

Six tips for funding impactful research

Key findings

These lessons from the Climate and Development Knowledge Network (CDKN) programme are aimed at funders who are commissioning research through a competitive model. Our experience suggests that such funders should:

- unpack what they mean by 'impactful research'
- scope the policy context
- fund diverse consortia with a range of skills
- include relevant country or context experts in the review panel
- manage their own expectations
- be flexible, and accept and learn from failure.

Since our inception seven years ago, CDKN has aimed for the research that we fund to be demand-led and to have impact beyond academia. In our experience, the key lies in eliciting and selecting research proposals from partners that expressly wish to enhance policy, planning or practice 'through' their research. This changes the approach to research and the questions being asked. Finding these projects and partners, however, is challenging.

CDKN's research programme incorporates a broad spectrum of projects operating at global, national and subnational levels. Some are focused in particular countries or cities, others provide cross-country comparison, and others aim to inform international policy processes. These projects have achieved a variety of types and degrees of impact.

While we do not have all the answers, this *CDKN Essentials* outlines the main lessons we have learned about commissioning through a research call model. It is aimed at other funders of research who want to influence policy, planning and practice in climate compatible development and beyond. Researchers seeking guidance on achieving impact should see resources such as '10 things to know about how to influence policy with research.'

As research funders, you should:

Unpack what you mean by impactful research: Be clear what type(s) of impact you hope to see. This might be changes to policies, legislation and practices; improved understanding of or attention to an issue within



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a stakeholder group; or changes in attitudes, among others. You may seek relatively direct, short-term impact and/or indirect, longer-term change. Each type of impact is valid, and impact types are not mutually exclusive. However, they do require different approaches – for instance, in terms of the extent to which the research is designed for (or even with) a specific decision-making audience, and with a specific policy decision or process in mind. While a single research call or programme can include different types of research, clarity on what you mean by impact is needed from the outset.

Scope the policy context: Place as much emphasis on gaining a broad understanding of what is going on in relevant national and international policy in relation to your topic, and the evolving questions and hot topics from a policy and practice perspective, as you do on the current state of academic knowledge. Speak to representatives of stakeholder groups in the policy and practice arenas, and consult grey literature alongside academic literature. Cover this in any background text you provide to applicants, and frame the research themes, and the language you are using, in line with what you find.

Fund diverse consortia with a range of skills: Publicise the research call beyond academia, and look for research consortia that include think tanks, non-governmental organisations (NGOs), trusted local partners, private companies and other actors alongside traditional academic institutions. Consider not just the technical expertise of research partners, but also their networks and main audiences: who tends to pay attention to what they have to say? If you are aiming to fund research that will directly influence policy audiences or processes, look for partners with an established relationship with their stated audience, or consortia that directly involve representatives of that group from the outset. Partners known for high-quality, innovative communications materials, strong media engagement and other skills are also an asset.

Include relevant country or context experts in the review panel: Too often, research call review panels only involve technical experts who may have little understanding of the

country context or policy landscape where the proposed research is to take place. Research donors must ensure that individuals with this knowledge are included in the review process – their input is invaluable for understanding whether the right stakeholders are on board, for instance, and can help assess whether opportunities and entry points highlighted in proposals are legitimate.

Manage your own expectations: Policy development is complex and dynamic, and you cannot expect to see rapid impact from every piece of research you fund. Sometimes impact can be swift and traced relatively easily, such as when it successfully targets a specific, short-term policy change. For example, the impact of an action-research project in Ahmedabad, India, that provided the evidence base and technical support for developing a Heat Action Plan with the municipal authorities, is easily traced.² Often, however, the outcomes of research may not become apparent for several years, making attribution and contribution difficult to identify. For instance, it is difficult to determine the degree to which a national submission to the 21st Conference of the Parties (COP21), which reflected evidence from a CDKN research project, had been influenced by that research. Furthermore, it can be detrimental and unethical to incentivise partners to overstate the impact of a piece of research. A sense that research has played a role in positive change, based on anecdotal evidence such as acknowledgement and appreciation among a target audience, may be the best evidence of impact you can expect to see.

Be flexible, and accept and learn from your failures: Innovative research aiming to influence an evolving policy context is riskier, and the routes to impact more unpredictable, than research primarily seeking to advance academic knowledge. Flexibility is needed throughout implementation to allow researchers to respond to political changes and other challenges, and to emerging opportunities. Inevitably, within a large portfolio, some projects will encounter problems, or may even collapse completely. This needs to be accepted, and learned from, as a research programme evolves.

Endnotes

1 Tilley, H., Shaxson, L., Young, J., Rea, J. and Ball, L. (2017) '10 things to know about how to influence policy with research'. ODI Briefing Paper. London: Overseas Development Institute (www.odi.org/publications/10671-10-things-know-about-how-influence-policy-research).

2 Bhatt, M. (2016) 'Severe heat wave grips India: Authorities can draw insights from Ahmedabad's experience'. ReliefWeb (<http://reliefweb.int/report/india/feature-severe-heat-wave-grips-india-authorities-can-draw-insights-ahmedabad-experience>).

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