Research for Development Impact

Lessons Learned from the ESPA Programme

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What do we mean by ‘Impact’?

- A widely used and increasingly popular term both in international development policy and practice and in academia (UK and elsewhere).

  **Difference in meaning & implication**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Impact in international development</th>
<th>Impact in academia</th>
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<td>“Positive and negative, primary and secondary long-term effects produced by a development intervention, directly or indirectly, intended or unintended” (OECD/DAC)</td>
<td>“the demonstrable contribution that excellent research makes to society and the economy” (RCUK)</td>
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How do we go....

...from here...

Charcoal income as a means to a valuable end: Scope and limitations of income from rural charcoal production to alleviate acute multidimensional poverty in Mabalane district, southern Mozambique

Agent-Based Modelling to Assess Community Food Security and Sustainable Livelihoods

Nature International Journal of Science

Understanding trade-offs in upscaling and integrating climate-smart agriculture and sustainable river basin management in Malawi

...to here
### ESPA’s Theory of Change

**Interdisciplinarity**

**Knowledge co-production**

*Figure 1. Theory of Change for the ESPA programme*
Interdisciplinarity

“ESPA investments are highly interdisciplinary, linking the social, natural and political sciences to address a series of focussed research questions and evidence challenges using systems thinking, acknowledging the interconnectedness of social and ecological systems”

*ESPA Impact Strategy (2016)*

Being an interdisciplinary team gave us in the DELTAS project the credibility to engage with Government Ministries in Bangladesh, which with a team of only hydrologists wouldn’t have had.

*(Alex Chapman, ESPA researcher)*
How ‘impactful’ were ESPA’s projects

- 125 ESPA project – great variety of ‘degrees’ and ‘types’ of impact, e.g.
  - Influencing policy (global, national, sub-national)
  - Influencing legislation and regulation
  - Influencing investments and business practices
  - Mobilising citizens for action
  - Scientific base and ‘proof of concept’ for subsequent development funding
  - Providing direct benefits to local communities through demonstration activities

In most cases, only initial indications are visible – impact takes longer than an average research project
Some examples of impact...
Government-community-business partnership in Ghana

• The ESPA-funded Ecolimits project tackled Ghana’s forest loss while boosting farmers’ wellbeing through climate-smart cocoa production.
‘Rescuing’ traditional knowledge and methods to improve water management in Peru

- ESPA-funded Mountain-Evo project used inexpensive, replicable and traditional technologies to improve water management in the Peruvian highlands, including the restoration of antique pre-Inca canals. The project benefitted the livelihoods of both rural upstream communities and the downstream capital Lima.
What made the difference?

- Time
- Relations with partners and stakeholders - based on mutual trust and respect
- Capacity and resources for impact in the team (e.g. communication)
- Clearly defined pathway to impact BUT ALSO flexibility and adaptive management to seize unexpected impact opportunities
Beyond academia: research co-production with stakeholders/users

• Coproduction: engaging non-academic actors (incl. local communities) as active participants in the design and implementation of research, rather than just as end-users.

• Important benefits for research with development impact.

• If done properly, co-production fundamentally changes the process of doing research (not just an add-on).
Co-generation of actionable knowledge in Mountain-EVO project

• Knowledge generation in an ESPA context:
  • a complex, multi-directional, and iterative process of interactions between different stakeholders,
  • With feedback loops and shortcut between actions of individual actors,
  • Resulting in secondary and parallel loops of knowledge generation

(Buytaert et al. 2018, ESPA Book Chapter)
CONDESAN lobbied for approval of a Law on compensation schemes for ecosystem services in Peru.

The iMHEA network starts providing quantitative information on hydrological benefits of natural and green infrastructure to support investment for ecosystem conservation and restoration.
How ESPA projects have engaged local communities in research processes

- Informing local communities of the objective and process of research
- Involvement of local communities as research participants (focus groups/interviews)
- Feedback and validation of findings (often using ‘creative’ methods e.g. comic books, theatre, songs…).

BUT

- Less strong evidence of involving communities in research design (questions/methods)
Some reflections…

- Co-production challenges traditional research methodologies
  - E.g. random sampling, comparability
- Co-production raises the question of “what’s in it” for local communities
  - Danger of ‘over-asking’ / raising expectations
- Co-production raises ethical issues
  - Compensation to participants
  - Intellectual property
  - Safety and anonymity for communities