



# From evidence to impact:

## Development contributions of Australian aid funded research

### A study based on research undertaken through the Australian Development Research Awards Scheme 2007-2016

#### Brief

This study investigated how development research funded through the Australian Development Research Awards Scheme (ADRAS) has influenced policy and practice. It was conducted by the Research for Development Impact Network (RDI Network), and sought to provide insight to funders and researchers on how to maximise development outcomes arising from such research.

#### Headline findings

- ▶ The \$58 million investment in research has resulted in significant development contributions. Numerous examples of ADRAS research influence on policy, practice and capacity were identified, particularly in the health, gender, disability and water and sanitation sectors. Influence was documented in relation to the policy and/or practice of partner governments, other donors, DFAT itself, non-governmental organisation (NGO) partners and private sector and industry.
- ▶ More than 9 in 10 of the sampled ADRAS projects had verified take-up (in that findings were shared with relevant audiences), approximately two-thirds had been used by other development actors and at least 40% had contributed to specific development outcomes. This latter figure is higher than other evaluations of research impact (for example, for UK funded research it was 35%) and yet may under-represent the full picture due to limits in the study scope, time-frame and resources.
- ▶ Three-quarters of the ADRAS projects aimed to have an influence on policy or practice (31% policy, 36% practice and 9% both equally).
- ▶ Five key facilitators of research impact were identified, and can be used to guide the actions of both funders and researchers to enable increased impact of development research:
  - **Foundational facilitators:** familiarity and prior engagement with research context and users
  - **Planning for impact:** intentional focus on and integrated methods for achieving impact
  - **Engaging end users:** proactive engagement and co-production of knowledge
  - **Influential outputs:** tailored, fit-for-purpose design of outputs
  - **Lasting engagement:** ongoing engagement and continuity of relationships.
- ▶ Three key pathways to impact were documented:
  - **Targeted influence:** Research responded to end-user demands and questions
  - **Enabled influence:** Research process incorporated multiple facilitators of impact
  - **Emergent influence:** Research relevance to national or local context was enhanced by shifting imperatives, narratives, crises or other pressures, and close engagement with key stakeholders.

## EXAMPLE

### DISABILITY INCLUSIVE ROAD DEVELOPMENT IN PAPUA NEW GUINEA

Road transport is the main form of transport in Papua New Guinea, including for pedestrians. A 2008 ADRAS-funded research project, Travelling Together, aimed to encourage road planners and decision makers (including infrastructure donors) to include road users with disability in road development and maintenance planning, to ensure key attributes important to them for safe road use are included, and to provide better connectivity for social and economic participation.

The Travelling Together team provided enabling conditions for impact through:

- ▶ the inclusion of PNG men and women with a disability as research assistants who had ownership of the work and conducted follow-up advocacy, coordinated through the PNG Assembly of Disabled Persons
- ▶ partnering with a private sector senior road engineer working in Papua New Guinea to bridge the usually siloed worlds of “hard” infrastructure and “soft” social development
- ▶ producing easy-to-understand guideline briefs with implementable recommendations, separately targeted for road planners and policy makers.

Outcomes included: disability-inclusive road alterations in at least two provinces, changes in infrastructure development practices in a major engineering consultancy, and further employment of a number of young men and women with disabilities in other research and advocacy positions.

## The ADRAS

The ADRAS was the Australian Government’s flagship development research grant scheme from 2007 to 2016. It involved annual to biennial open competitive calls, the last in 2012. ADRAS formed a pillar of the 2008-2012 aid program development research strategy to increase quality, diversity and transparency in aid program research funding.

Across the 2007, 2008, 2009 and 2012 funding rounds, 129 research projects were supported, representing an investment of just over \$58 million under priority themes for Australian aid programming.

## The Study

The study involved 25 **interviews** concerning the current aid policy and research context, review of the outcomes and impacts of a **50% sample of ADRAS projects**, and five **in-depth case studies** where pathways to impact were documented in detail, including verification by key end users of the research. A framework was developed to: a) distinguish between research output, take-up, use, outcome, and impact contribution; b) categorise the types of outcomes; and c) explore factors that facilitated and hindered contributions to impact.

## EXAMPLE

### SUPPORTING EFFECTIVE PUBLIC HEALTH LAW IN THE PACIFIC AND GLOBALLY

Public health laws, which are fundamental to the effective functioning of a country’s health system, require updating in response to emerging health threats, changes in disease patterns and reforms to health services. These reviews are often conducted in short time frames in response to disasters, outbreaks or other external pressures.

In the Pacific nations, many laws have been imported from other countries and are ill-suited to effective and sustainable functioning of health care. A 2007 ADRAS project to develop Pacific-appropriate guidance for health law review was not initiated in spite of a specific demand. However, as national needs and global concerns emerged, expertise and guidance arising from this ADRAS project was taken up, reviewed and published by the WHO. It was also used in building customary law provisions into the 2016 PNG tobacco control law, and adapted for wider global use.

**Table 1: Summary of ADRAS research contribution to development outcomes**

Outcome category	Examples of contributions to development outcomes
Policy	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▶ <b>Country relevant addition to law</b> concerning the 2016 Papua New Guinea tobacco control act</li> <li>▶ <b>Change in tax policy</b> in Fiji on key products to address rising obesity and NCDs</li> <li>▶ <b>Evidence-informed policy decision</b> on health equity funds or community-based health insurance in Cambodia</li> <li>▶ <b>Influenced DFAT gender monitoring indicators</b> for women’s leadership at local level</li> <li>▶ <b>Influenced policy</b> to include situation of women with disabilities in Cambodia</li> <li>▶ <b>Influenced a gender-responsive budget</b> to support Timor-Leste domestic violence law</li> <li>▶ <b>Informed quality standards</b> for early childhood education in Indonesia</li> <li>▶ <b>Informed policy requirements</b> for Indonesian textbook authors to take gender training</li> </ul>
Practice and systems	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▶ <b>Changes in payment practices to benefit small-scale coffee producers</b> in Timor-Leste</li> <li>▶ <b>Changes in disability-inclusive road practice</b> in at least two Papua New Guinea provinces</li> <li>▶ <b>Uptake and use of disability assessment tool</b> in access to education project in Fiji</li> <li>▶ <b>Disability-accessible infrastructure constructed</b> for women at vocational training centre</li> <li>▶ <b>Adoption of guidance materials on public health law review</b> in the Pacific, and extended by WHO</li> <li>▶ <b>Gender guidance materials informed NGO practice</b> in Indonesia, Timor-Leste and Vietnam</li> <li>▶ <b>Use of gender and disability community training materials</b> in Cambodia</li> <li>▶ <b>Intersectionality focus</b> through disability indicators in the Individual Deprivation Measure</li> <li>▶ <b>Improved access to health-related evidence</b> by decision-makers in Fiji</li> <li>▶ <b>Changed health check practices</b> on NCD and occupational health in key ministries in Fiji</li> <li>▶ <b>Influenced development of indices of investment attractiveness</b> in Indonesia</li> <li>▶ <b>Changed practices to protect groundwater quality</b> in Cook Islands</li> </ul>
Products	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▶ <b>Product testing and scale-up</b> of wastewater treatment devices in Cook Islands and the Pacific</li> </ul>
Capacity	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▶ <b>Improved skills and employability</b> of women and people with disabilities in Papua New Guinea, Solomon Islands and Cambodia</li> <li>▶ <b>Improved analytical and convening skills</b> of a Community Based Organisation peak body in Indonesia</li> <li>▶ <b>Institutionalised systems for access to and use of evidence</b> in Fiji by key policy officials</li> <li>▶ <b>Improved knowledge exchange and research translation skills</b> for health policy researchers in Fiji, and included in tertiary courses</li> </ul>

## EXAMPLE

### EXTENDING HEALTH COVERAGE IN CAMBODIA AND LAOS

In the late 2000s the ministries of health in Cambodia and Laos faced similar questions and debate on ways to extend health care coverage for poorer and vulnerable members of their populations. Both Health Equity Funds (that use grants) and Community-Based Health Insurance (CBHI) (where contributions are made to costs) were in operation.

Based on the ADRAS project team's existing work and relationships with ministries of health and WHO on health financing, coverage and equity, a 2007 ADRAS research grant targeted the clear demand for objective evidence to determine whether health equity funds, CBHI, or a combination of the two, best provided equitable and sustainable coverage for the poor and vulnerable in each country. Trusted working relationships, objective methodology and objective evidence enabled this research to contribute to government policy. The policy involved prioritising the roll-out of health equity funds, and led to further requests for contributions to health financing policy and strategy in the two countries, particularly Cambodia.

## Recommendations

### For Development Research Funders

**Recommendation 1:** Ensure research investments are guided by a holistic research strategy that enables the funder to commission a strategic mix of research which have a range of pathways to impact (for example targeted, enabled and emergent influence).

Utilise the insights and guidance from this study to orient funding towards research approaches and ways of working observed to have the greatest impact on development. To achieve this, invest in research that is oriented to inform specific strategy policy, programming or practice issues as a way to provide an immediate and visible return on investment.

To complement this targeted research investment approach, coordinate with research councils or other funders to ensure the availability of funding for other types of research which examines and prepares for emerging development challenges and opportunities (sometimes termed 'blue sky' research).

**Recommendation 2:** Assign responsibility for communicating research findings and recommendations arising from funded research to a relevant staff member or area (for example within DFAT; the Office of Development Effectiveness (ODE), the Development Policy Branch or InnovationXchange). Target internal communications and messaging about research and evidence to relevant sectors and/or country teams at times when they are likely to be receptive to evidence and insights.

**Recommendation 3:** Include in grant funding guidelines a requirement to demonstrate existing relationships, networks and understanding of context, as part of research proposals and weight this highly in selection criteria.

**Recommendation 4:** Consider a two-stage research funding and selection process that provides initial seed funding on the basis of a successful concept note in order to develop a full proposal. This will enable during proposal development a more detailed focus on understanding actors, processes and context, and better planning of engagement with relevant end users.

**Recommendation 5:** Consider follow-on research impact or evaluation grants by invitation, for selected research teams who have completed high-quality, relevant research. Such grants would support dedicated efforts to enable impact (for example through follow-up communications, engagement or other research translation processes), and/or to facilitate tracking and evaluation of longer-term research take-up and impact.

**Recommendation 6:** Replicate and extend the communication and engagement requirements exemplified in the ADRAS to other current channels for research funding, and require explicit articulation of the intended pathway to impact of proposed research as well as identification of clearly defined impact goals and target end users.

**Recommendation 7:** Improve available guidance, resources and capacity building for research communication and engagement planning to assist researchers, including by linking to existing resources such as the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC) – Department for International Development (DFID)-funded Impact Initiative website.

## For Development Researchers

**Recommendation 8:** Build in and budget for an adequate inception phase to understand context and stakeholders, build relationships (for example with relevant development partners, government, and/or NGOs), clarify impact goals, and target end users.

**Recommendation 9:** Integrate target end user representatives and relevant implementing organisation representatives into research teams or on-going engagement structures to strengthen the pathways from research to policy and practice.

**Recommendation 10:** Develop and implement a communications and engagement plan for every research initiative, including consideration of the proposed pathway to impact and effort to 'design in' facilitators of research impact to the research process.

**Recommendation 11:** Plan diverse, engaging communication outputs, and utilise interpersonal engagement to support research use, drawing on growing sources of information and good practice such as the Impact Initiative website in the UK. Long reports and journal papers are a necessary foundation for accountability and credibility, but decision-makers need short, accessible products to engage with.

**Recommendation 12:** Ensure appropriate funding, and adequate time and human resources for monitoring of research use during and at completion of research (and after) as a means to continue to facilitate impact and demonstrate influence.

## For Representative Research Bodies and Networks

**Recommendation 13:** Increase targeted advocacy about the value and impacts of development research and the role of institutional requirements or incentives, to support the use of quality evidence in Australian foreign policy and development assistance.

**Recommendation 14:** Consider collective work (for example via Universities Australia, Australian Technology Network (ATN), RDI Network and/or Australian Council for International Development (ACFID)) to strengthen the ability to track, aggregate and demonstrate the value-add from research in foreign policy dialogue, relationships and development. In addition, collectively build on and strengthen existing research sector developments such as the increasing requirement to demonstrate research impact that can be expected to incentivise researchers' attention to impact.

**Recommendation 15:** Strengthen and resource a focus on research communication and engagement, translation to policy and practice and impact evaluation, including by drawing on and exchanging with best practice initiatives and groups such as the UK Collaborative on Development Sciences (UKCDS) and the Impact Initiative in the UK, or the International Development Research Centre (IDRC) in Canada. This can promote outcomes from development research and generate evidence of 'real world' impacts.

## For Research Evaluators

**Recommendation 16:** Utilise and build on the Framework for Exploring Research for Development Impacts (FERDI) developed in this study, to underpin future evaluations of the impact of development research.

**Recommendation 17:** Complement forward evaluations of research schemes that have a starting point of examining individual research projects and their contribution to development outcomes with backward evaluations that take a policy and practice change as the starting point and work backwards to the role that research played, to better understand how to maximise the contribution of development research to improved policy and practice.

**Recommendation 18:** Conduct follow up of short-term study of the impacts of development research on policy, practice and capacity building (such as this study), with subsequent assessment of the longer-term social and economic impacts of such changes, to strengthen the evidence base regarding returns on development research.





RESEARCH FOR  
DEVELOPMENT  
IMPACT NETWORK

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**For the full report and further information please see the RDI Network website**

**[www.rdinetwork.org.au](http://www.rdinetwork.org.au)**