

From evidence to action

Five lessons on strengthening research uptake to prevent violence against children

BACKGROUND

When the Evaluation Fund was founded in 2011, much of the evidence used to design childhood violence prevention programs in the Global South originated from research developed in high-income countries and reflected Western settings.¹ To address this evidence gap and ensure contextually relevant and culturally appropriate interventions, over the last decade the Evaluation Fund has supported 22 research projects in 17 low- and middle-income countries that examine what works to prevent violence against children.

However, conducting high-quality, rigorous research is only half the battle. For impact, research must reach policymakers, practitioners, funders and decision-makers who can use it to develop evidence-based programming and policies to prevent violence against children at scale.

Over the years, the Fund has placed increasing emphasis on building the evidence-to-action pipeline, so that supported research advances the reforms needed in both policy and practice. As opposed to only focusing on the dissemination of findings, the Evaluation Fund has sought to build pathways for research uptake: a bridge between research, policy and practice that is built and nurtured over the full duration of a project – from inception to publication and beyond.

Research uptake is not about a one-off dissemination tactic, nor is it about communication products. Rather, research uptake marks a fundamental shift in the way research is commissioned and implemented. By putting the end users in

the driver's seat, it breaks down the knowledge hierarchies that can separate research, policy and practice, and it takes a broader perspective on research objectives by incorporating evidence utilization as a pillar.

In October 2020, the Evaluation Fund established an accompaniment program to assist project partners with defining their own pathways for research uptake. This document presents five key lessons from this accompaniment program in the hope that the Fund's experience of promoting and supporting research uptake might inform others pursuing similar efforts.

APPROACH

In 2019, four evaluative research projects in Tanzania and Uganda were selected during the Evaluation Fund's third round of funding.² These two countries have made significant political commitments to ending violence against children, and these projects were selected for their quality and rigor as well as their relevance to, and connections with, national-level advocacy and policy-making related to childhood violence prevention. Each of the four evaluation projects was led in partnership between a non-governmental organization implementing a childhood violence prevention program, and a research organization conducting an evaluation of it. In turn, evaluation findings inform not only the program, but also the wider violence prevention field operating at national and sub-national level in Tanzania and Uganda.

¹ World Health Organization & WHO Collaborating Centre for Violence Prevention. (2010). Violence prevention: the evidence. World Health Organization. <https://apps.who.int/iris/handle/10665/77936>

² Explore these four projects and their findings on the Evaluation Fund website: <https://theevaluationfund.org/2022/08/15/latest-findings-from-tanzania-and-uganda/>

To support these four projects in reaching their desired impact, the Evaluation Fund put in place a one-year accompaniment program that focused specifically on research uptake. The accompaniment program consisted of eight full-cohort sessions, as well as one-to-one mentoring. Each of the sessions and mentoring meetings were attended by both the researchers and practitioners. While the sessions provided the content and actionable steps necessary for developing a research uptake strategy, the mentoring meetings allowed partners to dive into project-specific questions and grapple with the challenges faced when working through the design and implementation of these strategies.

This accompaniment program was led by an external research uptake expert based in East Africa, with experience in the child rights and violence prevention field. She was supported by a trained facilitator, experienced in supporting complex multi-stakeholder partnerships.

By the end of the program, each project team had developed a robust research uptake strategy, where they outlined a coherent pathway for how the evidence built through their evaluation would be used to inform policy and practice. Most project partners have since incorporated research uptake as a strategic pillar in other projects. In some cases, the research uptake strategy templates have been adopted at an organizational level and integrate research uptake into their wider strategy.

OBJECTIVES

- Build connections between project partners, Fund staff, and facilitators.
- Deepen collective understanding of research uptake and clarify the pathways for how research informs and influences policy and practice.
- Strengthen the researcher-practitioner relationships required to drive evidence utilization.

OUTCOMES

- Develop project-specific research uptake strategies using a structured template.

SESSIONS

- Introduction to project teams and partners: What are the obstacles and opportunities for participating in and collaborating on this research project?
- **Workshop 1: Theory, objectives and stakeholder engagement***
- **Workshop 2: Messaging and activities***
- Researcher-practitioner partnerships: The drivers, challenges and opportunities
- **Workshop 3: Finalizing strategies and defining timelines, tasks and responsibilities***
- South Africa's Violence Prevention Forum: An example of research uptake in practice
- **Workshop 4: Monitoring, evaluation and learning***
- Open space: Exchanging on challenges, solutions, and the road ahead in violence prevention and research

* Longer workshops dedicated to developing tailored research uptake strategies.

FIVE LESSONS ON RESEARCH UPTAKE

1. **Do not assume that “research uptake” means the same thing to everyone. Create a collective definition that clarifies what it looks like in practice.** Since the concept and framing of research uptake are still relatively new, differing definitions can be confusing and limiting. The first workshop was devoted to developing a common definition of research uptake and differentiating it from traditional thinking around evidence dissemination

“ Prior to the sessions, we did not have a clear understanding of the difference between planning research uptake and simply disseminating study findings. ”*

2. **If building capacity is the goal, choose an accompaniment program over a one-off workshop.** The Fund recognized that shifting away from traditional dissemination strategies to adopt a research uptake approach

*All quotes have been extracted from an anonymous feedback survey completed by project partners who participated in the accompaniment program.

would demand practice, time and resources. It required both funders and project partners to dismantle existing assumptions in order to articulate a new set of objectives for evidence utilization and a clear pathway for implementation. A one-off workshop would not have afforded sufficient time to clarify the concept of research uptake, and its practical application would have remained difficult.

“ The process required several brainstorming sessions and constant revision to have a refined research uptake strategy. We had to rework it several times.*

3. Research uptake is a process, not a product. It is commonly assumed that research uptake begins once the research is complete and the findings are ready for dissemination. It is seen as an output rather than a long-term process that spans the full course of the research design, implementation, analysis and reporting.

Initiating this accompaniment program well before the completion of the research helped partners identify their research uptake objectives and target stakeholders, as well as the messages and activities required to align with and inform stakeholder needs. For example, partners were able to engage target policymakers from the beginning, helping to ensure buy-in and acceptability of findings and facilitating advocacy for policy intervention.

Ideally, the policymakers and practitioners that projects seek to influence are involved before research questions are developed. Inviting target stakeholders to the table from the start ensures that the research questions are relevant to policy and practice and secures stakeholder buy-in and engagement. In the case of this accompaniment program, it would have been more useful had it begun at the proposal stage, so that research uptake was an integral part of their overall study objectives.

“ Research uptake ought to be part of each stage of project development. Start with the end in mind. We need to think of the audience right from the research design.*

4. Research uptake is about relationships: trust and collaboration must be built between researchers, practitioners and policymakers throughout the research process. More often than not, researchers and practitioners work independently of each other. Collaboration is critical to ensuring that relevant research is conducted, and that findings are informed by and shared with the right people at the right times, before, during and after the study period.

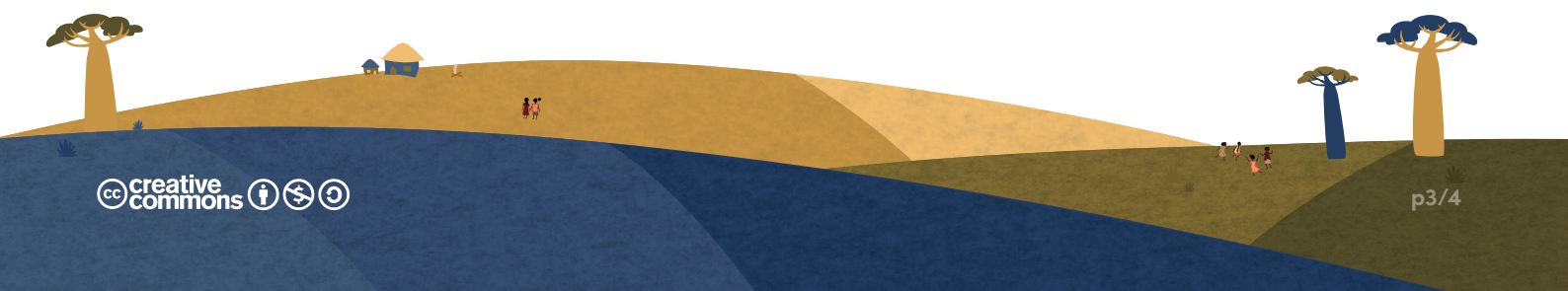
Although workshops and mentoring sessions mainly focused on developing research uptake strategies, they also emphasized the relational elements required for success, including the importance of cross-project and cross-sectoral partnerships. For example, one workshop reflected on what researchers and practitioners need from each other to ensure that their evidence influences the right stakeholders. A separate discussion on the subject of stakeholder analysis allowed project partners to identify relevant policymakers who they subsequently included in reference groups and feedback sessions throughout their studies.

“ The sessions, particularly the researcher-practitioner partnership session, improved our working relationship with our partner organization.*

5. Research uptake requires deliberate financial planning. Research uptake planning should begin at the proposal stage and must be included in the overall research budget. A major challenge for all project partners was a lack of adequate resourcing for their research uptake strategies, which had been developed after project approval and budget allocation. This limited the activities they could realistically implement. Incorporating a research uptake strategy into the project design will ensure sufficient funding for these activities from the very start.

“ We have inadequate budget to implement some of the research uptake activities that we had not anticipated during the early project design. Earlier development of the research uptake plan is key and enables budgeting for its implementation.*

*All quotes have been extracted from an anonymous feedback survey completed by project partners who participated in the accompaniment program.



CONCLUSION

For research to be taken up, it must be designed with the end user in mind and at the table. While there are many studies exploring what works to prevent violence against children, too few of these are commissioned, designed and implemented to respond to the needs of practitioners and policymakers.

The Fund's accompaniment program offers useful lessons for those designing and implementing studies on violence prevention who wish to ensure that results inform policy and practice. These lessons can also inform future funding efforts for evaluations, which demand a great deal of intention and deliberate resourcing alongside strong multi-stakeholder relationships. It is hoped that the Fund's experience helps researchers and practitioners advocate effectively to end all forms of childhood violence.

“ We’ve learned that the research uptake plan gives meaning to the research. Without a research uptake strategy, the research outcomes are limited, scattered, and hard to measure.*

“ Our organization now appreciates the relevance of research uptake and has gone a step further to integrate it in all research projects. Certainly, there is a steep learning curve ahead, but it is a great start. The sessions were impactful.*

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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We extend our gratitude to our research uptake expert, Dr. Lina Digolo, who led this accompaniment program. Her extensive knowledge of the violence against children sector, her background as both a researcher and practitioner, and her enthusiasm and support made learning about research uptake enjoyable and impactful. We also thank our fantastic facilitator Dr. Rebecca Freeth, who ensured that sessions were engaging, inclusive and fun despite being held online during a global pandemic.

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LEARN MORE

If you would like to learn more about the Evaluation Fund, this accompaniment program, or supported evaluation projects, please get in touch: giulia.barnhisel@gmail.com

theevaluationfund.org



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