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RESEARCH UPTAKE BRIEF

Strategies to promote the utilization of USAID-funded research results

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About USAID

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MIT D-Lab works with people around the world to develop and advance collaborative approaches and practical solutions to global poverty challenges. Since 2017, MIT D-Lab has operated the Comprehensive Initiative on Technology Evaluation (CITE), a USAID-funded program launched at MIT in 2012 to develop and disseminate rigorous, practitioner-oriented evaluation methodologies for use in global development. CITE supports independent research studies led by interdisciplinary teams of researchers and practitioners working at the nexus of evaluation methodology, sociotechnical systems, and global development challenges. This research uptake brief was developed under the CITE research study "Investigating Inclusive Systems Innovation," implemented by the MIT Local Innovation Group.

MIT Local Innovation Group

The MIT Local Innovation Group conducts interdisciplinary social science research on processes of local innovation and local systems change in communities facing development challenges around the world. Created at MIT D-Lab in 2017 by research scientist Elizabeth Hoffecker, the research group currently operates out of MIT's Sociotechnical Systems Research Center. Integrating academic scholarship with development practice, the group's research produces actionable findings, methodological advances, and analytical tools that enable global development actors to deepen their understanding of how local innovation processes work, how they contribute to sustainable and equitable development, and how they can be catalyzed, facilitated, and evaluated.

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INTRODUCTION

This brief offers a set of strategies to help individuals and teams who produce USAID-funded research to position their findings to be used by key stakeholders within and external to USAID. It focuses, therefore, on strategies for promoting research uptake, which is distinct from, but related to, research communication and dissemination.

Most USAID-funded research projects create communication plans that describe how research teams will communicate with USAID and other relevant stakeholders while conducting research and after the teams have identified findings. Communicating progress during research implementation and sharing findings after they have been identified does not ensure, however, that the stakeholders the research is intended to influence will use the findings. For research uptake to occur—and for research to achieve its desired policy, program, or other influence objectives—research teams should incorporate uptake-focused strategies into a project's communications and implementation plans from the outset.

This document offers a set of such strategies drawn from conversational interviews the author conducted with contacts in various positions within USAID during the fall of 2019. Insights from these conversations are complemented with recommendations from other relevant sources, including guidance on research uptake provided by other funding organizations and academic researchers working in centers focused on research utilization among policymakers and practitioners.

The consensus among these sources is that research uptake will be difficult to achieve if it is only considered after the team has conducted research. Rather, to ensure success, teams should consider uptake from the outset of research projects and keep uptake a central focus throughout the life of the project. The strategies presented in this brief are, therefore, organized according to the phases of the research cycle, with strategies that teams should pursue during the research design and planning phase listed first, followed by strategies for the research implementation phase, and research dissemination phase. The basic strategies highlighted in each phase are intended to provide teams with a starting point for creating more tailored research uptake plans.

PRIORITIZING UPTAKE THROUGHOUT THE RESEARCH CYCLE

In contrast to strategies for research dissemination, which focus on activities needed to share research results as widely as possible, research uptake focuses on strategies that will encourage the active use of research findings by specific audiences. Research dissemination activities are, therefore, about "pushing" the research results out to audiences, while research uptake is about encouraging "pull" of the research findings from specific audiences whom researchers hope to influence with their work.

For research uptake activities to achieve their desired results, research teams should implement these activities throughout the different phases of the research cycle, and teams must develop a strong focus on research uptake from the outset of a given research project. During the proposal development phase or at the earliest time feasible following receipt of funding, teams can define and establish the foundational components of their research uptake strategy. To start, research teams should develop project-specific responses to the following two sets of questions.

IDENTIFY THE PROJECT'S INFLUENCE GOALS

The first step in designing a research uptake strategy is for teams to identify what they hope to achieve with their research in terms of policy, program, or other influence. Influence goals might focus on changing the structure of other projects or activities, influencing future calls for funding, changing norms or standard ways of doing things, influencing policy, a combination of these, or other goals. To clarify influence goals, research teams should ask themselves the following questions:

- What or whom are we hoping to influence through our research work and results?
- What do we hope will change or be done differently because of our work?

DEFINE THE RESEARCH UPTAKE OBJECTIVES

Once teams have defined their influence goals, they can identify how their work needs to be used for the desired influence to occur (i.e., they can identify their research uptake objectives). This process entails asking and answering the following questions:

- Who needs to understand and take action on our research results to achieve our influence goals?
- What do we hope those research users will do with our results? How will they use the results to achieve our desired policy, program, or other change?
- What is likely to motivate these individuals to take the desired actions? How can we contribute toward building their motivation to engage with and use our work?

RESEARCH DESIGN AND PLANNING PHASE STRATEGIES

With research influence and uptake objectives clearly defined, research teams can create a research uptake strategy during the research design and planning phase of their projects. This strategy should, at a minimum, address the following topics and sets of questions.

IDENTIFY KEY AUDIENCES AND STAKEHOLDERS

With specific influence goals in mind, research teams can identify the key audiences and stakeholders for their anticipated research results. At this stage, it can be helpful to map audiences into the following two categories:

RESEARCH END USERS: These individuals are the target of your program and policy influence goals. They are individuals whom you hope will change their mind about something, make a specific decision, or take a particular action based on your research results. Your research uptake strategy should clearly identify who these individuals are, ideally by name and position but, at minimum, by type or persona. Once identified, research teams can ask and answer the following questions about research end users:

- What kind of research results typically prompt these individuals to change their thinking, behavior, and actions? Looking at their past decision-making, have personal stories been most effective? Evidence from peer-reviewed papers? Calls to action in policy briefs?

- In the case that scientific evidence is what our audience is looking for, what kind of evidence do they want to see (quantitative? qualitative?), and at what level of rigor?
- In terms of how they get our research results into their hands, how do these individuals prefer to receive information? As a digital document received online via email or some other digital channel? A hard copy that finds its way onto their desk? A short video? A briefing?

DISSEMINATION PARTNERS: These individuals will place the research team's results into the hands, onto the desk, or into the inbox of the targeted research end users. They are the influence network of the decision-maker who is the research end user and are likely to be that person's closest advisor, assistant, deputy, or trusted colleague. These individuals may not read the results themselves, but they need to understand them well enough to decide whether to pass them along, with whom to share them, and how to get them in front of decision-makers when relevant opportunities arise. At times, a research team may need to work through a chain of dissemination partners for their outputs to arrive in the hands of a particular research end user. Consider the following relevant questions for dissemination partners:

- What format and language will make our results immediately accessible and understandable to research dissemination partners?
- How can we communicate the key messages that we want dissemination partners to pass along in a way that enables them to quickly understand the results without having to fully read them?
- How do these individuals prefer to receive information and to share it with others? Via email? Social media re-posts? Word of mouth?
- What is the way in which these individuals typically learn about new research results? Informal conversations with colleagues? Organized brown bag meetings or working groups? Conferences or presentations? Online platforms such as websites, blogs, listservs, and email?

BECOME THE GO-TO RESOURCE ON THE TOPIC

The consensus among USAID staff interviewed for this brief was that research teams should pursue an overall strategy aimed at ensuring that their research outputs become the go-to resource on their given topic within USAID, the "resource that gets easily passed around." To be that resource, research findings should help USAID staff at Missions, Bureaus, Independent Offices, and other units answer a specific question they have or respond to an information search they are likely to be doing. To build a strategy around this guidance, research teams should identify the following:

- What knowledge gaps or information queries do our target audiences have related to the topic of our research? What will they likely be looking for?
- Where or to whom will our target audiences go first to find the information they are looking for?
- How do we position our research outputs to be in that go-to place, or with that go-to person, and be in a form that is easy to access and share?

- How do we ensure that research end users know how to reach us directly if they have additional questions about our work, and how do we ensure we have the capacity to respond to information requests?

IDENTIFY THE MOST EFFECTIVE FORMATS FOR RESULTS

With answers to the above questions, the research team can identify what specific combination of formats to use for the results to be easily understood and passed along by dissemination partners and to be considered credible, relevant, and digestible by the research end users.

The consensus from interviewees within and external to USAID is that outputs should ideally be in more than one format and be tailored for different audience needs. A particularly helpful package of outputs is the "2-5-25" package. This package consists of a formal research report (the 25-pager) containing the research results and methods, accompanied by a five-page executive summary or research brief, and a linked two-page policy brief that provides a policy-relevant summary of key findings. The two-page policy brief should start with the most relevant findings presented concisely at the top, in terms of clear, actionable recommendations to USAID based on the research findings.

The shorter documents will be positioned to have the most impact if they can cite or line-item reference a white paper (the 25-pager) or a peer-reviewed journal article, although interviewees noted that this is not always necessary for the shorter documents to become go-to resources within USAID if they meet a highly relevant information need with credible and useful results.

CREATE A RESEARCH UPTAKE TIMELINE AND BUDGET

When the research team has identified specific audiences and output formats tailored to those audiences, the team can create a timeline and associated budget to produce research outputs in the required formats. When developing the timeline and budget, the team should consider staff resources required to produce the desired outputs as well as the time of any outside professionals required for graphic design, copyediting, report production, video production, or multimedia production work. The budget should also consider whether outputs will be printed or distributed digitally and whether attendance at any in-person or remote events is necessary to raise awareness of the research with specific audiences.

When crafting a research uptake timeline, it can be helpful to work backward from any deadlines for the delivery of research outputs, as well as forward from the start of the project. Research stakeholders and end users are more likely to have a demand for the research findings if the research team involves them in setting the research agenda or providing up-front input into the research during the design and planning stage. Working forward from the project launch, research teams will, therefore, want to consider how they might involve potential research end users in the initial stages of framing the research and how this involvement will impact the timeline and budget.

Working backward from the final deliverables' anticipated submission deadline, teams should budget time during the output drafting stage to directly engage key dissemination partners by having them review early drafts of outputs, provide their input into the policy two-pager, or otherwise engage in the process of working toward final deliverables. This engagement, while adding extra time to the output production process, familiarizes research dissemination partners with the content of the research, which, in turn, positions them to be able to assist with research dissemination in the course of their work.

RESEARCH IMPLEMENTATION PHASE STRATEGIES

While most planning for research uptake should take place during the design phase of research projects, research teams can benefit from applying additional strategies, described below, during the implementation phase of their research activities.

MAKE CONNECTIONS TO CURRENT RESEARCH

In the early phases of research implementation, an effective uptake strategy involves identifying and connecting with the authors of the most influential reports on the topic area in the previous five years. Research teams can contact these authors to let them know about their study, invite them to engage as occasional advisors or content reviewers, and ask if they would be interested in receiving drafts of outputs for comment before they are released to the public. This outreach builds awareness of the team's research and may generate interest in the findings from individuals who are well regarded in the space and well positioned to serve as dissemination partners.

ENGAGE KEY RESOURCE PEOPLE WITHIN USAID

As a complementary strategy to engaging with external researchers, USAID interviewees recommended identifying key people within the agency who are considered "resource people" by others across diverse Missions, Bureaus, and Independent Offices. These are individuals to whom others tend to come when searching for relevant information on specific topics. They might be organizers of communities of practice, working groups, or brown bag lunch series within USAID or individuals who have built a diverse network within the agency and are seen as credible sources of information.

Rather than waiting until after research outputs are produced to engage with these people, the USAID interviewees recommended that research teams engage with resource people during the research implementation phase, particularly while envisioning and drafting potential outputs. This engagement can involve sharing the findings the team is working toward through brown bag presentations, direct emails to share progress updates, or requests for input on early drafts, particularly of policy two-pagers or research briefs, as these types of outputs give a quick overview of the team's work without requiring much time to review. As these resource people become familiar with the content of the work, they will be well positioned to send the team's final outputs to the correct research end users, both within USAID and among external audiences.

USE ACCESSIBLE LANGUAGE IN ALL WRITTEN OUTPUTS

When producing written outputs, research teams can come back to the audience identification questions from the research design phase to refine their understanding of their key audiences' language needs and preferences. Teams should ask themselves: what would make our outputs prohibitive to read for our key audiences, particularly our end users?

For many research end users, what makes outputs prohibitive to read are 1) the length of the output, and 2) language that is overly technical or difficult to understand quickly. If a reader cannot readily understand the team's output, they will put it down within a few minutes. With that in mind, teams should ensure that the most technical outputs, such as final research reports, start with less technical language in their first few pages and clearly preview the research findings before presenting more technical content. For research briefs, including five-pagers and two-pagers, authors should lead with the findings, and keep the language as direct and accessible as possible.

Given that USAID works across many diverse country and language contexts, research teams should also consider in what languages their outputs should be made available. If the outputs will be translated from English into other languages, teams should plan to write in English that is as clear, concise, and well organized as possible, as this will facilitate its accurate translation into other languages.

In the case that the team includes visuals in the final outputs, the visuals should simplify information delivery and increase the readability of the final outputs for all audiences. This includes ensuring that any visuals are Section 508 compliant, which the team can accomplish by including brief descriptions of the visuals in the image captions. Visuals that are overly complex, unclear, or poorly rendered can detract from the readability of a report, so visuals must be done well if they are done at all. A useful rule of thumb for visuals is that if the team can convey a message more directly or in less space using words as compared to a visual, then the visual should be omitted.

RESEARCH DISSEMINATION PHASE STRATEGIES

When research teams have focused on research uptake from the design and launch of their projects, as this guide recommends they do, the burden of implementing uptake-focused activities is lifted from the research dissemination phase, where it otherwise tends to fall. If research teams identify and engage research dissemination partners early in the process, then the teams will already have developed channels to convey research findings to the correct end users once the findings are published. This strategic planning will help generate demand for the eventual findings and completed research outputs. In this scenario, research teams can focus their uptake-related activities during the dissemination phase on a discreet and manageable set of strategies that are described below.

DISSEMINATE FINDINGS IN A VARIETY OF ACCESSIBLE PLACES

Given that different stakeholders and dissemination partners will likely prefer to access information in different ways, research teams should disseminate research findings in a variety of formats and outlets tailored to the project's stakeholders. The team should post finalized research reports and linked research summaries and policy briefs on the research institutions' and donors' websites, as well as in a variety of other online locations if possible. Teams can accomplish this strategy by writing blog posts or guest articles on other sites that link to the research findings, presenting the findings at meetings or conferences so that the findings are included on the websites or in publications of those groups, and potentially publishing on third-party platforms and publishing sites, including peer-reviewed journals.

FOCUS PRE-LAUNCH DISSEMINATION ON IN-PERSON MEETINGS AND PRESENTATIONS

To build awareness of and interest in final written deliverables within USAID, agency staff recommend that research teams plan to present their findings in person or through video-conferencing meetings at working groups or brown bag lunches prior to the formal release of their research outputs. Research teams can use these meetings and presentations to validate which aspects of the findings are most relevant to key audiences within USAID, which aspects of the material need additional clarification, and where key audiences want to know more. This information, in turn, can inform the finalization of research outputs and can help to ensure that there is an audience that is anticipating these outputs and is ready to receive them as soon as they are available.

FOCUS POST-LAUNCH DISSEMINATION ON WEBINARS, WORKSHOPS, AND PRESENTATIONS

Once the team has published final research outputs, an effective method of disseminating them is through webinars, online or in-person trainings, or invited talks and presentations. These formats enable audiences to learn about the findings in the context of a topic that they have come to hear about and is presumably relevant and of interest to them. It creates a space for audiences to actively engage with the findings, ask questions, and connect the findings to their work and research-relevant challenges they might be facing. This type of interactive, participatory format primes audience members to use the findings and research results in their work, which is the objective of research uptake.

CONCLUSION: ASSESS AND LEARN TO IMPROVE

As research teams implement the strategies described in this brief, it is important to take the time to assess these strategies to learn what has worked well and what could be improved in subsequent projects. It is particularly helpful to engage in this assessment during the research dissemination phase, as the team is preparing to close out the project or to launch a new round of related research.

Research team members can conduct assessment activities that are formal or informal and that involve both qualitative and quantitative approaches. Research teams can use qualitative approaches to gather the opinions of team members, research dissemination partners, research end users, and other relevant stakeholders regarding the extent to which the specific uptake strategies employed were effective in achieving their goals, how those strategies could be improved, and any recommendations to make uptake activities more effective in the future. Quantitative approaches to assessment can review key dissemination and uptake metrics, such as social media engagement metrics; citations in target publications; references to the findings in news outlets, opinion pieces, and policy communications; and inclusion of recommendations from the findings in calls for funding, program design documents, or other key materials.

When research teams have assessed which strategies were most effective for their project, they can identify how to tailor and refine their research uptake approach and plans for subsequent research cycles. As research teams learn and adapt, and as effective strategies, communication channels, and relationships with dissemination partners are refined and strengthened over time, research uptake activities can begin to develop a momentum that makes them easier to implement over time.

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