# Overcoming barriers to research use in international development organisations: learning from an action research project

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# Overcoming barriers to research use in international development organisations: learning from an action research project

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**ABSTRACT**
Development policymakers and practitioners face a range of challenges to using research. This paper draws on an action research project that aimed to investigate the individual and organisational drivers that contribute to, or inhibit, greater use of research in international development organisations, and test strategies to shift them. We convened a group of practitioners and researchers from 12 diverse international development organisations to undertake action research projects within their own organisations. Analysis of the portfolio of action research projects identified five organisational factors which are the basis for improving research use and 15 practical strategies for implementing organisational change. Taken together, these organisational factors and strategies can assist in improving the integration of research in international development organisations and support more evidence-based policy, programming, and advocacy.

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## Introduction

Over the last few decades, there has been an increasing emphasis in many parts of the world on using evidence – including research evidence – to inform policy and practice (see White 2019 for a useful survey). As a result, there is now greater understanding of the factors that support or inhibit the use of research in different contexts and the multiple influences on decision-making (see Walter, Nutley, and Davies 2005; Oliver et al. 2014; Breckon and Dodson 2016; Oliver and Cairney 2019; see also Muirhead et al. 2017; Kung and Kamp 2018). For example, it is now understood that research use is not a linear process, and concepts such as knowledge "transfer" are being replaced by discussions of the complex range of factors that shape how and when research is used to inform policy and practice (Davies, Nutley, and Walter 2008; Smith and Joyce 2012). There is also a growing recognition that research use – including the kinds of knowledge that are valued and "whose knowledge counts" – is closely linked to issues of power and politics (see e.g. Porter 2010; Eyben et al. 2015; Weyrauch, Echt, and Suliman 2016; Pankhurst 2017; Chambers 2017). Policymakers and practitioners who want to use research therefore encounter a range of challenges to doing so.

Some of these challenges are about how organisations – and individuals within them – value research and what incentives they have to use research. Others are about how individual knowledge and skills, and organisational capacity, systems, and processes facilitate or inhibit research use (Clar

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et al. 2011; Newman, Fisher, and Shaxson 2012; Jones et al. 2012; Langer et al. 2015; Shaxson et al. 2016). While there is a significant body of literature highlighting the importance of individual and organisational factors in improving research use, as both Nutley, Walter, and Davies (2007) and Langer, Tripney, and Gough (2016) suggest, there are relatively few studies on effective approaches to organisational change aimed at improving research use (for examples see Wills et al. 2016; Stewart et al. 2018).

The international development sector has in many ways embraced a more evidence-informed approach (see e.g. Court, Hovland, and Young 2005; Carden 2009; Jones et al. 2012; Eyben et al. 2015; Georgalakis et al. 2017). However, the increasing politicisation of development aid, depletion of development expertise within some aid agencies (Teskey 2022; Corbett 2019), a focus on visible and quantifiable "results", and shrinking aid budgets pose challenges for the generation and use of high quality evidence in development policy and practice.

In recognition of this, we convened a group of practitioners and researchers from international development organisations in Australia to undertake action research into the individual and organisational drivers, incentives and ways of working that contribute to, or inhibit, greater use of research in international development organisations and what works to shift these.[1] We accompanied the group throughout the ten-month process of undertaking their action research projects, supporting them to reflect on what they were learning and documenting insights and lessons from across the projects. This paper captures the learning that emerged from the project, adding valuable insights from practice about how efforts to improve research use can be approached in different organisational contexts. We begin by briefly outlining our methodology. We then introduce a framework for understanding the key organisational factors influencing research use that is based on what emerged from the action research projects. We use this framework to present the key challenges to research use that research advocates identified and the strategies they tested through their action research projects, illustrating these with examples from the different projects. We conclude by outlining the key lessons to be drawn about improving research use in international development organisations.

## Methodology

To identify organisations to be involved in the project, we issued an Expression of Interest (EOI) to Australian-headquartered international non-government organisations (INGOs) with development programs in the Asia-Pacific, consultancy firms that manage development programs on behalf of the Australian government, and Australian universities which conduct research on international development issues. In addition to sharing the EOI on our website, social media accounts, and in our newsletter, we also sent targeted invitations to just under 50 organisations. The EOI asked organisations to propose teams of three "research advocates" who were staff members from their organisations to be involved in an action research project to trial different strategies for improving how research is used to inform practice and policy within their organisations. It also asked them to provide information about what they saw as some of the main impediments to more effective research–policy–practice links, why they were interested in being part of the project, and how their organisation would support their participation. A total of 17 organisations applied and 12 were selected based on the quality of their applications and the degree of organisational support and with a view to ensuring representation of different organisation types and sizes. The 12 organisations included four consultancy firms, four INGOs, three Australian universities, one Australian government agency, and one Pacific-based intergovernmental organisation. Approximately 45 people from across these organisations were involved in the research, although this fluctuated throughout the project as staff members changed roles or left organisations.[2] They represented a mixture of staff, including those involved in managing programs, those in more policy- or strategy-oriented roles, and those involved in leading or undertaking research. Most were at middle management level, although a small number of more senior staff were involved.

Each organisation was accompanied by a facilitator. The facilitation team was responsible for planning and delivering three project-wide workshops involving research advocates from across all the organisations, accompanying research advocate teams as they implemented their action research projects, and supporting critical reflection, learning, and knowledge exchange across all the action research projects. Throughout the project, the facilitation team recorded notes and reflections from discussions with the research advocates from the 12 organisations, and documented discussions at the three workshops. At the end of the project we also conducted interviews with the research advocate team from each of the organisations.[3] The facilitation team analysed this primary data to identify emerging ideas, which were shared with research advocates at key points throughout the research process for review, feedback, and discussion. The action research process is described in more detail below.

## *Action research as an approach to organisational change*

Action research is a systematic and cyclical process of observing, planning, acting, reflecting, learning and sharing (Coghlan and Brannick 2010; Greenwood and Levin 1998; Reason and Bradbury 2001). It is based on the premise that informed and incremental practical changes undertaken as part of an inquiry process can generate knowledge to improve practice. Doing action research in organisations can contribute to new ideas about organisational change and provide a way of trialling practices that contribute to this change.

Within the project, action research cycles were implemented at two levels. In individual organisations, the action research process was led by the teams of research advocates, with support from the facilitation team. The facilitation team also led a process of action research across the project as a whole. This project-level action research involved iterative cycles of planning, action, reflection, learning, and sharing with research advocates.

## *Planning*

At the first project-wide workshop, the facilitation team introduced a problem-driven approach to political economy analysis (Harris 2013; Fritz, Kaiser, and Levy 2009). This aimed to provide research advocates with a tool to help unpack the constraints and opportunities for research use within their organisations as a basis for designing their action research projects.[4] At the workshop, research advocates used this approach to analyse the political economy of research use in the international development sector in Australia, contributing insights from their own knowledge and experience. This included identifying structural or systemic constraints such as organisational processes, practices, and norms that limit research use, as well as how individual and organisational incentives and behaviours shape how and when research is used. Research advocates also identified possible ways to address these constraints. During the workshop, the facilitation team also outlined the action research approach and worked with research advocates as they began planning their action research projects.

Following the workshop, the research advocate teams used a political economy lens to analyse the opportunities and constraints around research use within their own organisations, identifying specific enablers and challenges for research use, which they intended to strengthen or shift. Some teams undertook this analysis themselves, while others used surveys and interviews to seek input from across their organisations. They also established short, medium, and/or long-term goals for improving research use at the team or organisational level.

## *Action and reflection*

The research advocate teams then began implementing the activities they had planned to improve research use, meeting regularly with each other to reflect on progress and adapt their activities in response. The facilitation team also held regular "check-ins" with each of the teams to support them to reflect on what they were learning from their projects, prompt further action, and help trouble-shoot challenges. The facilitation team also kept action research logs for each project to track emerging insights, lessons, and challenges.

At a project-wide second workshop, research advocates shared what they were learning through their individual projects. The facilitation team drew on these insights – together with the action research logs – to compile and categorise emergent ideas about key factors driving research use across different organisations and to develop a framework to describe emerging findings. This was shared with research advocate teams at the third project-wide workshop. The finalised framework is the result of this this iterative process (see Figure 1).

The framework outlines five organisational factors which are the basis for improved research use within organisations: authorising environment,[5] research culture, relationships, capabilities and capacity, and systems and funding. These factors shape what research and research use means in organisations and influences the likely success of efforts to improve research use. The framework also presents strategies for improving research use in organisations, derived from the project

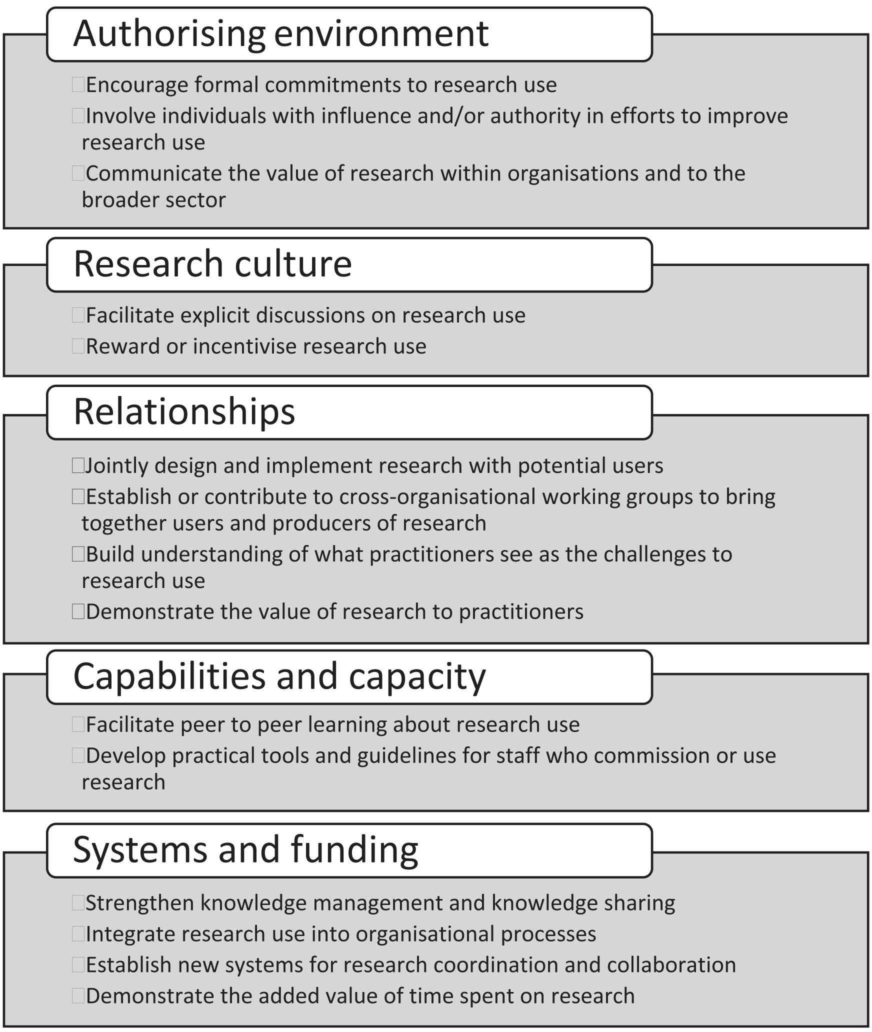


**Figure 1.** Strategies for improving research use in international development organisations.

experience. These emerged from the action research projects as the building blocks for strengthening research use.

## Organisational factors shaping research use

The following factors were identified across the portfolio of action research projects as being fundamental building blocks in enabling research use within organisations. These are in keeping with much of the wider literature on research use and uptake and provide a useful map for organisations about what building blocks they need to have in place or strengthen in order to better integrate research into their work.

### *A supportive authorising environment*

The authorising environment for research use encompasses both the formal and informal authority and support for research use within organisations (Andrews, Pritchett, and Woolcock 2016). In INGOs, for example, a mission statement or organisational strategy may provide formal authority for research use by referring explicitly to how the organisation will use knowledge. Informal authority may come from individuals or groups of individuals within an organisation who value research and therefore provide greater support for program or policy staff to spend time on research and analysis, or invest their own time in engaging with it.

In the workshops, research advocates observed that formal authority and informal support for research use varies between organisations, and within organisations, including over time. They felt that the presence of an authorising environment within individual organisations was linked to the value perceived to be placed on research in the wider international development sector. This includes how donors and others who fund research, as well as in-country partners, communities, and the general public, are perceived to value research (see also Shaxson et al. 2016; Stewart, Langer, and Erasmus 2019). They therefore observed that valuing of research is thus not consistent across the sector and varies over time. When asked during the workshop to characterise the authorising environment within their own organisations, some research advocate teams felt that it supported research use, while others thought a stronger mandate and high-level commitment was needed, as one research advocate stated: "We can focus on research for impact, but we still need to bring it back to the internal and external environment. In some cases, focusing on the internal authorising environment is best."

In their action research projects, teams used several different strategies to promote a more supportive authorising environment. This included encouraging formal commitments to research use in existing organisational policies, procedures or processes, or promoting its inclusion in new policies and procedures (see also Shaxson et al. 2016; Breckon and Dodson 2016, 27); involving individuals with influence and/or authority within the organisation in efforts to improve research use (see also Shaxson et al. 2016; Breckon and Dodson 2016, 20–21); and communicating the value of research within organisations and to the broader sector.

One of the action research projects, for example, involved research advocates from an INGO engaging in a national strategic planning process with the aim of encouraging a strategic commitment to research and learning in the new plan. The team was able to raise the importance of knowledge and learning as a key organisational value in staff and management discussions about the strategy, and initiate conversations to explore the diverse perspectives and organisational drivers that influence how research is used and valued in different parts of the organisation. As a result, the new strategic plan refers to knowledge and learning at a high level, with the wording of the underlying policy and procedure documents giving a mandate and scope to further embed specific commitments to knowledge and learning in practice. While it remains to be seen whether such high-level commitments in policy lead to a valuing of research and its use in practice, the research advocates felt the authorising space that it provided was a necessary step towards that goal.

Research advocates from another INGO worked on formalising an existing informal research committee comprising staff from across the organisation. In seeking members for the research committee, the research advocates targeted individuals in management positions who would be able to provide support and legitimacy for the work of the committee and potentially influence behaviours and processes around research use within their teams and more broadly across the organisation.

### *A culture that supports research use*

The research culture of an organisation can be understood as the values, ideas, and assumptions about research and research use which shape how people within the organisation – and the organisation as a whole – behave (adapted from Cartwright and Cooper 1993, 60; see also Langer et al. 2015; Shaxson et al. 2016). In workshop sessions, the key issues raised by research advocates about the research culture within their organisations centred on differences in understanding and valuing of research, and a lack of incentives. For example, research advocates from INGOs and consultancy firms felt that there was often too much of a focus on producing research evidence to meet reporting or compliance needs or to tell "good news stories" to funders, rather than as a way of incorporating learning into programs or giving voice to community concerns (see also Fransman and Newman 2019). They also identified differences between how research was seen within INGO head offices and how it was seen in field offices. University research advocates noted that research in academic settings did not always have a strong focus on application, although this was changing, with performance metrics now focusing more on the "impact" of research (see also Muirhead et al. 2017, 24).

During the workshops, research advocates also observed that the status or value assigned to different forms of evidence and ways of knowing within and across organisations is uneven (see also Shaxson et al. 2016). For example, they reported that local knowledge was often seen as less credible (see also Althaus 2020) and that evidence produced by researchers or technical specialists was given greater weight in decision-making than the knowledge of practitioners. As one research advocate expressed it: "There is lots of power and politics involved in defining what is sufficient evidence to inform policy and programmes. Local voices … tend to get lost." Research advocates also discussed the fact that quantitative research methodologies, such as randomised control trials, were often seen as more reliable than qualitative or participatory approaches.[6] Finally, they suggested that there are few formal incentives for staff in INGOs or consultancy firms to use research (see also Langer et al. 2015; Kung and Kamp 2018, 22–23). For example, research use is often not included in the position descriptions of program and/or policy staff or in their work plans and is not assessed as part of performance appraisals.

Strategies that research advocate teams used to promote the development of a culture supportive of research use in their action research projects included facilitating explicit discussions on research and research use and what this means to the organisation, as well as rewarding or incentivising dissemination or use of research (see also Shaxson et al. 2016; Breckon and Dodson 2016, 8, 26). For example, one of the INGO research advocate teams convened a committee to develop a framework setting out core principles for the research it conducts. This included how research connects to programming and advocacy, how and why the organisation partners with different types of research organisations, and what kinds of research approaches the organisation considers important. This approach had helped promote greater discussion of the link between research and practice, as one of the research advocates observed: "The project has motivated staff to come together to discuss and improve practice". The research advocate team from one of the consultancy firms initiated an employee award for the "Best bit of learning shared with a colleague", nominated and voted for by staff, which was presented at a monthly staff meeting. This introduced an incentive – in the form of peer recognition – for staff to share knowledge and learning, as well as signalling to staff that this was something the organisation valued.

### *Relationships to enhance research use*

In workshop sessions, research advocates consistently pointed to relationships as central to enabling research use in their organisations. The relationships needed to encourage and sustain research use include both formal and informal connections between research producers and research users. Formal connections might include contractual relationships or institutional partnerships with researchers, while informal connections centre more on personal relationships and professional networks. For research advocates, key challenges included limited links or collaborations between researchers, practitioners and policymakers and, in many organisations, a structural separation between staff who commission or produce research and staff engaged in policy development, advocacy, or programming. As one research advocate observed: "Partnerships and ownership of the research make a big difference in how [research findings] get circulated and used. Co-creation [of research] with end-users is the best way to create research impact, but it is often difficult to do."

Strategies that research advocate teams used to strengthen the relationships needed to encourage and sustain research use in their action research projects included jointly designing and implementing research with potential users, including collaborative arrangements between faculties and universities and between program and technical teams in INGOs and consultancy firms (see also Datta 2012; Breckon and Dodson 2016; Langer, Tripney, and Gough 2016; Kung and Kamp 2018, 3, 12–13). It also included establishing or contributing to cross-organisational working groups or communities of practice to bring together users and producers of research and build relationships, foster connections and encourage collaboration (see also Walter, Nutley, and Davies 2005; Langer, Tripney, and Gough 2016).

For example, research advocates from one INGO established a knowledge translation working group involving staff from different departments, including senior staff. This has helped build links between staff responsible for research, policy and advocacy, and programming across the organisation, as one research advocate expressed it: "The project has prompted us to take a cross-team approach, which is counter to the "siloing" between programmes and teams that is quite typical in our organisation".

### *Capabilities and capacity for research use*

The capabilities and capacity for research use reside in an organisation's human resources – the skills and knowledge of staff, staffing levels, and whether staff have enough time to facilitate research use. Key challenges that research advocates identified during workshops included limited time to engage with research, reflect on its implications, or engage with potential users of research (see also Clar et al. 2011; Kung and Kamp 2018, 23) and a need to build staff knowledge and skills in understanding, facilitating, and assessing research use (see also Newman, Fisher, and Shaxson 2012; Kung and Kamp 2018, 21).

Strategies that research advocate teams used to build capabilities and strengthen capacity for research use in their research projects included facilitating peer-to-peer learning about research use and impact across teams or organisations and developing practical tools and guidelines for staff or partners who commission or use research (see also Breckon and Dodson 2016, 25). The opportunity to learn from peers was valued, as one research advocate revealed: "Sharing of ideas and seeing how others are addressing their challenges – learning from others has been of particular interest for us as it allows us to review and improve our own approaches and thought processes".

The action research projects of the two universities involved in the project included activities to develop researchers' skills and knowledge in understanding and promoting research use. The key strategy in both projects was peer-to-peer learning. Research advocates from one of the universities hosted a series of workshops to examine how university researchers understand research impact and explore the different pathways to use and impact. Another university organised networking forums at which researchers shared their experiences of research engagement and impact and considered ways to strengthen their approaches.

Research advocates from one of the INGOs developed practical guidance for staff, including processes for commissioning research, minimum standards for research, and a detailed framework against which to assess research proposals. This aimed to address the capacity and capability barriers that had prevented staff from engaging with research.

### Systems and funding for research use

The systems and funding to enable research use include formal policies, procedures and processes as well as informal practices ("the way we do things here"). Systems and funding for research use include how knowledge is managed and shared, how decisions are made, how teams work together, and how funding is allocated and channelled. The challenges that research advocates reported in workshops ranged across these issues. Key issues raised with regard to systems included a lack of mechanisms for sharing knowledge regularly and systematically across organisations (see also Oliver et al. 2014; Head 2016); misalignment between timeframes for policy or program development and research timeframes or funding cycles (see also Clar et al. 2011; Oliver et al. 2014); a lack of organisation-specific policies, procedures, and guidance on how and when to undertake, commission, or use research, or how to promote research use; and limited consideration of research use in research projects. There is also limited funding for activities designed to promote research use (see also Muirhead et al. 2017, 41). Moreover, including for collaborative or co-produced research and funding is often focused on individual research projects rather than on longer term partnerships that would support better use of research. As one research advocate observed, "Funding buckets are limited and tied to projects. This limits the opportunities for longer, more in depth research" (see also Muirhead et al. 2017, 41).

Strategies that research advocates used to strengthen systems and funding to enable better use of research in their research projects included improving knowledge management and knowledge-sharing mechanisms, tools and practices; integrating research use into organisational processes around research, monitoring, and evaluation, including funding for activities related to research dissemination and use (see also Muirhead et al. 2017, 30–34); and establishing new systems to strengthen coordination and collaboration around research, including with partners and field offices or programs.

For example, research advocates from one of the consultancy firms helped strengthen mechanisms for sharing knowledge between head office and in-country staff by contributing to an organisation-wide community of practice on gender, including through an online forum. Using this platform, the team was able to encourage discussion about how members of the community of practice use research, and what they find most useful. The team from one of the INGOs focused on demonstrating ways to improve sharing and use of research findings both within the organisation and externally. The team established a knowledge translation working group involving senior representatives from three different departments within the organisation. They then used a specific research project to test ways to improve research use. This included mapping potential research users (internal and external) and adding tasks and funding for research use in the terms of reference for the study (see also Muirhead et al. 2017, 28–29).

These five organisational factors emerged from the action research projects as providing the necessary foundation for research use in international development organisations. However, each of these factors involves considerable effort to address and can seem daunting to those looking to improve research use in the more immediate term. In light of this, the action research team also distilled ten practical strategies that research advocates employed to make progress towards achieving these organisational factors.

## Practical steps to improve research use

The action research projects contributed practical insights into the organisational incentives, drivers, and ways of working that support or inhibit the use of research in international development organisations. They have also shed light on the kinds of strategies that can be used to help address these challenges and shift individual and organisational behaviours, norms, and practices around research use. Most of the projects addressed two or more of the key organisational factors influencing research use. This reflects the fact that the determinants of research use are often interlinked, and that improving research use requires a multi-faceted approach (see also Walter, Nutley, and Davies 2005; Stewart, Langer, and Erasmus 2019). Some projects addressed these simultaneously, while others proceeded in a more incremental way, trialling strategies to address one factor before moving on to another.

Analysis of the portfolio of action research projects suggests a number of key lessons on how to improve research use and implement organisational change. These draw together the main factors that enabled the research advocate teams to successfully initiate change.

### *Start small*

The action research projects demonstrated that there is value in starting with a single issue or a small activity to test organisational appetite and see what might work, as one research advocate reflected: "The action research process gave us permission to identify what we think is a problem, take small actions, including observing, then come back and refine the project, reassess, and take new action" (see also Andrews, Pritchett, and Woolcock 2016). Most of the action research projects were not overly ambitious in their initial aims and scope. Rather, they involved activities or adaptations that teams could integrate into their day-to-day work. This was particularly important given that all teams took on the action research projects in addition to their existing workloads.

### *Work on organisation-specific challenges incrementally*

Although many of the challenges to research use were common across organisations, they looked quite different in different organisational environments. Using a problem-driven political economy analysis approach helped research advocates to understand the specific challenges for research use in their own organisations and identify realistic entry points for triggering change.

Several of the action research projects involved initial interviews, conversations, or surveys to "map" the needs and expectations of different stakeholders. For many of the teams, the process of undertaking this analysis was useful in stimulating wider conversations, surfacing different viewpoints, and challenging assumptions. It also helped to identify small, practical changes that could be implemented within organisations, rather than trying to confront larger obstacles in the wider sector, as one research advocate observed: "Looking at the impact of research is always challenging. We don't have a single solution for this, and it is a process we are working through". This is in keeping with political economy-informed approaches which suggest breaking large – and potentially overwhelming – problems down into sub-causes that are more amenable to change is a useful approach (see also Andrews, Pritchett, and Woolcock 2017; Samji et al. 2018, 18).

### *Take advantage of change and disruption*

Experience from the action research projects suggests that processes of organisational change provide opportunities to influence strategic decisions around research and research use. Several of the research advocate teams took advantage of recent or ongoing strategic planning processes, organisational restructures, or program and policy reviews to introduce new or strengthen existing ideas and practices around research use. Disrupted environments offer opportunities where previously "unthinkable" options can become realistic possibilities (see Capoccia and Kelemen 2007; Weyrauch, Echt, and Suliman 2016, 34; Roche and Tarpey 2020), but they also require research advocates to be prepared to adapt and refocus as situations unfold.

### *Bring others along*

The action research projects suggest that efforts to improve research use need to be undertaken in a way that engages meaningfully with others within and outside the organisation. Meaningful engagement helps encourage collaboration, spread ideas, and build broader ownership of change (Andrews, Pritchett, and Woolcock 2017; Weyrauch, Echt, and Suliman 2016, 35–39). As the diversity across the action research projects shows, there is considerable variation between individuals and within and between organisations in perceptions of what constitutes "good" research and the purpose of research, as well as in capacity to engage potential users of research. This needs to be addressed incrementally. Experience from the action research projects suggests that forming teams which bring together individuals from different parts of an organisation can be useful in "unpacking" the different understandings and views within organisations and challenging some of the values, beliefs, and behaviours which undermine research use. Engaging staff from different departments can also help diffuse ideas and create a "critical mass".

A number of the action research projects also demonstrate the importance of having senior staff directly involved in efforts to improve research use (Weyrauch, Echt, and Suliman 2016, 47–49). This made it easier for research advocate teams to change direction or expand outreach, gave them access to decision-makers, and provided authority and legitimacy for their work. However, the results of the research projects also suggest that authority at the top alone is not enough. Rather, support for research use needs to be embedded at several levels, including with senior and middle managers, technical staff or advisers, and program managers, to result in organisation-wide changes in behaviour and practices.

### *Reflect and adapt*

Action research involves cycles of planning, implementing, reflecting, and adapting. This means that teams needed to be open to changing their assumptions about key challenges and opportunities – and what strategies might work – and adapting accordingly. Almost all the action research projects underwent revision along the way. Short- and medium-term goals were modified, and several teams altered the scope of their action research projects based on new insights and understandings of research and research use in their operational contexts, as one research advocate reflected: "Using a reflective approach has helped us shape and re-shape how we have tackled this assignment and re-calibrate for a better approach". This mirrors a wide body of research on how efforts to achieve change in international development more broadly must similarly be open to adaptation based on learning and changes in context (Andrews, Pritchett, and Woolcock 2017; Valters, Cummings, and Nixon 2016; Craney et al. 2022). In this way, changing internal organisational culture within development organisations shares many similarities with working towards change in the locations those organisations work. Both require an understanding of the political economy of the structures, norms, and interests that maintain the status quo, with change efforts having to navigate these.

The facilitation team played an important role in supporting teams to reflect and adapt, as one research advocate stated: "The mentoring has been really helpful in progressing our thinking and in shaping … our [action] research". The type of support provided by the facilitation team varied considerably between partners. For some teams, the regular check-ins kept them on track. For others, their facilitation team member acted as a critical friend, asking questions which prompted them to re-examine their assumptions, and supporting them to be realistic about what they could achieve. Some teams wanted to involve their facilitation team member more deeply in their action research project, while others preferred to work more independently.

## Conclusion

The strategies presented in this paper are intended to provide ideas and starting points which other practitioners and researchers can use to strengthen research use in their own organisations. One of the unique aspects of the action research project as a whole was that it brought multiple different types of organisations together to try out a range of strategies. As a result, the learning from this project is relevant to a wide range of organisations across government, private, not-for-profit, and university sectors.

Efforts to overcome barriers to research use are all the more important at a time when development aid has become increasingly politicised (Teskey 2022; Corbett 2019). In addition, in a more constrained funding environment, INGOs have been pushed to rely on the most effective fundraising advocacy, rather than the most evidence-informed. The learning presented in this paper can assist those championing the use of research and evidence in international development to pursue this within their own organisations and support more evidence-informed approaches to international development policy and practice at a time when it is sorely needed.

## Notes

1. For the purposes of the project, we adopted an applied understanding of research, defined as a process of investigation for the purposes of gaining knowledge, understanding, or evidence to contribute to change in theory, policy, or practice (adapted from Georgeou and Hawksley 2020, 3). This definition recognises that for most organisations involved in the project, the purpose of research is to develop new knowledge in international development and to inform how development is understood and practiced.
2. This was particularly acute for INGOs, many of which were forced to make staff redundant as a result of the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the international development sector.
3. Ethical approval for the project was provided by the La Trobe University Human Research Ethics Committee (HEC19347). Informed consent was obtained from all research advocates who participated in the project.
4. Political economy analysis is concerned with the political, economic, social, and cultural factors that shape how power and resources are distributed between different groups and individuals and how this changes (or stays the same) over time. A problem-driven approach to political economy analysis is helpful for understanding the underlying features of practical problems and for identifying pathways to change.
5. Following Andrews, Pritchett, and Woolcock (2016), “authorising environment” refers to both “formal” authority such as an organisation’s legal mandate as well as ‘informal’ authority such as organisational norms and practices and the support that key individuals provide for what organisations do and how they do it.
6. This topic is very much a live debate in international development (see for example Bédécarrats, Guérin, and Roubaud 2019; Barrett and Carter 2010; Ravallion 2012).

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