

CONVENING BRIEF

Using Research to Advance International Development: Women's Empowerment as a Case Study

APRIL 2020

This brief provides a summary of the convening's key discussion points and offers seven strategic recommendations that can help advance the use of research in women's empowerment initiatives and other areas of international development.

ABOUT THE CONVENING

In December 2019, the United States Agency for International Development (USAID)'s U.S. Global Development Lab with the Research Technical Assistance Center (RTAC) brought together 66 researchers, funders, implementing partners, and policymakers in Washington, D.C., to discuss research utilization through the lens of women's empowerment. The highly participatory, dialogue-driven agenda was designed to promote shared learning across the sectors of education, entrepreneurship, digital technology, and health innovation. The event included three working group sessions that organized participants in different combinations of sector and stakeholder groups, creating an intimate setting to cross-collaborate and engage in dialogue about challenges and successful approaches to research utilization. The convening also featured four 15-minute lightning talks that highlighted insights and challenges for effective research utilization from each sector (see "By the Numbers" to learn more about working groups). Together, participants:

- Unpacked the concept of research utilization and effective strategies to take full advantage of research.
- Collaborated across multiple sector and stakeholder groups to understand and appreciate different approaches to using research.
- Identified barriers to the use of research from the perspective of researchers and research users—bridging the research-to-practice gap.
- Developed recommendations that can help advance the use of research in women's empowerment and other areas of international development.

— WHAT IS WOMEN'S EMPOWERMENT? —

Women's empowerment is achieved when women and girls acquire the power to act freely, exercise their rights, and fulfill their potential as full and equal members of society. While empowerment often comes from within and individuals empower themselves, cultures, societies, and institutions create conditions that facilitate or undermine the possibilities for empowerment.

Source: Adapted from Gender Equality and Female Empowerment Policy (Washington, DC: U.S. Agency for International Development, 2012).

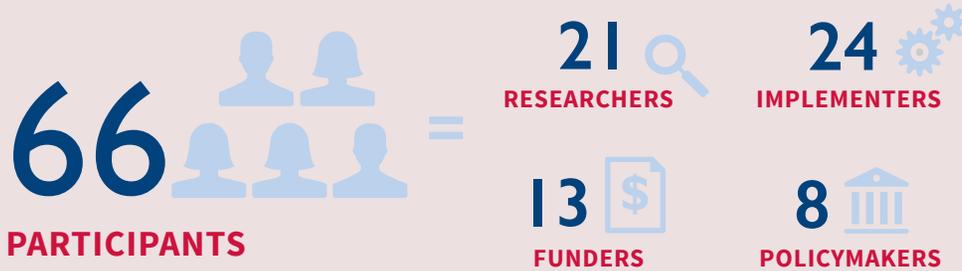


Photo credits: Jack Devine/Research Technical Assistance Center

— BY THE NUMBERS —

12.11.19

CONVENING DATE



LIGHTNING TALKS
4

1
MULTISECTORAL FRAMING PAPER

3 BREAKOUT DISCUSSIONS

SECTOR-FOCUSED VIGNETTES
4

— RESOURCES —

EVENT RESOURCES

CONVENING AGENDA [↗](#)

SPEAKER BIOS [↗](#)

FRAMING PAPER [↗](#)

SECTOR VIGNETTE EDUCATION [↗](#)

SECTOR VIGNETTE DIGITAL TECHNOLOGY [↗](#)

SECTOR VIGNETTE HEALTH INNOVATION [↗](#)

SECTOR VIGNETTE ENTREPRENEURSHIP [↗](#)

HELPFUL LINKS

U.S. GLOBAL DEVELOPMENT LAB [↗](#)

RESEARCH TECHNICAL ASSISTANCE CENTER [↗](#)

WHAT IS RESEARCH UTILIZATION AND WHY DOES IT MATTER?

Research utilization seeks to bridge the gap between scientific evidence and policy and practice by applying research findings in tangible, action-oriented ways. The research utilization process brings together different stakeholders to provide guidance on priorities for research design and use these findings in locally relevant ways to:

- Encourage more transformative policy development.
- Guide investment strategies and resource allocation.
- Improve effectiveness of programs and service delivery.
- Promote new ways of thinking.
- Design innovations for problem solving.

Effective research utilization requires that all stakeholders be engaged within the ecosystem of development research. These stakeholders include researchers, program implementers, policymakers, and funders—each with their own unique role to play in turning evidence into action.

— HOW DOES RESEARCH UTILIZATION FACILITATE WOMEN'S EMPOWERMENT?

Research utilization in the context of women's empowerment means using information generated from valid research to make policy decisions, allocate resources, plan and manage, and develop and strengthen programs to increase possibilities for women's empowerment. Public and private institutions can use scientific evidence to increase the reach of activities known to reduce gender disparities by increasing women's opportunities to gain power and make meaningful choices within their legal, social, political, and economic environments.

“USAID's ongoing conversations about research translation help us understand what it takes to go from findings to implementation. Through our discussions with researchers and funders, we want to create opportunities that build new approaches—engaging the development community with research for more effective integration and implementation.”

—Dr. Ticora V. Jones, Director,
Center for Development Research,
U.S. Global Development Lab

“Creating a practice of working with researchers to include the local voice, the funder, and implementers ensures that research can be utilized for policy and better application in the future.”

—Convening Participant

THE RESEARCH UTILIZATION PROCESS

Research utilization is an ongoing process that typically includes four phases—preparation, research production, research translation and dissemination, and adoption of findings—as described below. Together, each phase in the research utilization process addresses variables from the perspective of both researchers and research users. While this process is presented as phases here, it's important to recognize that the process is not linear. With so many different stakeholders involved, it is critical that timelines for research production and publication are aligned to support effective research utilization in real-world settings. During the convening, participants discussed the distinct role each stakeholder type plays in every phase, reiterating the importance of including all stakeholders in conversations about research utilization.

PHASE I

Preparation for Research Utilization

- Understand the policy and political environment in which research is used.
- Be familiar with how users define, acquire, use, and interpret research.
- Recognize the organizational capacity of research users to apply findings and realistically scale-up programming based on recommendations.
- Identify and engage with key stakeholders who provide input into priority program goals, issues, and questions.

 **Researchers** can broaden their understanding of real-world needs and priorities and cultivate research utilization champions among implementers and policymakers.

 **Funders** have an important role to play through how they create processes that set research agendas and metrics of success. Aligning their interests with researchers from the outset can increase the likelihood that funders will use the research that is generated.

 **Implementers** can share research needs and help incorporate local voices from the beginning.

 **Policymakers** can provide feedback on research initiation based on the current policy environment and partner to ensure that research findings address timely policy needs.

All actors shared that coordination between researchers and research users during this phase can help alleviate misalignment of priorities between academic, implementing, political, and funding bodies.

PHASE 2

Research Production and Conceptualization

- Design the study.
- Clearly define whether the research reliably measures "program impact" versus "program influence."¹
- Implement the study.
- Analyze, compile, and present the research results.

 **Researchers** should develop adaptive, flexible research designs that include participation from women and marginalized populations in both implementation and evaluation.

 **Implementers, funders, and policymakers** can improve the process of developing tools that evaluate and measure research outcomes through shared discussions about the information that would be most useful in their development efforts.

1. Program impact is defined as the effect on (or changes in) outcomes relative to what would have been observed had the program been absent. Program influence is defined as a factor that mediates, modulates or interacts with the program along its causal chain to enhance or impede its impact on outcomes.

THE RESEARCH UTILIZATION PROCESS

PHASE 3

Research Translation and Dissemination

- Determine what type of research product is most suitable for conveying findings and key messages.
- Consider accessible and innovative forms of dissemination to reach the target audience.

 **Researchers** should partner with communications experts to create consumer-friendly content that uses language accessible for nontechnical audiences and recognizes that most research users don't have open access to scientific journals.

 **Funders** are encouraged to prioritize involvement in this phase at a similar level to their involvement in Phases 1 and 4 to ensure research results have greater impact.

 **Implementers, funders, and policymakers** can prioritize hiring staff with the necessary skills to bridge the gap between research and policy and programs to help translate research into action.



All actors shared that timelines among researchers and research users should be better aligned so findings aren't already outdated at the time of publication.

PHASE 4

Adoption of Findings

- Decide whether to use the research findings and what findings to use.
- Scale-up, adapt, and maintain intervention strategies based on research findings.

 **Researchers** should stay engaged with research users even after the research is completed to understand how findings have been acted upon and how this can feed back to future research generation.

 **Implementers** can commit to learning by developing flexible programming that allows space for integrating new research and adapting approaches accordingly.

 **Funders** can actively share research findings and commit to replicating successes, with a close eye for cross-sectoral sharing opportunities.

 **Policymakers** should be open-minded and flexible when using new research to inform their policy conclusions, with a willingness to adapt when evidence contradicts their original positions.

Source: Phases adapted from *Using Research to Advance International Development: Women's Empowerment as a Case Study* by Dr. Audra Grant, Senior Manager, NORC at University of Chicago

FROM FINDINGS TO ACTION: BARRIERS TO RESEARCH USE

In their group discussions, stakeholders from all sectors identified barriers across the research utilization continuum that prevent effective use of research and collaboration among researchers, policymakers, program implementers, and funders.

Knowledge exchange is often siloed within stakeholder groups, sectors, and geographic regions.

Key players involved in the research utilization process frequently operate in their own spheres of influence without cross-collaboration. / PHASE 1

Jargon makes journal publications inaccessible for nontechnical audiences. / PHASE 3

PHASE 1

PHASE 2

PHASE 3

PHASE 4

Expertise on how to effectively put research into action can be limited.

Many stakeholders involved in research utilization don't have the bridge skills necessary to package jargon-laden scientific studies into actionable recommendations that can be integrated into policy and programs. / PHASE 1

Actionable research is not readily available.

Results and conclusions are often presented without recommendations that can be put into practice. / PHASE 2, 3

Synthesized bodies of research aren't available.

Few repositories exist where stakeholders can access cross-cutting research in multiple languages. Moreover, publications and reports may only focus on one specific program or approach rather than providing decision makers with a big-picture view of the technical area that could guide more coordinated direction across sectors. / PHASE 3, 4

Time and money committed to research utilization are insufficient.

Using research for policy and program design is often an afterthought, and programs and research activities designed with short-term funding cycles don't allow the flexibility to realize long-term research results or integrate findings in implementation. / PHASE 1, 2, 3, 4

Incentives and timelines among different stakeholders are misaligned.

Researchers, funders, policymakers, and program implementers have their own priorities, timelines, incentives, and metrics of success. Funders, implementers, and policymakers may seek out evidence that supports their positions. Researchers may be rewarded for novel findings rather than those that can be applied in practice. These differences can create divides that hinder the process of putting research into action. / PHASE 1, 2, 3, 4

SEVEN STRATEGIES TO IMPROVE RESEARCH USE

In the plenary and breakout sessions, participants identified the following best practices and multisectoral strategies for USAID and others to advance effective research utilization in the future:

Prioritize research development and its uptake.

Encourage research utilization with the development of formal agency operating procedures or project requirements that prioritize research development and uptake and define it as a metric of success. These procedures include explicitly prioritizing research development throughout a project's life and application of findings in other policies or programs.

STRATEGY 1

Include research utilization as a required measure of success when developing new policies and programs.

 Funders  Implementers

STRATEGY 2

Develop formal partnerships to update data for use in rapidly evolving contexts.

 Researchers  Implementers
 Funders  Policymakers

Communicate and share evidence effectively with target audiences.

Increase the reach of research findings through the creation of knowledge products that are easy to understand, visually appealing, appropriate for the target audience, and make a strong argument for policy and programmatic action. Examples of knowledge products could include—but are not limited to—factsheets, infographics, policy briefs, data visualizations, videos, and presentations.

STRATEGY 3

Dedicate specific funding for developing knowledge products that can strategically communicate research findings to a broad range of stakeholders.

 Researchers  Implementers
 Funders

Empower advocates, decision makers, and communicators to use research.

Collaboration with implementers and policymakers—who are typically viewed as end users—from the start of any research project can help encourage their use of research by securing their buy-in and ownership.

STRATEGY 4

Fund stakeholder engagement in all phases of the research utilization process to build and sustain buy-in for the importance of research utilization.

 Funders

SEVEN STRATEGIES TO IMPROVE RESEARCH USE

Include marginalized populations in the research process.

Engaging a more inclusive group of stakeholders—both as researchers and as study participants—can help ensure research sufficiently considers the needs of overlooked and underserved communities. This engagement includes funding to local organizations that are uniquely positioned to conduct research and contextualize findings for use in their own communities and settings.

STRATEGY 5

Require a percentage of each research portfolio be devoted to active outreach and partnership with marginalized populations.



Ensure open access to high-quality data and publications.

Free, unrestricted online access to research outputs can accelerate use of data in programs and policies by making evidence readily available to everyone involved in research utilization.

STRATEGY 6

Create a free, unrestricted online resource center where international funders, researchers, implementers, and policy-makers can share research outputs.



Bring together stakeholders across disciplines and regions for cross-collaboration.

Events and platforms that provide an interactive forum for multisectoral collaboration can improve use of research. Effective meetings involve multiple stakeholders—including younger and regionally diverse voices—that designate a specific mandate for operationalizing research. Small, intimate settings can break down power dynamics and foster authentic collaboration.

STRATEGY 7

Convene regular, regional meetings for stakeholders across different sectors to discuss new opportunities—including overcoming challenges—for using research to improve programs and policies.



SECTOR SPOTLIGHTS: CONSIDERATIONS FOR RESEARCH UTILIZATION

In their group discussions, stakeholders from all sectors identified barriers across the research utilization continuum that prevent effective use of research and collaboration among researchers, policymakers, program implementers, and funders.

 Education

 Digital Technology

 Health Innovation

 Entrepreneurship

Research Should Be Responsive to Evolving Political Environments.

Participants in the education sector breakout group discussed the importance of grounding research in real-world needs by including policymakers and implementers in initial conversations with researchers. This process starts with creating spaces for stakeholders across geographical regions to meaningfully interact and share best practices. They emphasized the need to develop convening agendas that reflect current trends and allow participants to engage in activities that produce tangible outcomes.

In his lightning talk, Dr. Faheem Hussain demonstrated how research utilization in the education sector is critical to developing policies and programs that respond to current political dynamics, using the crisis facing Rohingya refugees as an example. While host countries

may offer parallel education systems, they don't specifically target refugee women, and patriarchal norms among Rohingyas—exacerbated by displacement—often prevent women and girls from accessing education. Most research about women's education, however, mistakenly assumes static population and structured education systems, leaving policymakers and program implementers to rely on outdated information to respond to the current policy environment. Collaboration among researchers, implementers, policymakers, and funders is necessary to generate and use updated research that can help stakeholders understand the unique challenges that refugee and displaced women face, and how best to address them.

LEARN MORE

[Women's Empowerment and Education: How Do We Empower the Displaced Millions?](#)
by Dr. Faheem Hussain, Clinical Assistant Professor, Arizona State University.

 Education

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Local Communities and Power Agents Must Be Engaged in Generating Research.

Participants in the digital technology sector breakout group emphasized that defining a shared working goal among all key stakeholders—including local actors—can motivate partners to work together to generate research projects and proposals or communicate findings in a coordinated way. They discussed ways to incentivize better coordination among stakeholders involved in research utilization, including developing sets of recommendations that can be implemented by diverse users at whatever level they are working.

Dr. Revi Sterling expanded on this goal in her lightning talk by sharing how the USAID WomenConnect Challenge has engaged local communities and power agents in generating research in the digital technology sector to

address social norms that keep women offline. The program seeks to close the divide between men's and women's use of technology by working with social and political gatekeepers in local communities to identify conditions under which women can use technology, and then create opportunities for them to access and use technologies. In collaboration with local stakeholders, the WomenConnect Challenge has identified a relevant research agenda for researchers, practitioners, and funders that challenges the sector to push the bounds of technology and develop solutions that address social norms underlying this gap.

LEARN MORE

[The Gender Digital Divide](#)

by Dr. Revi Sterling, Project Director,
USAID WomenConnect Challenge.

 Digital Technology

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Research Design Must Involve Inclusion Data Collection.

Participants in the health innovation sector breakout group discussed the lack of inclusivity for women in health research—including women as researchers—and consideration of women’s needs in developing new innovations in health. They proposed providing direct and indirect incentives for increasing women’s participation in research as one solution to closing this gap.

In her lightning talk, Dr. Dani Poole provided more details on the extent to which women are not included in health research. She shared that clinical trials regularly fall short of real-life scenarios for women—despite being the gold standard for gathering data about the causes of disease and the effects of treatment and informing many health innovations. Additionally, data from clinical trials are frequently not

disaggregated by sex and fail to include enough women in samples. Political power and gender bias across the research enterprise also affect women’s inclusion in development of new or improved health policies, systems, products, and technologies. Examples include decisions about what research topics and study populations will receive funding, which individuals and institutions will carry out the investigations, and which findings are published.

She stressed that the gap between the expected effects of health innovations and real-world results hinders progress toward health for all. Before research can be used for policies and programs, data must move beyond the one-size-fits-all model to better reflect real-world populations and adequately inform health innovations.

LEARN MORE

[Statistical and Political Power Health Innovation for Promoting Women’s Empowerment](#)

by Dr. Dani Poole, Postdoctoral Fellow, Harvard University.

 Health Innovation

SECTOR SPOTLIGHTS: CONSIDERATIONS FOR RESEARCH UTILIZATION

In their group discussions, stakeholders from all sectors identified barriers across the research utilization continuum that prevent effective use of research and collaboration among researchers, policymakers, program implementers, and funders.

 Education

 Digital Technology

 Health Innovation

 Entrepreneurship

Research Can Be Used to Identify Gaps in Implementation and Develop Culturally Appropriate Solutions.

Participants in the entrepreneurship sector breakout group highlighted several meetings, publications, and web communities that have been useful in supporting research utilization in their sector, but noted there is no venue for sharing research results in a coordinated way to help identify program implementation gaps. They emphasized the need to include more settings dedicated to sharing results in local languages and across borders. Their discussions also acknowledged that while research findings can help develop program and policy solutions, these findings are more likely to be integrated if they are sensitive to cultural norms.

Angela Walker's lightning talk illustrated how research findings have been used to create and apply culturally relevant solutions to

advance financial inclusion in Bangladesh. WEConnect International and the World Bank Group collected qualitative data through focus group discussions, one-on-one interviews, and questionnaires with corporate entities and women-owned businesses. The research informed the development of a tailored intervention that raised corporate awareness of the benefits of buying from women-owned businesses, and created direct linkages between corporations, women-owned businesses, government agencies, and support services. The initiative also highlighted sector-specific areas for improved use of research findings to develop action-oriented solutions, including the need for disaggregated data, active engagement of all stakeholders, and the importance of considering socio-cultural factors in interventions.

LEARN MORE

[Beyond Corporate Social Responsibility: Using Research to Advance Women's Empowerment through Entrepreneurship](#)
by Ms. Angela Walker, Vice President of Communications, WEConnect International.

 Entrepreneurship

Acknowledgments

This brief provides key insights and recommendations from the December 11, 2019, USAID convening titled “Using Research to Advance International Development: Women’s Empowerment as a Case Study.” It draws on information and ideas featured in the four pre-conference vignettes, the group discussions, lightning talks, and a framing paper produced by NORC.

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