

Blog: The involvement of non-academic stakeholders in education research: perspectives from sub-Saharan Africa

This blog was written by Dr Rafael Mitchell, Research Associate at the University of Cambridge's [Research for Equitable Access and Learning \(REAL\) Centre](#), where he has been helping to develop the African Education Research Database (<https://essa-africa.org/AERD>) which consolidates research outputs from across the region. This blog was originally published on the [Impact Initiative website](#) on 3 October 2018.



Image: Participants at the 'Raising Learning Outcomes' Africa Symposium. Left-to-right: Mary Omingo (Aga Khan University, Kenya), Christine Adu-Yeboah (University of Cape Coast), Jenipher Mbukwa-Ngwira (Catholic University of Malawi), Dackermue Dolo (Innovations in Poverty Action, Liberia), Mekbib Alemu (University of Addis Ababa), Dorothy Nampota (University of Malawi). Taken by Rafael Mitchell.

Research which addresses the complex, real-life challenges of improving learning outcomes for disadvantaged groups in Africa benefits from the involvement of [a range of non-academic stakeholders](#). In a recent [blog](#) by Diana Dalton, the Deputy Director of DFID expressed her agency's desire to "make the rhetoric of equitable partnerships in research a reality." This entails, amongst other things, engaging non-academic stakeholders, including policy actors, practitioners, students and civil society organisations, in the process of research. Recognising the valuable contribution which such groups can bring to research – in terms of their knowledge and perspectives – is not only an issue of equity and quality, but also of *impact*. Research which aims to produce social change (rather than academic reports which sit on a shelf) must change ways of thinking. The production of research evidence cannot bring changes policy and practice unless there is a demand for that evidence and capacity to act upon it.

Last month I was fortunate enough to represent the [Impact Initiative](#) at the [Africa Symposium](#) of the ESRC-DFID-funded "[Raising Learning Outcomes in Education Systems](#)" (RLO) [research programme](#). This included fascinating presentations from ongoing projects in in

Botswana, Ethiopia, Ghana, Kenya, Liberia, Malawi, Niger, South Africa and Uganda. As well as learning more about research findings in the region, I took the opportunity to interview ten African researchers about their experiences working on this UK-funded research programme. The accounts of these researchers will inform the forthcoming [*IDS Bulletin: Exploring research-policy collaboration for societal impact*](#). Here, I want to focus in particular on one aspect of these discussions: the involvement of non-academic stakeholders in RLO projects.

Engaging non-academic stakeholders

All of the researchers interviewed explained that non-academic stakeholders had been involved in their work within the RLO programme. It was common for researchers to consult different stakeholder groups at the planning stages. For example, Christine Adu-Yeboah's study of the critical thinking skills of university students in Ghana began with such a meeting:

“At the start one of the things we did was a stakeholder consultation where we shared the research agenda and how we were going to go about it... We contacted the universities we thought we'd be using, in addition to others which we didn't really know...[and] persons from the Ministry of Education, some regulatory bodies, the National Council for Tertiary Education. Those are the stakeholders we engaged at the start of the project, before we even carried out the piloting.”

Preliminary discussions with national- and institutional-level actors were important for selecting and gaining access to research sites, as well generating interest in the forthcoming study and its implications for policy and practice.

In other areas, engaging with local communities is necessary to establish the legitimacy of the project and research team. This is especially important in rural Malawi, where strangers have faced attacks in recent years due to fear of [*vampires*](#). In travelling to remote areas for her study on the inclusive Early Childhood Education provision, Jenipher Mbukwa-Ngwira (Catholic University of Malawi) said that it was important, as much possible, *“to include [people] from the district, from local level...leaders in the communities. These ones are very vital. They have the voice that locals respect. Anything coming from their local authorities is respected, and you find it easy for them to buy into your project and accept it.”*

For long-term studies embedded in education systems and institutions, research teams must develop positive working relationships with all relevant stakeholder groups and clear expectations about the nature of the research. This can be a challenge, as Dackermue Dolo (Innovations in Poverty Action) reported in the context in Liberia. Dackermue's team is conducting a randomised control trial (RCT) to investigate the effects of the privatisation of primary schooling on student learning outcomes. *“We had a really energetic country director that worked on the relationship between partners, organisations and stakeholders,”* he explained, which was important, as the study requires working closely with the Ministry of Education in addition to eight private operators, whose schools have become research sites. Understanding the nature and limitations of the RCT methodology can be a challenge for non-researchers, as Dackermue came to realise:

“People do not easily understand the RCT, it takes time...So there's going to be a baseline, [...then] the first round of surveys...the second round of surveys, and possibly a third round

of surveys. It takes time to have the full result of this study. And what I think the Ministry wanted [was] a quick impact – something that will show some result now, and then they can scale up...I suddenly realised that the baseline result was being considered by people who never understood what this is. So this is one tricky thing about the RCT: people really don't easily understand...[that] you have to do again, do again, do again to have some full result come from that kind of empirical study."

Developing equitable partnerships with non-academic stakeholders requires anticipating and responding to such misunderstandings as they arise.

From engagement to dissemination and impact

Across the interviews, the desire of researchers to bring positive changes at the national, regional and/or institutional levels was clear. Non-academic stakeholders' involvement was seen as crucial for increasing the *impact* of research – an objective of all work funded within the RLO programme, which aims to produce policy- and practice-relevant evidence for raising learning outcomes. Non-academic project outputs included primary teacher training materials for dialogic Physics teaching in Ethiopia, and the incorporation of inclusive education training in national guidelines for early childhood caregivers in Malawi.

Some researchers are able to exert an influence on policy decisions by virtue of their positions. For example, Anthony Mugeere (Makerere University) who is investigating deaf education in Uganda, sits on a parliamentary committee for disabilities which includes representatives from civil society, academia, politicians and the private sector:

"We brainstorm on what are the issues that we should bring to the attention of Parliament. Is there any policy that urgently needs to be reviewed? Do we have any lessons to bring to this committee? Because of that, we are already making an impact."

Others researchers within the RLO programme were able to draw on project funding to organise dissemination events. For example, Mekbib Alemu's (Addis Ababa University) work was presented at a national stakeholder meeting receiving wide coverage in the national media. To share findings from her longitudinal study of the learning of low-income university students in South Africa, Mikateko Höppener (University of the Free State) has invited students to present at the dissemination event, *"because the stories can be more powerfully told by students themselves."*

Although more work is needed to draw clear lessons, it is evident that the involvement of non-academic stakeholders has enriched work within the RLO programme. Drawing on insights from African researchers, I am working with colleagues at the [REAL Centre](#) to identify and highlight best practices and challenges from across this ESRC-DFID funded programme in the hope of informing future research partnerships.

Related Projects:

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[Improving curriculum and teaching methods to influence policy and increase the quality of ECDE provision for children with disabilities in Malawi](#)

[Inclusive higher education learning outcomes for rural and township youth: developing a multi-dimensional capabilities-based higher education index](#)

[Literacy development with deaf communities using sign language, peer tuition, and learner-generated online content: sustainable educational innovation](#)

[Partnership schools for Liberia: impact on accountability mechanisms and education outcomes](#)

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