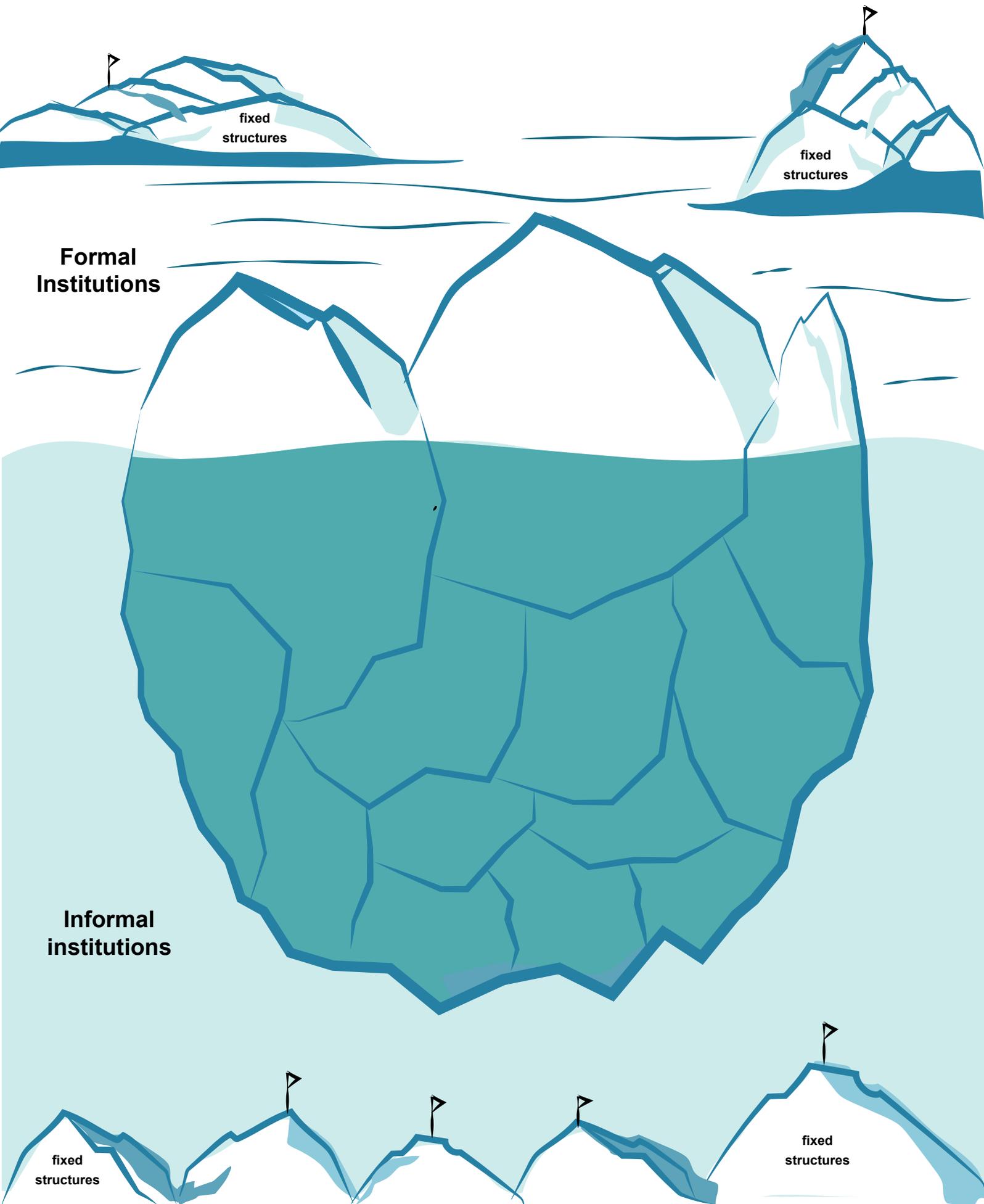
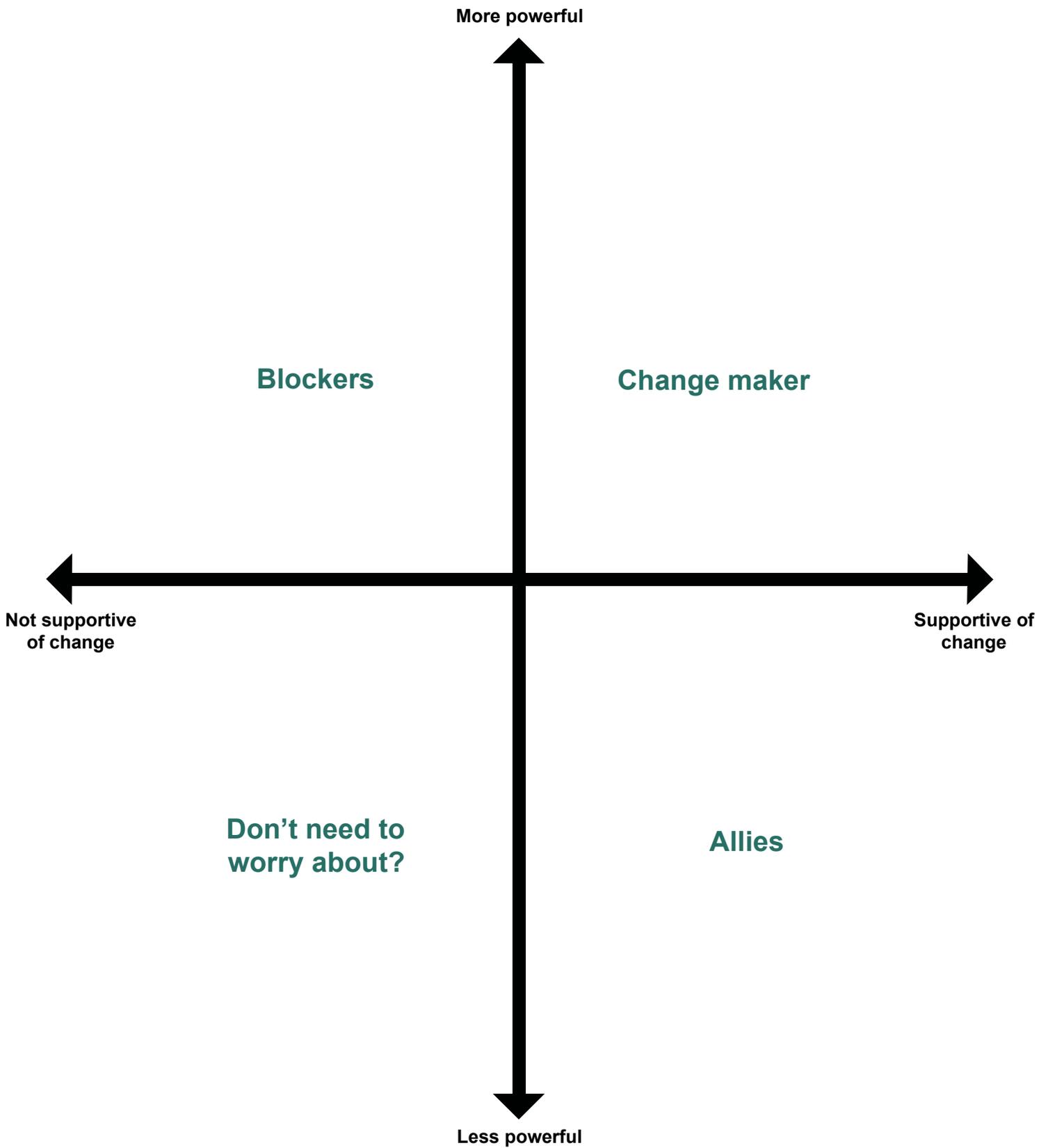


Figure C: Stakeholder Map



# 6. References



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