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Building bridges between research, evidence and development practice – are we there yet?

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1. PURPOSE

1.1 This brief examines common challenges and opportunities that development practitioners face when trying to use research and evidence to inform aid policy and programming. Attention is paid to the organisational and institutional drivers, incentives and ways of working (including agency and collective action) which prevent or enable greater use of research. We also examine an instance where a program (Investing in Women) has been able to use research and evidence effectively to improve decisions regarding budgets, activities, strategy and design. The note concludes with a series of messages for development practitioners and policy makers on how to strategically and substantially invest in research for development impact.

1.2 Evidence in this note is drawn from a survey conducted with 80 staff from across four high-profile Australian aid projects in the Asia-Pacific,[1] as well as a small number of semi-structured interviews held with senior managers from these programs.

1.3 This work was undertaken as part of an action research project called 'Enhancing Research Use in International Development'. Led by the Research for Development Impact (RDI) Network[2], the Institute for Human Security and Social Change at La Trobe University and Praxis Consultants, the aim of project is to improve research-policy-practice links in international development. Thirteen organisations – including Abt Associates – are being supported to understand both the nature of the problem (why it is hard to uptake research in programming) and develop ways to promote greater use of research in aid policy and programming.

[1] The PNG Governance Partnership, the Timor-Leste Australia Partnership for Human Development, Investing in Women and KOMPAK in Indonesia.

[2] RDI is a network of practitioners, researchers and evaluators working in international development and global social justice. Funded through DFAT and governed in partnership with ACFID.

2. CONTEXT

The political reality of using evidence and research in development

2.1 The production and use of evidence and research in development policy and practice is an inherently political exercise. We are well aware of the political challenges when it comes to ensuring that research and evidence is useful and impactful. Data and information are valued, used and interpreted depending – in large part – on where you sit, what your world view is, and what incentives are driving research interests and priorities. In the real world, agenda for research and evidence are often bounded by political and social realities of aid and development.

2.2 Often in international development, those 'at the top' (senior bureaucrats in donor agencies, politicians) require quantitative, simple, unambiguous, and aggregated data on results that improves performance as well as development outcomes. Often times this is driven by the demands of domestic constituents to 'prove' or 'explain' how public funds are being used to support aid programs and outcomes overseas, and a reliance on linear models of change (i.e. there is an assumed predictable and clear relationship between cause and effect, or inputs and outcomes). In the Australian aid context especially, this has increasingly led to a far greater emphasis on the "M" (monitoring) and "E" (evaluation) of the "MERL" agenda: at the expense of investments in Learning, Analysis and Research. It is also common to see projects, that have called for research and learning at design, to devalue these functions as implementation begins and the urgent (reporting on immediate output-level results) necessarily become secondary to the important (deeper learning and reflection).

2.3 While a focus on clear, aggregated data (and linear change models) can play an important accountability function, it is not always what those 'at the bottom', who are responsible for implementation need. The information needs of individuals and organisations managing aid programs on a day-to-day basis, as well as those in national Government with responsibility for coordinating aid projects, can be different to those 'at the top'. Often times these stakeholders value evidence and research which is tailored to the local context, engages with and captures complexity, can represent the views of citizens and/ or is able to examine alternative explanations of cause and effect (why did something work or not work? Is it replicable? How and why or why not?).

2.4 In addition, the organisational and institutional drivers of those working in academic settings to produce research are often very different to those responsible for policy and program management in the countries aid is delivered. While academic institutes may have more rigorous, ethical and methodological standards for research and longer timeframe to execute their research, they are usually driven by requirements to produce research on certain topics within the framework of a particular academic discipline and discourse or for publication targets (as opposed to the information needs of those in partner countries). Some academic institutes may also value particular forms of knowledge as more 'credible', 'unbiased' or 'scientific' - such as knowledge generated through a randomized control trial versus that produced through narrative history or stories told by communities and passed down through generations.

2.5 Organisational and programmatic factors – including budget allocations for MEL and research, staff capacity to commission and understand research and evidence, the structure and robustness of an aid programs project cycle – can also all have an important bearing on how information is used to inform aid policy and programming. In this briefing note, we explore some of these tensions and tease out some of the common themes drawing out some of the successes and challenges of getting traction for research and evidence to influence policy and practice.

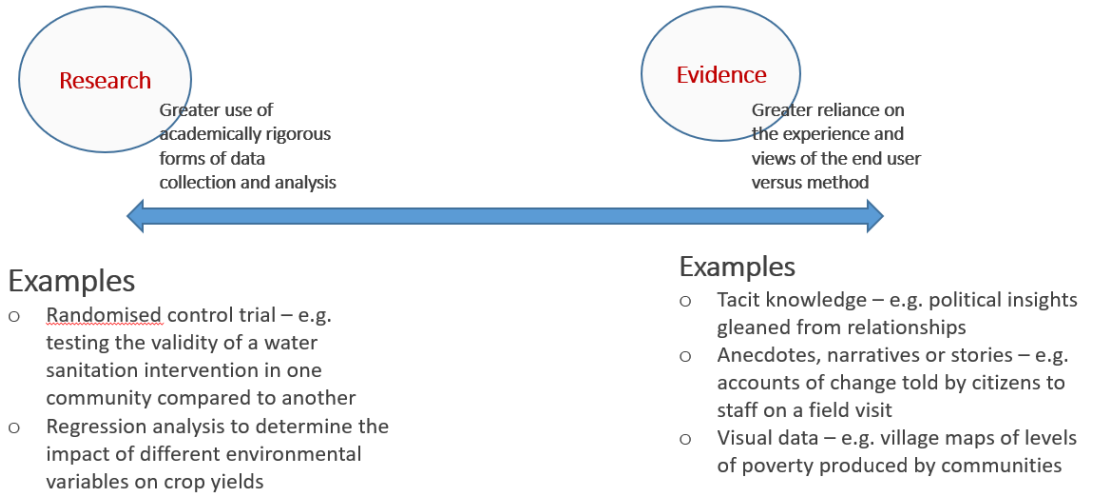
3. DEFINITIONS

Evidence and research: an aid practitioner's definition

3.1 What became evidently clear to us was that practitioner and academics have quite different definitions of research and what ultimately constitutes as research and evidence from a practitioner's view. Western Sydney University, defines research as: "*the creation of new knowledge and/or the use of existing knowledge in a new and creative way to generate new concepts, methodologies and understandings. This could include synthesis and analysis of previous research to the extent that it leads to new and creative outcomes".*[3]

3.2 The point of difference we take here is more of degree, rather than kind. As aid and development practitioners, we have a broader interpretation of what constitutes research and evidence. We see 'research and evidence' as synonymous and existing along a continuum (see Figure 1 below). Both are forms of knowledge; however 'research' often uses more academically rigorous methods of data collection and analysis – as opposed to 'evidence', which may not require the generation of new data or rigorous data analytic techniques and places greater value on the views and experiences of the end user. Furthermore, research is itself a form of evidence, and evidence can inform research design and interpretation.

Figure 1: Our (a practitioner) view on research and evidence



3.3 The critical point to be noted is that the stigmatization and isolation of 'research' as a separate pursuit to the day-to-day generation and use of evidence – can be unhelpful for aid and development practitioners. 'Research' often carries connotations of a lengthy, expensive, and internationally commissioned piece of work – which, when produced, will have little relevance to those responsible for aid strategy and implementation. This overlooks the fact that the application of applied research methods – e.g. interview, survey design, analysis of big data sets, literature review – can be of immense practical value to program teams. In fact, action research is often more useful in not only facilitating collaborative program design and delivery but also supporting local ownership of research uptake. For instance, when action research is designed, undertaken and communicated in collaboration with local partners and policy makers it tends to have both practice and policy impact as well as influence. Stigmatising 'research' can also inadvertently de-value other forms of knowledge which rely on experiential and tacit information – such as political insights

[3] See https://www.westernsydney.edu.au/research/researchers/preparing_a_grant_application/dest_definition_of_research

gained through relationships and networks, stories and narratives told by local communities or non-verbal forms of data (such as maps drawn by villages to indicate where poverty exists in their community).

3.4 Drawing on the above interpretation of what constitutes 'research and evidence' and our understanding of how academics and practitioners relate (see also Annex 1), the remainder of this briefing note outlines: the method used (Section 4); key findings and messages emerging from the data (Section 5); a good practice example where research and evidence is effectively informing aid programming (Section 6), and finally conclusions and recommendations (Section 7).

4. METHODOLOGY

4.1 This briefing note draws on survey and interview data collected by Abt Associates as part of the 'Enhancing Research Use in International Development' action research project[4].

4.2 Eighty program staff, across four Australian-funded aid programs, participated in an online survey. These four programs were selected as they reflect a mix of country contexts (PNG, Indonesia, Timor-Leste, Asia regional), include both national and international staff, cover a range of delivery modalities (programs and facilities) and a range of sectors (gender, governance, community and sub-national development and human development sectors).

4.3 In the survey, program staff were asked questions relating to:

- Why is research and evidence important for effective programming?
- How well do the participants judge that their programs use evidence to inform activity design, implementation or review/evaluation?
- What approaches do their programs use to integrate research into programming?
- What forms of research/evidence are of most importance to program staff?
- What are the main barriers to uptake of research in their programs?
- How can programs improve the use and uptake of research and evidence in their day-to-day work?

4.4 Four semi-structured interviews were also held with program staff or team leaders who had oversight of MEL or research functions in each of the programs. The results of the survey and interviews were grouped according to theme, triangulated to identify points of convergence and difference, and then analysed and presented at the second RDI workshop in January 2020. Following feedback from workshop participants, the data was refined and presented in this briefing note.

4.5 There are a number of limitations to this study worth noting here. The sample size used in this study is necessarily small, as it was confined only to those programs or facilities which Abt Associates manages in the Asia-Pacific. While there are numerous other externally funded programs and facilities operating in the region, it was not appropriate for this study to investigate their experience given they are managed by other implementing partners. Furthermore, only Australian-funded programs were included in this study – confining the relevance of the findings largely to the Australia aid program and policy landscape.

4.6 Attempts were made to overcome these biases by increasing the number of survey participants (eighty staff participated in the final survey), as well as triangulating and contesting the

[4] The project is being implemented by the Research for Development Impact (RDI) Network, the Institute for Human Security and Social Change at La Trobe University and Praxis Consultants over eight months (October 2019 – June 2020). It is a collaborative project involving 13 participating organisations across donor agencies, NGOs, the private sector and universities working in international development. The aim of project is to improve research-policy-practice links in international development, and influence changed behaviours among development research commissioners, producers, brokers and users by unpacking the organisational drivers, incentives and ways of working that contribute to, or inhibit, the use of research in development policy or practice.

findings from this study with participants from academic, non-government and other private sector backgrounds as part of the RDI research project.

4.7 Inclusion was promoted in this study by ensuring the views of national and international staff, as well as people of different gender and cultural background, were included in the interviews and surveys.

5. FINDINGS

5.1 Four key themes emerged from the data. These are grouped and described below.

Theme 1: Most practitioners believe research and evidence is critical to programming, but there is no one view on what *purpose* research and evidence serves

5.2 Seventy four percent of staff surveyed felt that research and evidence was 'very' important in effective aid and development programming. Yet the reasons why staff felt research and evidence was important varied significantly. These reasons included:

I. Better understanding complexity – how change does or doesn't happen and why in the sector, country or issue the worked in or on;

II. To *"validate program logic …. so that program assumptions are evidence based"*[5] and test whether design assumptions hold true in practice or not

III. Helping program teams to know when to adapt activities or budgets during implementation – and evidence to justify to others (including donors) why they needed to do this;

IV. Justifying and informing investment decisions at design (of both projects and activities);

V. Giving voice to local actors or partners (especially those who are most excluded) in program design and implementation;

VI. Identifying lessons learnt from earlier programs, and;

VII. Assessing how efficient particular delivery modalities are and whether value for money considerations were being met.

Box 1: Why research and evidence matter

"…Research provides another perspective or angle on some of the development issues people are grappling with…for decades. For instance, a piece of research…highlights a vulnerable voice on an issue where their voice has been absent. I love it when research tells you what isn't working too. I think research is required to underpin advocacy and influence …if it targets the beliefs and perceptions of those who are barriers to change. Recently, on another project…I have been the value of tracer studies…looking into what combination of factors support social norm transformation on a particular issue." Anon 2019

Box 2: Why research and evidence matter

"(a)The knowledge and evidence support development programming and policy to be more effective and adaptive (b) Provides local insight, knowledge and perspective which helps programs to adapt to local context; (c) creates a safe space for marginalised and vulnerable groups to share views and knowledge." Anon 2019

[5] Anonymous staff respondent, 2019.

Theme 2: Despite support for research and evidence, it is not being used as well as it could – and there are a number of common reasons why

5.3 Despite the overwhelming support staff placed on research and evidence, only 20% of staff felt their programs were using research and evidence well. Staff identified five main barriers that they felt were preventing better use of research and evidence in program design, implementation and review. These are outlined in Table 1 below.

Table 1: Five barriers to better using research and evidence in programming

1: Limited capacity	Many program staff reported to have limited capacity to do research and learning themselves, or to commission research in a way that would meet their program needs. For instance, some staff felt they lacked the 'know how' of writing a TOR to commission a piece of policy relevant or a research project that employs rigorous methodology and estimating input days, cost and scope for a research project. Some programs also lacked strong, in-house expertise in mixed-method (quantitative and qualitative) research designs or experience setting hypotheses to research and analyse complex problems – thus making them reliant on external advice which may or may not be available to them.
2: Methodological differences	There are methodological differences between academia and development practice – many data collection (e.g. Political Economy Analysis [PEA]) do not conform to the academic rigor and basic principles of doing ethical research. In the development aid sector, no one type of research method is necessarily better than the other – but different research methods serve different purposes and program needs. For example, program team make strategic use of their trusted relationships and networks with power brokers as the most powerful sources of information to effectively inform program goals and outcomes (see Briefing Note 1, 2017). One of our programs in Indonesia noted that evidence from a research that employed participant observation method was difficult to digest because it was too academic. This reflects the different kinds of research methods that development practitioners typically employ to inform adaptive programming. But often this can create an impression that development practitioners do not apply academic rigor in their methodological approach.
3: Quality and methods dilemma	In a complex international development world, development practitioners often struggle with the fact that the quality of data must pass the litmus test on reliability and validity. But as noted above, program team need to employ research methods like PEA to better understand, analyse and interpret the complexity involved in program delivery and improving outcomes in a development context. This calls for program staff to make strategic use of their trusted networks with power brokers to influence program goals and outcomes. These factors need to be reflected in the program design and delivery so that research becomes part of intervention design that tracks and responds to changing contexts in a timely manner.
4: More time needed for commissioning, using evidence and for learning and reflection	In the highest response category (29%), program staff felt they lacked time to commission and use evidence and research, as well as time for learning and reflection to feed evidence into programming. When asked if they would like to see more time spent on learning – 75% of staff said "yes". Learning and reflection informs and helps improve program outcomes by sharing knowledge between and across programs on what went wrong, what's working and what's not working, how things could be done better, what didn't work, what interventions failed, or what where the unforeseen outcomes/results. Program staff are often time poor when it comes to taking time to "pause for critical reflection" or doing a bit of forward thinking around innovative and smarter ways to deliver development beyond their day to day programming. They simply do not have "thinking time" that is embedded in the way program is designed, delivered and evaluated. Creating time and money to reflect is often invaluable for effective programming but research and learning is often not prioritised as part of good development practice.
5: Ethical and political concerns	Many program staff also have concerns about who designs/funds programs and who benefits from research. While there is certainly more appetite for evidence to inform development practice than in the past, research budget is rather minimal and often first to be cut across programs. Another set of concern is the way in which evidence is used to inform donor decisions and research tends to be donor-driven and not demand-driven from the program/country perspective.

5.4 In the four lowest response categories (not reflected in Table 1 above), only:

I. 10% of staff felt that a lack of **funding** to pay for analysis and research;

II. 5% felt **leadership** was a barrier;

III. 10% saw a lack of buy in from **partner government** or local partners, and;

IV. 3% felt lack of buy in from the **donor** were barriers to research uptake.

Theme 3: Aid practitioners want knowledge presented in short, verbal and interactive ways – with a heavy focus on practical implications (vs problem definition or academic method and debate)

5.5 Almost 40% of all staff wanted evidence and research presented to them in ways that allowed them to interact verbally, and in person, with "experts" and information – rather than long written papers. This includes in the form of events, discussion sessions or meetings with key advisors to government. Second priority was to access evidence through mediums which were short and applied in nature: e.g. short policy notes, program evaluations, field trip reports, blogs and case studies. As one participant puts it succinctly, "in a rapidly changing development context, to remain contemporary and relevant, it is important to rely on evidence from previous programs to better deliver outputs and outcomes in the future". Very few (6%) wanted to engage with information in academic journals and only 10% of staff surveyed wanted to receive evidence in the form of in-depth policy papers.

Theme 4: Better capacity, more time and opportunities to co-design research with partners would improve research and evidence uptake

5.6 In terms of improving the uptake of research and evidence in programming, the majority of staff surveyed felt that having more time set aside in their day-to-day work, as well as opportunities to jointly design research and evidence processes with partners and capacity building – would help. This is summarised in table 2 below.

Table 2: Steps to improve research and evidence uptake

ANSWER CHOICES–	RESPONSES–
More funding available for research and analysis	8.75%
Training or capacity building for project staff to commission and use research	28.75%
More leadership from your own project management team to value research	2.50%
More leadership from the donor	1.25%
More leadership from your partner government or local partners	1.25%
More time available for you to commission or use research in your day-to-day work	16.25%
Having opportunities to jointly identify research work with donors or partner governments	27.50%
Other	13.75%

6. A PROGRAM CASE STUDY: INVESTING IN WOMEN

6.1 Investing in Women (IW) is an Australian Government funded development program in its second Phase of operation. IW aims to improve women's economic participation as employees and entrepreneurs to promote women's economic empowerment. It operates in Philippines, Indonesia, Vietnam and Myanmar. The program has three pathways: (i) supporting business coalitions who with influential businesses on shifting workplace cultures, practices and policy barriers to achieve workplace gender equality (ii) investing in women SMEs (supporting impact investors to move capital to women-owned or led SMEs by providing financing and operational support, as well as

understanding the ecosystem of gender lens investing) and (iii) influencing gender norms by commissioning targeted research and partnering with campaigners in the region.

6.2 Notwithstanding the challenges the IW team had to overcome – including finding a fit-for-purpose way of engaging with researchers and academic institutes – the program is a good practice example of putting research and evidence into action.[6] Research, evidence and tacit knowledge are integrated regularly, and meaningfully, into the IW program cycle (in program review and adaptation, as part of advocacy plans and in decisions regarding budgets and activities). Our study revealed a number of reasons why this is the case. These are detailed in box 3 below.

Box 3: Factors enabling research and evidence to be put into action

Based on the findings from our study, the common 'success factors' IW have put in place to effectively use research and analysis in programming, included:

1. **Quarantining budget at design which carries through to annual allocations:** Each of the program pathways under IW, and the MEL unit itself, have budget set aside for research and analysis and internal MEL/research staffing costs are resourced. This allocation was instigated at design and has carried through in subsequent annual budgets.
2. **Embedding a culture of MEL into programming:** Research and analysis is only effective if it is integrated into learning and reflection processes that allow it to influence activity and budget allocations. In IW, the MEL team are embedded in the program (not sub-contracted to a third party)[7] and facilitate a number of processes to allow program teams to directly engage with analysis and research and use this to inform implementation and review. A research manager has also been recently appointed by the program, alongside the development of a Research Plan, aimed at consistently and strategically commissioning and feeding research into the program cycle.
3. **Leadership on part of the donor and the managing contractor or NGO:** In IW, there is political will within the program team (including the donor representative) for evidence that provides a yardstick for program performance, its success or failure. Importantly this extends beyond 'just' results reporting for accountability performance – and to investments in understanding complex problems the program is seeking to tackle, and an appetite for contestation, "failure" and continuous improvement.
4. **Partners in the country who value evidence and research:** in addition to leadership on the part of the donor and Managing Contractor, IW also has national partners (government and private sector) that value and demand evidence to help them influence business corporate policies and decision making. While this demand is not consistent across the board, and has had to be encouraged in some instances, it exists. This is especially important when it comes to research uptake (as there is little merit in undertaking analysis if the end user does not value or see its usefulness).
5. **Evidence as a programming strategy:** Many aid and development programs separate the commissioning and dissemination of research and evidence from programming (i.e. designing and implementing activities). In some parts of IW (pathway three), however,

[6] The selection of the case study was based on its own merit and is not representative of other Abt programs under study because of the uniqueness of the in-depth data that demonstrates a good practice example of how a particular program in this case was able to ensure appropriate time and human resources for research and learning. Hence, lack of qualitative evidence across the sample limited our ability to allow comparisons to be made across programs and how other programs manage to achieve the balance between research, learning and practice.

[7] In fact, MEL was subcontracted to a third party (Metis Analytics) in the first phase of the IW and only became part of the IW program in phase 2 (from July 2019 onwards). Although, the MEL team was reasonably well embedded in the. Program by the latter part of Phase 1 even with the subcontracting arrangements.

these are understood as one in the same. Information and evidence are seen as a way to influence gender norms and attitudes amongst businesses, investors and governments. In other words, evidence-based advocacy. A good example of this, under pathway 1 is the program's investment in analysis of data from the EDGE certification process, including HR data for 37 firms and staff perceptions data from almost 150,000 employees.

6. **Making academic partnerships work for programming needs (not visa-versa):** Under its first phase, IW had a partnership with an Australian based academic institute to provide research outputs for the program. Notwithstanding the benefits of this approach, the challenge remained that many outputs were not sufficiently applied or presented in a manner that the program could absorb and action. As such, in its second phase, IW has brought research functions in house. A research manager (based within the MEL team) now works with academic institutes, local researchers and program teams themselves to commission evidence and research outputs. While it is too early to determine the success or otherwise of this approach; a key rationale for this is to bring the commissioning and production of research closer to those who intend to use it (demand led vs supply led).

7. DISCUSSION AND POLICY IMPLICATIONS

7.1 **Focusing on causes, not symptoms:** the most surprising outcome from this study was the difference between what staff observed to be biggest challenges to applying evidence and research in their day-to-day work; with what was identified through subsequent interviews and the IW case study. While staff felt *capacity and time* were the two biggest challenges (and enablers) to using research and evidence, these are proximate symptoms of deeper, underlying barriers. For example; when pressed, some staff felt they were not afforded time to undertake research because the donor (and by extension their senior managers) were only interested in output data for results reporting – and thus did not see value in, or provide funding or leadership for, staff to spend time commissioning and engaging with topical research. Thus, the major implication from this study is that a fundamental shift is needed in the value which the development industry ascribes to research and evidence in policy and programming. A greater value on all forms of research and evidence in programming will improve incentives for implementers and national partners to engage with evidence, and address what staff are seeing as proximate challenges to evidence uptake (such as lack of time or poor capacity). Without such a shift, it is unlikely that current policy and practice will improve in the Australian aid context in a systematic way, and beyond isolated good practice examples.

"The major implication from study is that a fundamental shift is needed in the value which the development industry ascribes to research and evidence in policy and programming

7.2 **In the following discussion – we identify four underlying and four immediate changes that could be made to improve the use of research and evidence in aid policy and practice.** Given that this study has only examined Australian-funded development programs in the Asia-Pacific, these issues are of particular relevance to those working in this context.

Figure 2: Changes to improve the impact of research and evidence in aid policy and practice*

*The circle in the middle reflects four underlying shifts, and the boxes on the outside indicate practical day-to-day adjustments to program management to support this.

7.3 The underlying changes are shown in figure 2 (see four quarters of the circle above) and include:

I. Expanding our understanding of what constitutes 'sufficient evidence' in aid policy and programming. In aid, those making decisions often see particular forms of knowledge as more 'credible', 'unbiased' or 'scientific', as opposed to the (often) less methodologically rigorous program data collected to serve day-to-day monitoring, learning and evaluation needs. The risks here are twofold. First, it overlooks the majority of datasets, which already exist, to facilitate internal learning and adaptation, aid coordination and response and monitoring progress against outputs or populating accountability reports to donors. Second, it focuses the efforts of MERL on gathering forms of knowledge that may be of little use to end users – i.e. local communities where aid is delivered, local officials or program managers themselves. For example; an overemphasis on randomized control trials at the expense of program staff spending time developing local relationships that give them tacit, political insights to inform activity design. To overcome this, there needs to be more involvement of those directly involved in implementing aid projects/programming in research, monitoring and evaluation — so that there is common understanding of what data do we need or want, what are we reporting on and why, and what would 'sufficient evidence' look like if we start from the needs of local communities where we deliver aid?

II. Re-valuing research and learning within the MERL agenda. Once project implementation begins and if budgets are cut, funding and time reserved for research, learning and analysis are often the first to go[8]. Especially when donors, tax-payers and those higher up in the aid system require that whatever fledgling Monitoring, Evaluation, Research and Learning (MERL) budget remains be put towards generating unambiguous, clear, aggregable data about results and performance to meet accountability demands. This can be overcome by requiring and resourcing learning and reflection as a core part of all

[8] This was the sentiment echoed by the majority of the over 80 program staff which we surveyed as part of our contribution to the RDI Action Research project. Results and a full report will be released in February 2020.

program management, and linking learning processes to changes in project activities and budgets (thereby ensuring that multiple forms of evidence are fed directly into design, implementation and review).

III. Decolonising the research agenda. As aid practitioners, we need to critically interrogate the very existence of dominant discourses and dominant groups that set the agenda (the 'what' and 'who' we research) in development. How can mainstream aid research agenda be of value to communities where development takes place? Rather than only serving the agendas of donor agencies, academic institutes or international implementing partners where research is often commissioned. Less often are those with a stake in how evidence informs programming (e.g. program managers, national implementing agencies, officials, local organisations and researchers) given authority over research design, budget and implementation. Thus perpetuating what are observed as "weak demand" and "weak uptake" of research and analysis. Options to overcome this include co-designing research topics and analytic agendas, questions and methods, and undertaking research with policy makers, local actors and program managers. Those who will use it should ultimately be part of its inception and implementation. Extending the point above, there should be more scope for applied/action research, where program staff work directly with the communities they study to collaboratively impact change.

IV. Devolving authority and re-patterning incentives. A typical approach to the generation of evidence and research in development relies on the assumption that program managers are mere 'do-ers'; not 'thinkers' capable of producing and integrating evidence into daily decisions. Moreover, the incentives of those charged with producing research (academic institutes, think tanks, international consultants) are often not aligned with those who consume these products. Ways to overcome this include giving authority for commissioning, identifying and using research to practitioners at the front line and/or their national counterparts with support of academic providers (as opposed to sub-contracting these functions to a third party).

7.4 **In addition, there are a number of practical steps that could be taken, on a day-to-day programmatic level, to enable greater uptake of research and evidence (provided the above shifts occur at a sufficient pace).** These include:

I. Creating opportunities for dialogue and dissemination. There is a need to promote dialogue and dissemination as a means to reconcile differences in discourses, logic and methodology between academia and development practice. Many practitioners are suspicious of academics and vice versa. However, opportunities such as the RDI network through La Trobe University action research project in Australia, provide a platform for practitioners and academics to develop a broader understanding of methodology and research in practice. In a forum or platform like this, it is likely that the people from two sides of the camp would be able to dialogue about academic rigor and practitioner relevance of research in a non-confrontational way. Hence, the need to increase funding for research bodies and networks that support the demand and uptake of research and evidence in Australian development assistance.

II. Identifying opportunities for collaborative research projects. Research-practice collaboration is often seeded through mutual trust and understanding, however, much deeper conversation is required between academics and practitioners so that researchers are better able to define the problem(s) that practitioners are trying to solve and there are clear expectations regarding the nature of the relationship and engagement, data ownership and scope. Setting up a strong foundation for research-practice partnership will ensure that the mutual benefits of the engagement between

two parties are realised as well as valued. Not only that, but it is also vital to ensure that evidence and knowledge production is timely, accessible and relevant to practitioners. Time zone differences between academic and practitioner world should be factored into the partnership to reduce potential conflicts and taper tensions.

III. Capacity development in research, evidence and learning. In order for program staff and national partners to shape evidence and research agendas – training and development may be needed in particular methods, analytic approaches and concepts. Yet rarely do programs have, as part of their MERL budget and approach, space for their own staff or national counterparts to undertake these learning and development opportunities. Having funding to undertake and resource these activities (for both program staff and national counterparts at design, tender, and then quarantined in project budgets would assist.

IV. Research and evidence outputs carry little weight unless they are actionable and linked to learning, review and reflection (and therefore management decision making) processes. Structured review and reflection processes, as well as systems that quarantine budgets for MERL (and resource this within the program) are useful ways to get evidence and information to the right people at the right time in policy or program cycles – and therefore have greater chance of impacting design, program adaptation and policy development. Programs need to critically reflect on whether they are achieving the best possible development impact and whether the aid money is allocated in the right development context.

8. CONCLUSION

8.1 As highlighted in this briefing note, research and evidence seems to offer a win-win situation for our programs across the Indo-Pacific region. In a perfect world, we would like to see that big development challenges of our time are informed by well-timed and relevant/topical academic evidence. Some believe that academics who focus on rigor tend to denigrate the value of relevance to practitioners – rigorous is often not relevant and vice versa. "If only academic research and evidence could be made more accessible and digestible in time for policy/program design and delivery – the world would probably be a better place"[9].

8.2 By the same token, not all research can directly influence policy-making or feed into a program design. However, having a clear understanding of the development context is what matters to aid practitioners in our field. Emerging results from this action research suggests that through credible 'contextual evidence', our program staff were able to adapt and adjust the program design through activities that were aimed at solving some of the pressing development challenges in the Indo-Pacific region. Hence, research and evidence should become an integral part of the way aid in the international development sector is delivered so that investments lead to meaningful and lasting change.

[9] Survey respondent, anonymous, 2019.

ANNEX 1: THE ACADEMIC-PRACTITIONER RELATIONSHIP

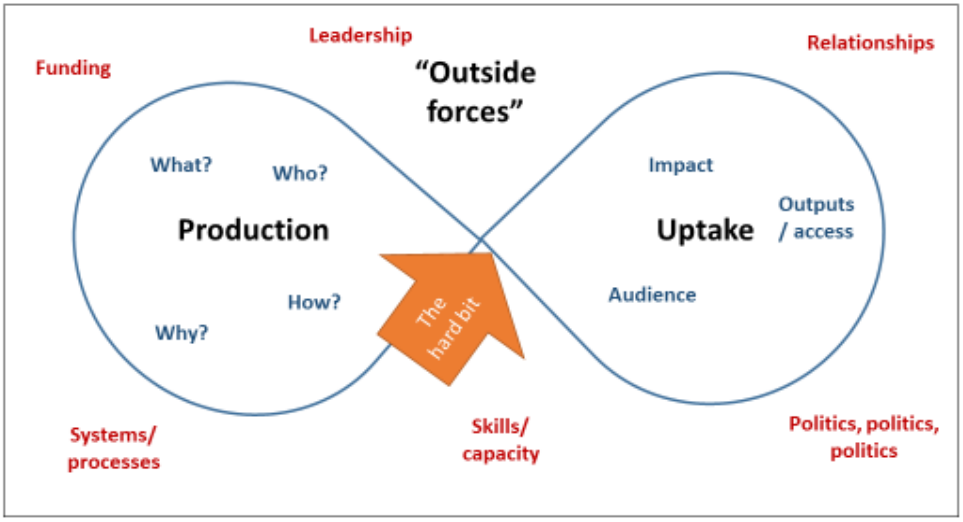
The academic-aid practitioner nexus: what is needed for this relationship to work?

8.3 A number of attempts have been made to understand and represent the relationship between aid practitioners and academics[10]. Whist each author has their own take on the issue, one common theme remains: there is a divide between those who *produce* and those who *consume* research and evidence in international development.

8.4 Academics and aid practitioners[11] inhabit different organisational and institutional environments: each with their own set of performance incentives, relationships, interests, culture, budgetary and policy imperatives. Thus, and in order to overcome these differences and align incentives for research to have an impact on aid project design, implementation and review – a number of things have to be considered at both "production" and research and evidence "uptake". Especially for processes that involve the use of commissioned research from academic institutions (these same factors may not apply equally or in the same way for tacit forms of knowledge – which are elicited from a range of sources other than academic institutes – see 3.2-3.3 above).

8.5 Based on our experience as part of the RDI action research project, as consumers and producers of research ourselves, and data collected from Abt's programs – we would propose the following framing for anyone seeking to understand the academic-aid practitioner nexus. In our experience, when this relationship functions, it is best reflected as mutually reinforcing; not two dichotomous groups. This is depicted in Figure 2 below.

Figure 3: What is needed for functioning academic/ aid practitioner relationships



8.6 There are three things to highlight in Figure 3:

I. First, while it is common in aid and development to think of research and evidence in a binary way (those who produce versus those who consume it) – it is the **bit in the middle which matters most: the overlap between academic-practitioner interests and incentives**. One can have an epistemologically robust piece of research; but if it doesn't translate (relevant ideas, format, topic, practicality and applicability) to those in the field or in decision making positions – then it has little impact. By the same token, if those managing aid programs and policies don't

[10] See for example: Rynes and Bartunek (2014). "Academics and Practitioners are Alike and Unlike: the Paradoxes of academic-practitioner relationships, Journal of management, and; RDI Network (2020), "Enhancing Research Impact in International Development: A Practical Guide for Practitioners and Researchers", RDI.

[11] Managers and implementers of projects, bureaucrats in donor agencies or partner governments

have the means or incentive to uptake research – then demand will be weak and investment (money and political will) in the production of research and evidence will be low. Although aid practitioners and academic sometimes live in separate worlds, in order for research and evidence to impact programming – interests and incentives must be aligned with bounded mutuality

II. **How researchers, academics, policy makers and program managers approach** the production and uptake of research also has significant impacts on whether evidence will impact development outcomes or not. Table 1 below outline the questions researchers and practitioners need to ask themselves at all stages of commissioning, producing and using research.

Table 2: Considerations that will impact whether evidence and research informs programming

Production		Uptake	
What	**What** do we mean by research and evidence? What do we deem "sufficient evidence"? Must it meet the academic standards (ethical, methodological) and world-views (e.g. scientifically versus tactic knowledge) typically associated with universities? Or are other forms of knowledge and knowledge production valid (e.g. family histories)?	**Outputs (and access)**	**Outputs (and access):** Are the outputs accessible to different language and cultural groups? Can they be understood by people of a non-academic background? Are they practical and applied or theoretical? These choices lead to inclusive or exclusive outcomes.
Why	**Why** is it being done and who is demanding it? Is it for tenured academic position or perhaps a theoretical debate? Or as one LTU'er rather astutely put it "is it evidence-based policy or policy-based evidence" (i.e. research to legitimise a particular political position or not)? Is research grounded in the problems practitioners need addressed?	**Audience**	**Audience**: do we know how information is consumed? What happens once something is 'disseminated'? How does it get translated into a "policy" or a design, evaluation or annual plan? Read the audience wrong, and we are left with documents on a shelf (or files on database somewhere).
Who	**Who** controls the what, why and how of research and its relevance to practice? Who has the power to set the agenda and questions? Are local voices and the views of end users included? It is important to understand whose interest's academics and practitioners are serving and how this affects research agendas, topics and methods.	Impact	**Impact**: finally, how do we know if research has had any impact (positive or negative) on aid quality and performance? How do we measure and reflect on this and who's responsible for doing it? The upshot is that if the impact *is* positive and measurable, then the chances of getting more support for production, and starting the whole thing over again (right back to step 1 above), is more likely.
How	**How** is it commissioned and produced? Is the procurement competitive? Are both local and international researchers and consultants given equal opportunity? Is there flexibility to adapt the research or analysis as its undertaken? Are all research methods accorded equal status (e.g. quant and qual) or are some more valid than others?		

III. Finally, a number of **"outside forces"** (in terms of structure, institutions and agency) can also positively or negatively impact on the quality and impact of research and evidence:

- politics, it is no secret that research which speaks to a live political issue will always have more traction. Although this can be a double edged sword;

- skills, expertise and capacity impact not only the ability to understand and use research and evidence, but also to commission it;
- leadership in at least three places matters too: the donor, the aid program and the partner (government or local actors);
- systems and processes, especially in the policy making process and aid cycle are also important – how and when there are incentives for evidence to be brought in at design, evaluation, cabinet deliberation of policy etc, and;
- Funding. The perennial challenge for aid practitioners because research is often viewed as a “nice to have” so often falls to the bottom of funding and priority list.