

Growth
Research
Programme

Impact and Communications Strategy

Supporting projects to achieve impact

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May 2016

www.degrp.sqsp.com

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Research jointly supported by the ESRC and DFID



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Introduction

This DFID-ESRC Growth Research Programme (DEGRP) Impact and Communication Strategy is designed to complement the Research Strategy to ensure that researchers funded by the programme understand the context within which their research will have impact, how impact is defined, and the steps that they could take to maximise their impact. This strategy builds on the [ESRC's Impact Toolkit](#), and [DFID's guidance on Research Uptake](#); both of which provide useful information to grant holders on how to achieve impact.

The programme will focus on ensuring excellence in research; that is, research that is of the highest possible disciplinary quality. The ultimate aim of the programme is to improve the lives of poor people in LICs through contributing to stronger and more rapid economic growth. However this is a very long-term aim with a large number of complicating factors. More immediately, the goal of the programme is to support the production of world-class research, and ensure it has an impact on policy and practice in LICs. The programme's success will be assessed via: the quality of the research it funds, the contribution it makes to debates around economic growth in LICs, and the changes to policy and practice that result from those debates. There are many stakeholders in these debates: not every programme-funded project will be able to achieve impact on all of them. However, the portfolio of research commissioned by the programme is expected to have a significant impact on a wide range of decisions taken by national public policy-makers, the private sector, civil society organisations (CSOs) and NGOs, donor agencies and multilateral organisations.

For the programme, success will be achieved when its research portfolio is able to demonstrate a range of impacts. These will include:

- Influencing the academic and policy debates around economic growth in relation to agriculture, finance and innovation in LICs
- Being able to demonstrate a plausible contribution to changes in policies and practices in the public, private and third sectors
- Forging lasting connections between researchers and the projects' other stakeholders
- Building the capacity of researchers who are themselves from LICs to lead and manage this high-quality research.

This is a demanding programme of work to which individual projects will be contributing. It is therefore important to set out what we mean by 'impact' at the project level, particularly in the context of LICs. Projects funded by the programme will be expected to ensure that their own impact strategies are coherent with this understanding so that the programme as a whole is cohesive.

Understanding what shapes impact

DEFINING 'IMPACT'

This impact strategy has been designed to link the impact agendas of the programme's two funding bodies – ESRC and DFID – to improve economic growth in LICs and ultimately benefit the world's poor.

DFID leads Britain's fight against global poverty, seeing economic growth as one of the most important means of raising incomes and reducing poverty. DFID funds research that will make a difference to policy and programmes in developing countries, to ultimately benefit the lives of poor people. ESRC funds research that will make a demonstrable contribution to society and the economy.

The programme's definition of impact focuses specifically on what it means to have impact on decision-making in support of economic growth in LICs. By understanding the drivers of economic growth in LICs, programme research will help a wide range of stakeholders to take decisions which have positive, sustainable impacts on the lives of poor people. The programme funds the production of high-quality research to support decision-making, and will ensure that the research is accessible to the full range of stakeholders.

ACADEMIC EXCELLENCE

Underpinning any definition of impact is the need for programme-funded research to be of world-class, cutting edge academic quality. The programme's projects are selected via the standard ESRC review process according to a range of criteria. These include, but are not limited to: being able to deliver world-class research and analysis; pushing the boundaries of knowledge; and creating new global public goods in the form of new datasets, models or approaches. Projects must be 'fit to programme': aligned with the themes set out in the Research Strategy and demonstrating potential for impact on economic growth and the likelihood that the ultimate beneficiaries will be the world's poor.

The academic impact of programme-funded research will be determined by the quality of that research, the quality of the publications and products that are subsequently produced and the extent to which the research results are influential. ESRC will be responsible for assessing the academic impact of programme-funded research, though the Evidence & Policy Group (EPG) will contribute to this by working to ensure that the content of the research is aligned with the agreed Research Strategy.

THE DIFFERENT TYPES OF IMPACT

While the ultimate beneficiaries of the programme's research are intended to be citizens in LICs, most of the more immediate impacts will be on processes and policies that stimulate economic growth. The focus

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of the programme's research will be on these processes: in the short term, individual projects may affect the lives of those who have been directly involved as part of the research; but impacts on those outside the immediate reach of the project will take longer and probably happen in a less direct way.

The next section sets out who the programme expects to use the results of research, but it is useful to examine what types of impact we expect programme-funded research to have.

The programme's research touches on a very wide variety of issues in a large number of countries, each with their own socio-political and economic contexts and with different, and often highly contested, policy goals. A single piece of research evidence will mean very different things in these diverse contexts depending on local ideas of what should be done to achieve the policy goals (not just what can be done). Local approaches to decision-making will also vary widely, with consequences for how decisions are taken and how they therefore include the voices of those the research seeks to help.

This makes it impossible to develop a single model to assess the sorts of impacts programme-funded research has had. It will be incumbent on individual projects to develop a detailed understanding of the context within which their research results will be received and to formulate their own ideas about what sorts of impacts they could aim to achieve, in what time frames and with what people. This understanding also needs to recognise that much impact cannot be planned to the nth degree: opportunities will arise that had not been foreseen, and it will be up to researchers to take advantage of them to ensure that their evidence and resulting messages are able to contribute to debates. In a separate document we set out how we will help programme-funded projects anticipate the types of impact they might achieve and help them develop their own communications strategies that are tailored to their particular contexts.

What the programme will not do is assume that citable impacts on the policies of the various stakeholders (be they in public policy, the private sector, NGOs or civil society) are the holy grail of research impact. These are an important part of the picture, but are by no means the only type of impact for which to aim. Instead, individual projects, and the programme as a whole, will be asked to achieve a portfolio of impacts in four different areas. These draw from the three categories of impact set out on the [ESRC website](#), and from the [evaluation of the Rural Economy and Land Use programme](#)¹. It will be up to individual projects to develop their line of argument about how the four different types of impact are prioritised and the proportion of effort that is devoted to each one.

While the boundaries between the different types of impact will be somewhat fuzzy, the following four categories will be used:

- **Conceptual impacts:** contributions to the knowledge, understanding and attitudes of those who are involved in using research to benefit citizens in LICs; including policy-makers and practitioners, the private sector, NGOs, CSOs and others. A piece of research that has conceptual impact will have changed ways of thinking or raised awareness of an issue and may lead to changes in the ways people and organisations behave towards each other;
- **Instrumental impacts:** impacts on policies, programmes or practice in the public, private or third sectors. Research may give rise to a change of direction; to a new policy being developed on an issue; or to new or changed programmes of work being implemented. In the public sector, it may lead to the development of new economic or legislative policy instruments. We follow DFID in defining instrumental impacts as the development-level effects which (i) can be attributed to a

¹ The Rural Economy and Land Use (RELU) programme is similar in size and scope to DEGRP; commissioning research to achieve impact on policy and practice. The evaluation usefully demonstrates the need for a portfolio of impacts from a complex research programme. Note that promoting interdisciplinarity is less important to DEGRP than it was to RELU, so has been dropped from the DEGRP impact portfolio.

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project or programme through comparison with the counterfactual, or (ii) for which there is reasonable evidence that the project or programme has made a direct contribution.

- **Capacity-building impacts:** the research process raises the capacity of researchers to conduct similar research in future. This may come about from using new methods, working in new areas, or simply becoming more experienced with research protocols and analytical frameworks. Due to the nature of the programme it is expected that all projects will demonstrate a high degree of capacity building. However the programme is particularly concerned that this should apply to researchers from LICs.
- **Enduring connectivity:** research does not happen in isolation: building networks of people and organisations who understand the research and are able to make use of it, is part and parcel of achieving broad-based impact, which takes on a life of its own after the project has ended. As described later in this strategy, the Evidence & Policy Group will provide specific support to projects to help them build connections between themselves and within the wider growth-related environment.

The communications lead in the Evidence & Policy Group will be able to advise projects on developing their own communications strategies to achieve this portfolio of impacts. While all projects have been asked to draw up pathway to impact as part of the proposal process, once their project is well established the EPG will support them to take this further – to consider in more detail the types of impact they could have with their various stakeholders and how this might be achieved through a combination of outputs and types of engagement. This support will enable them to develop a structured communications strategy which maximises their potential impact.

IMPACT SUPPORT AVAILABLE TO GRANT HOLDERS

Two levels of support will be available to grant holders to help them achieve their impact: ‘silver’ and ‘gold’.

Silver support

The ‘silver’ level of support will be provided across the programme as a whole, and offered to all grantees who wish to make use of it². This basic level of support will ensure that the programme is well directed in line with ESRC and DFID priorities. It will also ensure that DEGRP is made visible via good communications, profile and image work. Silver support will provide all grantees with a certain minimum level of support and encourage them to interact with each other to promote cross-learning. Silver support will specifically include:

- Outlining the vision for the programme; communicating this to the outside world via the DEGRP website and feeding it back to grant holders in our regular communications with them;
- Asking all projects to update their pathways to impact (using this guidance note) one year after they have commenced. This will allow them time to begin the work and understand any changes in context that may affect how they plan for impact;
- Ensuring that the programme’s outputs are well synthesised, set in context and presented for a variety of non-academic audiences;

² The purpose of the silver support is for the EPG team to engage with grant holders to help improve their impact without micromanaging them in any way. The emphasis will be on sharing good practice, spotting potential problems and putting in place the appropriate processes to avert them and encouraging peer learning.

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- Maintaining a basic set of information about all projects that can be used for reporting and publicity purposes;
- Maintaining a ‘watching brief’ across all funded projects in order to ensure there is good coherence with the general thrust of the EPG’s work on impact. This will be done via reviews of their routine reports and project outputs: its purpose will be purely to understand how to improve impact and will not replicate in any way the administrative overview maintained by ESRC.
- Designing and hosting workshops, seminars, webinars and training events around policy engagement and communications to which all grantees and stakeholders will be invited. These may include standalone events hosted at ODI or side events at major conferences.

Gold support

The gold level will comprise strategic support to enhance the impact of DEGRP’s research on policy and practice. Gold support will be provided in two ways; on demand to grantees, and when Theme Leads spot a particular opportunity to showcase the work of DEGRP grantees—either singly or by bringing several of them together—at pre-existing events. Gold support could also draw on external experts identified by the programme, ESRC or DFID, giving grantees the opportunity to interact closely with some of the world’s leading academics in their area. Gold support will specifically include:

- Identifying events at which DEGRP-funded research can be showcased, or where the impact of individual or clusters of projects could be enhanced, and inviting and supporting grantees to attend (if such events are not already in their project plans).
- Supporting individual projects to build on events they are already planning; bringing in outside experts to contribute to discussions, present papers, or provide summary notes for wider communication via the DEGRP website.
- Providing 1:1 advice and support, on demand, to projects which have specific questions or challenges relating to their impact plans. This will be a spin-off from the silver support provided to all grantees, and will be managed as cost-effectively as possible if several grantees are found to face similar issues.
- Running policy engagement workshops, in country, to bring together researchers and policy-makers to explore policy-maker demand for DEGRP research. These may be run alongside existing events or be DEGRP-branded stand-alone events.
- Strategic DEGRP events will be planned in conjunction with the Research Strategy Group.

Achieving impact: some important factors

It is not possible to prescribe a single formula for ensuring that research results have an impact. Experience from other research programmes shows that there are several key factors which, when taken together, contribute to the types of impact identified earlier in this document³.

UNDERSTANDING CONTEXT

The context into which research results are communicated is known to have a significant effect on how they are taken up and used. It will be important for projects to develop a nuanced understanding of context, particularly if their research is aimed at national decision-makers in LICs where capacity to engage with complex issues may be limited. Identifying the key stakeholders and understanding how they might be able to contribute to achieving the different types of impact will be an important first step in a project's research uptake strategy. The EPG will issue guidance on how to do this such that it feeds into a wider understanding of how to plan for impact.

IDENTIFYING WINDOWS OF OPPORTUNITY

Understanding the national and international policy processes which influence economic growth in LICs will allow projects to plan their strategies for engagement and the communication of the research results. But it will also be important to take advantage of windows of opportunity that may open more suddenly, which may allow greater impact if the response is rapid enough. Projects will be encouraged to look out for such windows and to discuss with the theme leads how best they might be addressed. The EPG will help identify opportunities for greater impact, particularly at a regional or global level.

Example

In September 2013 the EPG supported a project workshop in Ghana held by DEGRP grant holder Professor Stephany Griffith Jones and sponsored [a public financial sector debate](#) with the [Institute of Statistical, Social and Economic Research \(ISSER\)](#) linked to the event. The new Governor of the Central Bank of Ghana was among the panel members who discussed the topic of how to build a stable and efficient financial sector for sustained growth and structural transformation in Africa. Participants include local policy-makers and the Governor's speech in particular led to an array of local media discussion after the event.

³ Including [ESRC's Impact Toolkit](#) and DFID's [Research Uptake Guidelines](#)

DEVELOPING THEORIES OF CHANGE

Achieving impact is not simply about disseminating outputs to passive audiences. Change is delivered through a variety of mechanisms and organisations; the end result depending on the network of relationships between the different actors and the time each take to incorporate their understanding of what needs to happen differently and why.

Drawing up theories of change can be a good basis for developing a detailed impact strategy: the process helps researchers conceptualise what impacts they might have, and how they might be sequenced and achieved given the research's wider context. The key issues in a theory of change are the context, the different actors involved, and a sequence of events which lead to the final impact being achieved. Julian Barr of ITAD (Vogel, 2012) notes that a theory of change is analogous to:

“...Google maps – this is the territory, this is how we see our bit of the territory, and this is the route that we think is best to take through it (though, like Google Maps, we recognise there may be a couple of different routes across the territory, but we have explicitly chosen one). Based on our understanding of how the territory along the road works, this is how we shall approach the journey, and these are some of the landmarks we expect to see along the way.”

Theories of change are kept under review during the life of a project or programme; taking into account any changes in the wider context or the group of stakeholders; to use the Google Maps analogy, to take account of any unforeseen road closures.

Via discussions on the programme's online forum, the EPG's impact & uptake lead will encourage projects to construct their own theories of change about achieving impact, focusing on developing a realistic understanding of what 'impact' will look like and what sequence of changes each project could promote to achieve that impact.

Rather than projecting forwards to define the changes that might happen as a result of their outputs and engagement, projects will be asked to consider what changes in stakeholder behaviour they would expect, like and love to see as a result of their work. This approach draws from the recognised principles of [Outcome Mapping](#); it recognises that change is a social process, and does not simply happen as a result of the production of research products.

KNOWLEDGE BROKERING: WORKING WITH AND THROUGH OTHERS

Achieving impact is not by any means a linear process: impact often happens through work done by others. At different stages, projects may need to undertake activities that are more associated with the term 'knowledge brokering' than with simple research dissemination. There are four main types of knowledge brokering function (Shaxson, Bielak et al., 2012):

- **Informing:** enabling access to information; such as disseminating research results to the target audience via academic journal articles and project reports.
- **Translating:** helping people make sense of and apply research results; such as writing policy briefs or giving presentations at seminars.
- **Active knowledge brokering:** being actively involved in decision-making processes to improve the use of research evidence; such as participating in technical advisory committee meetings hosted by government departments or hosting multi-stakeholder workshops with policy-makers to develop implementable recommendations.

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- **Systems-level brokering:** changing the wider context to reduce the transaction costs of research uptake, such as helping to construct a multi-stakeholder network that meets regularly to review policy progress.

While every project would be expected to perform the 'informing' and 'translating' functions, it may or may not be appropriate for them to work on the other two: indeed, other organisations may be better placed to act as knowledge brokers or system-level brokers. The EPG will help projects balance their need to act as knowledge brokers with budgetary and other considerations.

Achieving impact through good communications

Developing a communications strategy is critical for the programme to achieve impact, both on a project level, but also at a programme level. ESRC's Impact Toolkit helps projects communicate their research for greater impact, and researchers should also refer to DFID's Research Uptake Guidance.

THREE PRINCIPLES FOR EFFECTIVE RESEARCH COMMUNICATION

Within the programme we build on these documents using principles from [ODI's Communications Strategy \(Scott, 2012a\)](#). The three principles are:

- **'Being there'**: This approach is an attempt to bring a more strategic vision to the distribution of communications outputs by explicitly linking efforts to be heard and found. Rather than expecting key audiences to come to us, we push information to them, through the existing channels that they already use. As a result, more audiences are reached, who can then share the content through their own networks.
- **'Cradle to grey'**: This approach focuses on helping researchers build a long lifespan or 'tail' for their research, to communicate with key stakeholders throughout the life of a project, and to make online activities central from start to finish. The process starts with 'the cradle': this is the time in which research ideas are developed, where early ideas can be shared and champions built for future communications. This is followed by 'the life': when the research is completed and communicated in multiple, complementary formats to key audiences. Finally, 'the grey': we will plan communications that lengthen the lifespan of the research once it is published, so that it never 'goes to the grave' and is forgotten. An example would be that a researcher could post their research to [Wikipedia](#), upload their publications to archiving sites and then release it all under a [creative commons licence](#).
- **'Reusing the wheel'**: Rather than 'reinventing the wheel' this approach focuses on using cost-effective, existing tools and channels wherever possible to ensure value for money, save on repetition and therefore only concentrate efforts on new and necessary areas for greater impact. This also includes working in collaboration with existing actors and organisations wherever possible.

IDENTIFYING AND ENGAGING WITH AUDIENCES

It is essential to discuss whom we expect to take up the results of this work and how we expect researchers and the EPG to engage with them. The programme will need to engage with a wide variety of stakeholders at both levels to achieve impact, including some or all of the following: academics in

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LICs and other countries; civil servants in LICs and donor countries; politicians and their advisers in LICs; local stakeholders in LICs, representatives of donors and IFIs; private sector organisations; civil society organisations; non- government organisations; development agencies; DFID policy advisors and ESRC, and the media.

It will be up to individual projects to determine the precise mix of stakeholders to target to achieve impact – as outlined in the guidance note on impact. Identifying who will use programme-funded research evidence is an important part of the impact and communications strategies for each project, and for the programme as a whole. Where possible, involving stakeholders at an early stage of the research – even in designing the project – can have a significant effect on the ultimate impact of the project by increasing their buy-in to the work and their understanding of the sort of evidence that is likely to emerge⁴.

The EPG will assist programme-funded researchers to develop a plan to reach the relevant stakeholders and decision-makers through a process of engagement and knowledge brokering, not simply one-way communication. We will encourage direct engagement between researchers and stakeholders on specific issues, whilst providing the overview analysis that will help set this engagement in context. But as a general rule, studies will be more likely to be taken up by end users if they:

- **Actively engage** with their key stakeholders from early on in the project to ensure that whatever messages are emerging from the research are available as and when necessary; that researchers are aware of when windows of opportunity are likely to open up where they will be able to make a difference; and ensure they are asking the right questions
- Represent **conceptual advances** in the field, improving our understanding of issues and reframing our ideas around growth (see above)
- Recognise the **breadth of institutions** involved in fostering economic growth in LICs, and use this recognition to ensure their messages are relevant and coherent
- Set their research evidence in the **wider context**; helping policy-makers and practitioners understand the particular contribution the research makes to a particular issue or set of issues.

In addition, the EPG Theme Leads', and the Advisory Board's own contacts and networks, will be critical to building the programme's profile and supporting its work.

SUPPORTING PROJECTS' COMMUNICATION ACTIVITIES

The EPG will support projects to achieve impact through a variety of means, based on good engagement and communications. During the life of individual projects the EPG will work to ensure that opportunities for engagement at national, regional and global levels are communicated to project leaders and that they are encouraged to participate where appropriate (electronically or in person). We will ensure that the outputs of individual studies are well-communicated to the key players in the debates, at the right time and in a useful format. We will support researchers to disseminate a mixture of different products in multiple formats and media, the precise mix being determined with the individual research teams as the draft final reports begin to emerge. The Theme Leads will also work with DFID and ESRC to communicate any cross-programme syntheses which build on the work from individual studies and to strengthen the network between programme- funded researchers through both online and in-person events.

⁴ Refer to the [ESRC Impact Toolkit](#) for more detail on this point.

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Finally, we will offer workshops and webinars on impact and communication for grant holders, which will focus on strategy and specific channels and tools as necessary, and facilitate the development of project communications. These will take place at other linked events, so that as many project teams as possible (who are already attending the main events) can be reached. The training will be complemented by the use of a closed online platform to encourage discussion, interaction and lesson sharing.

COMMUNICATING DEGRP RESEARCH RESULTS WITH END USERS

Influencing growth processes is not simply a matter of broadcasting evidence to a wide audience and seeing where it sticks. A strong communications strategy combines communicating to a wide audience with carefully targeted approaches. This is particularly true for this programme, where the results of individual projects will be complemented by EPG-level activities which will help develop a broad understanding of growth research in LICs.

Commissioned papers

The Communications Manager will support the production and communication of programme-level publications, which will synthesise existing and emerging evidence on growth in the three theme areas and provide overview analyses. A variety of formats will be used and shared effectively with a wide range of stakeholders:

- **Academic syntheses of DEGRP issues**
Led by ESRC with input from DEGRP research theme leads. Targeted at academic, donor and policy audiences.
- **DEGRP 'Research in context' policy briefs**
Led by EPG, briefs provide context for and strategic analysis of key findings from DEGRP research projects. Targeted predominantly at national policy-makers and in-country donors, but also suitable for wider lay audiences.
- **DEGRP Policy essays**
Short, accessible essays by DEGRP researchers and research partners demonstrating how their research addresses a specific policy issue or opportunity. These may be a single essay, or a set of essays bringing together contributions from multiple DEGRP projects, like the essays on [State-Business Relations](#). Targeted at in-country researchers and research institutions.
- **Tailored communications packages and outputs**
In line with our communications principle 'being there', DEGRP research is communicated via other outputs and channels as and when opportunities arise. For example, blogs, op-eds, and shorter pieces of content (such as our '[10 things to know about innovation](#)' one-pager) will extend the reach and impact of the core publications and messages.

'Being there' and participation in events

The programme will reach end users of research through events and conferences:

- Supporting programme-funded researchers to determine the events where they can engage with key stakeholders and their messages can be effectively communicated, over and above those identified

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in proposal documents;

- Identifying regional and global events at which the programme can be publicised to raise awareness of the programme and to encourage a wide variety of people and organisations to engage with it. The programme will offer a series of supplementary workshops and seminars (see Box 1)
- Contributing to meetings of grant holders organised by the EPG.

Participation in key regional and global events

The Theme Leaders have identified a series of meetings, conferences and workshops at which the programme will raise its profile. The events have been chosen as those that are high profile, relevant to programme topics, and where a significant number and variety of programme stakeholders are likely to attend; such as UNU-WIDER Conference, AERC, IMF Growth Week and G20 meetings. DEGRP researchers will be encouraged to participate in these events where time and research plans allow.

Digital Communications

The digital strategy will be the backbone to all communications activities. The main online activities will be:

- Creating a central programme website to collate key research, but also repurposing existing research and 'reusing the wheel'
- Engaging the use of other online platforms, so the programme-funded projects can be seen and heard in a variety of places as part of the 'being there' principle
- Encouraging grant holders to write opinion pieces and blogs on a variety of platforms and working with projects to create opportunities for this type of product
- Using social media when appropriate and in conjunction with other communication channels, but also making use of existing social media within projects teams or host organisations, institutes and universities
- Engaging with the media online (and offline), particularly at a global level in debates around growth in LICs, but also at a regional and national level.