R2HC: RESEARCH UPTAKE GUIDANCE NOTE

INTRODUCTION

This document provides R2HC applicants and grantees with advice on developing clear and achievable uptake plans for their research projects[1] as part of a strategy to deliver research impact.

For R2HC, it is crucial that all funded work should have a measurable, positive impact on improving the public health response during humanitarian crises. This means that all research should be designed so that humanitarian stakeholders can and will access the evidence produced, understand it, trust it and be able to apply it to policy and practice. It is also important that, when possible, affected populations, local actors and beneficiaries are also engaged, so as to enable them to adopt evidence that may benefit their own recovery from crisis.

For this reason, it is expected that applicants set out clear plans for how research findings will reach key audiences, especially humanitarian practitioners and policy makers. R2HC requests applicants to dedicate a significant amount– in the region of 10% of the project budget, for uptake activities. Research teams (excepting formative studies) are expected to undertake a Research Impact workshop with R2HC (which may be delivered remotely), and will be expected to develop a Stakeholder Engagement Strategy for their research project; this sets out the target stakeholders and how they will be engaged in the findings through communications and knowledge translation activities.

Below, brief guidance is presented on four critical strands of research uptake and planning –
   (1) **stakeholder engagement**, (2) **capacity–building**, (3) **communicating** research findings, and (4) **monitoring and evaluation** of research uptake.[2]

The **Appendix** links to further resources and tools that can be used to design and implement research uptake plans in greater detail. As part of R2HC's support package, tools and resources are provided to support the development and delivery of research uptake and planning for impact.

DEFINING RESEARCH UPTAKE

Uptake includes *all the activities that facilitate and contribute to the adoption and utilisation of evidence by researchers, practitioners and other humanitarian actors*.

Uptake activities interact with processes including learning, monitoring and evaluation, and impact evaluation. A generic work flow emphasising this link is represented by Figure 1. However, it will always be necessary to adapt these broad principles to specific project contexts.

Critically, planning and monitoring for effective research uptake **must take place early on in the design of the project**, long before final research findings are available. All R2HC research teams

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[1] See http://www.Elrha.org/r2hc/home/ for a description of the R2HC programme.
[2] https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/514977/Research_uptake_guidance.pdf

(excepting formative studies) are expected to develop and refine
these plans during a Research Impact workshop, supported by R2HC. As emphasized below, stakeholder relationships, communication channels and the development of outputs for uptake all require careful forethought. Continual monitoring and revision of the engagement and communications strategy may be necessary throughout the project.
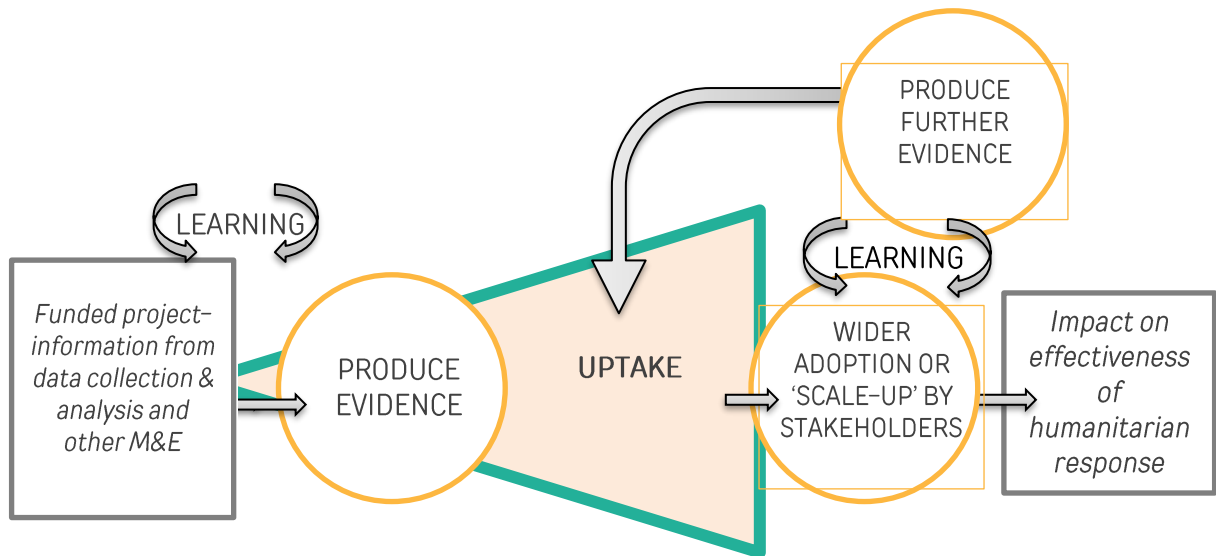

FIGURE 1: **Generic workflow emphasising uptake.** The orange shape indicates that uptake activities need to start at the beginning of a project and be ongoing.

STRANDS OF RESEARCH UPTAKE

Research uptake considerations can be divided into four general activity strands, identified by FCDO (previously DFID). These strands, shown in Figure 2 below, are: **(1) stakeholder engagement**, **(2) capacity building**, **(3) communication**, and the **(4) monitoring and evaluation of uptake**.

While the four strands are described separately, they are complementary to each other and should be considered in parallel. Likewise, while an uptake strategy should consider all four strands, the relative importance of different strands will differ between projects. Not all of the activities illustrated will be carried out by all projects, and other activities not shown will be important for some projects.

Tools, discussions and evidence for many aspects of these strands are available in academic and working papers, some listed in the Appendix. Grantees are also encouraged to contact the R2HC Research Impact Manager for further advice.
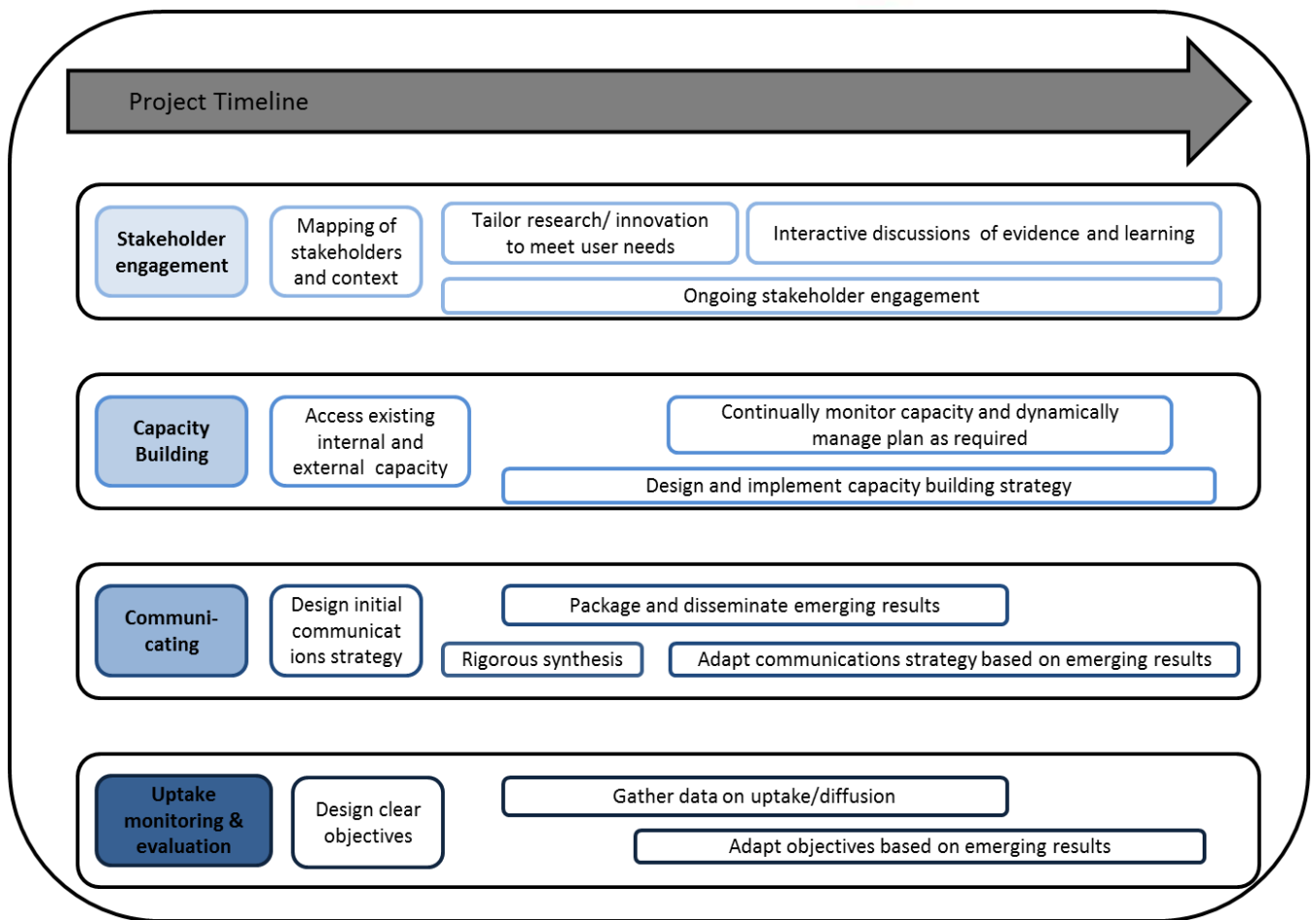
FIGURE 1: Strands of research uptake.

1. STAKEHOLDER ENGAGEMENT

When seeking to influence stakeholders' uptake of your research, good evidence is only part of the process – powerful stories and the building of real relationships with stakeholders, invested in from the earliest stages of a project, are also essential.[3] The successful spread of new research and innovation requires a range of relation assistance, including prioritisation from senior leadership; boundary-crossing intra- and inter-organisational interaction; targeted, persuasive communication; and investments in social interaction[4]. This means that determining who to influence, how to influence them and what specific, evidence-driven changes could be made by each humanitarian actor is not an ad-hoc activity that can be done at the end of a project.

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[3] STRIVE Research Programme Consortium, London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine: Theory of Change at strive.lshtm.ac.uk/system/files/attachments/STRIVE%20Theory%20of%20Change.pdf

[4] Jonathan Lomas, J. 2008, Formalised Informality: An action plan to spread proven health innovations at www.health.govt.nz/publication/formalised-informality-action-plan-spread-proven-health-innovations

These relationships take time, patience and often significant commitments of project capacity. For this reason, stakeholder engagement cannot be rushed at the end of research – it must begin early, and continue throughout the life of the research project.

1.1. MAPPING OF STAKEHOLDERS AND CONTEXT

When a project starts, the end results and evidence are obviously unknown. However, it is necessary to map stakeholders relevant to the key research theme(s) from the beginning, so that it is clear who the project aims to benefit and who it aims to influence. R2HC has resources available to help you with stakeholder identification, mapping and targeting to our grantees as part of our support package, but you should already have a reasonable idea of key stakeholders who could be engaged with the research before you apply for funding.

The health sector of the 'humanitarian system' itself represents a key diffusion audience for the R2HC. However, this system is not a homogeneous body. Ideally, grantees should recognise and engage with official stakeholders where they exist. These will be humanitarian knowledge brokers including those working under the IASC (Inter–Agency Standing Committee) and Cluster coordination mechanisms, local government offices, and national government institutions.

Other diverse humanitarian stakeholders could include international NGOs, local NGOs, community based organisations (CBOs), United Nations agencies, the Red Cross/Red Crescent movement, academic institutions, research think–tanks, and inter–governmental bodies. In some humanitarian contexts key stakeholders will be religious leaders or institutions, private companies, small businesses, military and militia groups. Importantly, affected communities themselves represent key stakeholders. They may include the researched subjects themselves who have an essential stake in final communication of research findings.

When mapping stakeholders, it is also important to identify individuals as well as institutions, key groups, structures and processes. In this way, the need to design different engagement approaches for different stakeholder groups will become apparent. Projects should proactively plan, resource and implement an uptake plan with this in mind.

1.2. TAILORING RESEARCH OR PROJECT DESIGN TO NEEDS OF STAKEHOLDERS

A project can be designed to produce specific evidence that fills the priority gaps and most urgent needs of a particular stakeholder group. For example, there may be an urgent humanitarian problem in a particular context, and active research could produce evidence on which solutions will work most effectively. In other cases, grantees may aim to produce evidence to influence stakeholders – particularly leaders or decision makers– to prioritise humanitarian needs that, for whatever reason, may not have been addressed. In both cases, it is vital from the beginning to consult with relevant stakeholders who may include in–country policy makers, decision-makers, field practitioners, and affected populations. If the research project does not successfully address the real causes and conditions of the humanitarian need and the need of stakeholders, then these stakeholders' receptivity to any final evidence or results will not be influential or effective.

1.3. ON-GOING ENGAGEMENT

Once project implementation has begun, engagement with decision-makers, operational agencies, affected communities and other stakeholders can often be neglected until the evidence is ready to be communicated. For your research to have the greatest impact, it is critical that key stakeholders are engaged early and regularly throughout the life of the project. This allows key audiences to continuously advise on implementation, ensuring that challenges do not become problems. This is particularly important in insecure locations. It also maintains stakeholders' ongoing awareness of the research, so they are more likely to champion the final results.

Grantees can engage with stakeholders by, for example, inviting them to sit on a project advisory team or asking them to attend periodic interactive information sessions. If a project is ongoing during a humanitarian response phase, grantees can attend cluster meetings, share information in standard formats, sit on government panels or join NGO networks. Social media can also be used to remain engaged with stakeholders.

It may be particularly important for some projects to engage with affected populations. There are very few publications describing how beneficiaries of humanitarian relief use knowledge and evidence for their own response and recovery[5], but it is an issue worthy of consideration from all researchers. Additionally, for ethical reasons, interaction and information sharing with affected communities is encouraged. This may be particularly the case for R2HC projects that adopt members of an affected population as subjects or patients of their health research.

For some research, there are simple questions that may guide more engagement with local people, which may in turn produce results that are more effectively taken up by a wider range of stakeholders. These include[6]:

- Are local knowledge and customs incorporated into project planning and design?
- Is there a need for information products or reports aimed at the people directly affected by the project results?
- Do project activities enhance a local capacity to understand and utilise the information products resulting from the project?
- Is the authorship of any academic publications balanced?
- Is there an opportunity to include a participatory element to the research design?

The timescales of humanitarian response are a particular challenge to ongoing engagement. In acute phases, time frames are short and the focus is on saving lives, so that even contacting stakeholders is often difficult. Delaying a project until stakeholders are available is not realistic. Nevertheless, if stakeholder engagement is not prioritised from the beginning, evidence may ultimately fail to be recognised and used and the project will fail to impact upon practice or influence policy.

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[5] van der Haar, G., Heijmans A., and Hilhorst, D. 2013. Interactive research and the construction of knowledge in conflict-affected settings *in Disasters,*, 37(S1): S20–S35
[6] Costello, A. and Zumla, A., 2000. Moving to Research Partnerships in Developing Countries. *British Journal of Medicine*, 321(7264): 827-829

1.4. EVIDENCE AND LEARNING

Learning from evidence is important whether a research project has succeeded or failed, or whether the results were expected or unexpected.

Learning can include organisational and individual learning, and can be undertaken in many ways, with the caveat being that it is important that dissemination activities effectively impact the key stakeholders that have been identified. Learning requires a proactive approach, and some resources on this subject are presented in the appendix.

2. CAPACITY BUILDING

Capacity building for uptake can refer to grantees and their project teams, or the stakeholders that they aim to influence.

2.1. ASSESSING EXISTING CAPACITY

A capacity for uptake may include the knowledge, skills and attitudes needed to access, synthesise, use and communicate project results, outcomes and evidence. Researchers may be outside their area of expertise with regards to communication capacity, particularly when it comes to designing an effective uptake plan. At an early stage, there should be an assessment of communication capacity both internally (i.e. within the project team) and externally (for example, for consultants or expert partners).

An assessment of the capacity of different stakeholder groups to uptake evidence may also need to be considered. Some recent reports suggest that even when information is available, decision makers in humanitarian contexts may not take it up due to a range of reasons that start with not knowing the evidence exists, but may also include a lack of understanding of how to translate it – that is, how to interpret the evidence and apply it. From the beginning, grantees should understand the capacities of their key audiences in order to better influence them.

2.2. THE RESEARCH UPTAKE FOCAL POINT

To ensure that study teams we fund have adequate capacity for research uptake, we now request that each team includes a Research Uptake Focal Point (RUFP) [note this is not a requirement for grantees funded through our Formative research stream]. Ideally, this would be a separate individual, with dedicated time to develop the Stakeholder Engagement Strategy, though sometimes the core research team will have this capacity already. The RUFP must have appropriate skills and competencies to support the lead researchers in, or lead on themselves, key uptake activities such as knowledge translation; policy engagement; or communications to deliver the uptake goals of the study. They may sit within the humanitarian operational partner organisation, if this will enable them to support uptake of the research findings, or outside it. The capacity needs for each study will look different, but we encourage you to identify an individual with the requisite skills and experience to engage humanitarian stakeholders in research evidence, particularly in relation to your topic of study or the stakeholders you will need to reach. This person should have adequate funded time on the research study throughout, both to effectively support the project and to liaise with R2HC on research uptake grant support activities and wider engagement opportunities.

3. COMMUNICATION

Communication is obviously key to uptake. A core aim for R2HC is to increase the effectiveness of humanitarian response through building and strengthening partnerships between researchers and operational humanitarians.

Therefore, R2HC grantees should consider how to synthesise evidence and results in styles and formats that are accessible to both non-experts and non-academics, as well as the academic research community. While peer-review publication remains an important priority, a much broader range of communication outputs than peer-review publications should be considered.

A key output which all grantees are required to complete for R2HC is a **Research Snapshot**, a 2pp summary of research intended to be accessible to a general humanitarian audience. Please allow adequate time and space to write the Snapshot in the dissemination phase of your research. We also encourage grantees to write blogs throughout their study.

Some other examples of communication outputs include:

- Policy briefs
- Newsletters
- Websites
- Social media
- Public events
- Press releases
- Mid-term research reports, working papers, and short update pieces
- Individual and group briefings for key decision makers
- Community-level engagement events, such as 'town hall'-style meeting
- Conference presentations and posters

When research is funded by Elrha the lead applicant or focal point will receive an Elrha communication information pack. This pack outlines the obligations and the opportunities for communications that come with the funding. It includes guidelines on blogging, media interaction and photography which should be used for general communications, as well as communications of uptake. This pack can be requested by anyone who would like to use the information to guide their application.

Clearly it is not possible to decide what messages will be communicated before the project is completed. However, communication activities such as publishing in peer reviewed journals, running community meetings or timetabling government briefings need to be included at a project design stage, so that they are properly prioritised and resourced. At initial stages it is also useful to begin identifying 'windows', when stakeholders may be particularly interested in discussing project evidence and implications.

4. UPTAKE MONITORING AND EVALUATION

The monitoring and evaluation of uptake needs to be just as rigorous as the M&E of the rest of a project. M&E usually begins at the start of the project; it is not enough to try to pull it together at the end.

4.1. MONITORING

All grantees are encouraged to design a set of key indicators, targets, milestones and outcomes or impacts for uptake to ensure that we understand which stakeholders have been reached; and what external change outcomes have been delivered by the study team by influencing these stakeholders. These should then be incorporated into research project planning documents – such as logframes (logical framework), workplans, or theory of change diagrams where available. These indicators and targets would then be monitored to measure uptake or diffusion progress and effectiveness. Specific tools are available from R2HC to assist you in monitoring changes with key stakeholders.

It is important to choose outcomes and impacts which can be realistically achieved by the project. The ultimate impact of research uptake may be positive changes of behaviour in a community, changes in the conceptual understanding of partners and peers, changes in policy and so on. However, such impact can be very difficult to measure or monitor, and grantees must understand what kinds of changes they could be accountable for and which results they want to report on.

4.2. EVALUATION

Demonstrating the success of uptake through outcomes and impact can be difficult, not least because the uptake of research can take place some months or years after the research has been completed. In some cases, anticipated results may not occur due to factors outside the control of the research team, and unexpected effects are not unusual in humanitarian contexts. Even when changes in policy or practice happen, they can be difficult to measure and the cause(s) of change can be hard to attribute.

Nevertheless, it is important to evaluate the impact of uptake as far as possible, in order better to understand how and when real evidence contributes to humanitarian response, and to account for all project achievements. In addition to inviting reports on uptake in the closing phases of studies, R2HC conducts case study evaluations of closed grants post 1+ year, to better understand the uptake and impact resulting from research we fund.

SUMMARY

- R2HC applicants and grantees should consider uptake activities, including stakeholder engagement, communications, capacity building, and evaluation and monitoring of impact, as a critical part of their project, and need to clearly articulate plans at the application stage and allocate adequate time and budget. Planning should begin early on; and outline uptake plans and intended outcomes should be clear in the proposal.
- Support for uptake planning is provided by R2HC through participation in a Research Impact workshop during the grant. A Stakeholder Engagement Strategy should be produced for each study and you must identify an appropriate Research Uptake Focal Point for your study team. These conditions do not apply for Formative research grants.
- If help or support is needed, please do not hesitate to contact the R2HC Research Impact Manager, Cordelia Lonsdale: c.lonsdale@elrha.org

RESOURCES, TOOLS AND GUIDANCE

ELRHA RESOURCES:

Conducting research with impact: Five ideas for researchers (Video)
https://www.elrha.org/researchdatabase/conducting-research-with-an-impact/

Introduction to Research Impact: Briefing for R2HC grantees
https://www.elrha.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/10/Introduction-to-Research-Impact_R2HC_April2019.pdf

GENERAL GUIDANCE AND RESOURCES

ODI (Overseas Development Institute): Research and Policy in Development Programme
- Tools for Knowledge and Learning: A Guide for Development and Humanitarian Organisations
  www.odi.org.uk/programmes/rapid
  www.odi.org/sites/odi.org.uk/files/odi-assets/publications-opinion-files/188.pdf
- www.odi.org/publications/5257-stakeholder-analysis

UK Government:

- Examples of research-uptake programmes
- www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/199850/EiA_programme_document.pdf
- **Guidance note on capacity building**
  www.gov.uk/government/publications/how-to-note-capacity-building-in-research
- How-to note on appraising evidence
  www.gov.uk/government/publications/how-to-note-assessing-the-strength-of-evidence

ALNAP – capacity development and communications guidance
www.alnap.org/resources/

Research to Action website
Contains a range of tools and resources related to research uptake.
www.researchtoaction.org/

The Emergency Capacity Building Project, tools and lessons learned
www.ecbproject.org/resources/library/426-ecb-project-learning-event---afternoon-session

Registry of Methods and Tools
The Canadian National Collaborating Centre for Methods and Tools provides tools for knowledge translation, diffusion and uptake, such as critical appraisal tools and guidelines for communicating research.
www.nccmt.ca/registry/browse/all/1/view-eng.html

Research Communications
A special issue of the Institute for Development Studies Bulletin focusing on research communication.
http://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/idsb.2012.43.issue-5/issuetoc

Evidence for decision making
James Darcy, Heather Stobaugh, Peter Walker, and Dan Maxwell, 2013, *The Use of Evidence in Humanitarian Decision Making* ACAPS Operational Learning Paper, Feinstein International Centre
www.alnap.org/resource/8003

Introduction to stakeholder engagement
www.researchtoaction.org/2014/02/introduction-to-stakeholder-engagement/

DEFINING OUTCOMES AND IMPACTS

ESRC (Economic and Social Research Council) evaluation and research guidance
www.esrc.ac.uk/research/evaluation-and-impact/

Knowledge to Policy
A freely downloadable book summarising various case studies on policy impact achieved by International Development Research Centre-funded research. The introduction provides a useful conceptual framework for categorising 'Impact'
www.idrc.ca/EN/Resources/Publications/Pages/IDRCBookDetails.aspx?PublicationID=70

London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine
A theory of change approach to research uptake (example)
http://resyst.lshtm.ac.uk/sites/resyst.lshtm.ac.uk/files/docs/reseources/TOCposter.pdf

UKCDS Evaluation of Research Impact page
This page summarises a workshop on evaluating research impact hosted by UKCDS, DFID and IDRC
www.ukcds.org.uk/page-Research_Impact_Evaluation-195.html

Economic and Social Research Council Impact Toolkit
A useful toolkit to help in tracking and capturing the impact of research.
www.esrc.ac.uk/funding-and-guidance/tools-and-resources/impact-toolkit/index.aspx

A collection of impact case studies can also be located here:
www.esrc.ac.uk/impacts-and-findings/features-casestudies/index.aspx

LEARNING

ALNAP
Organisational and Institutional Learning in the Humanitarian Sector: Opening the Dialogue – A discussion paper for ALNAP
www.alnap.org/pdfs/other_studies/kvblearn.pdf

Capacity.org: Organisational learning for aid, and learning aid organisations
www.capacity.org/capacity/opencms/en/topics/learning/organisational-learning-for-aid-and-learning-aid-organisations.html

Europe Aid
Study on the uptake of learning from EuropeAid's strategic evaluations into development policy and practice, June 2014. This study shows the translation of knowledge from strategic evaluations into EU development policy and practice. From this evidence, recommendations are made to strengthen uptake.
https://ec.europa.eu/europeaid/sites/devco/files/uptake-study-main-report-2013-317962_en_.pdf

INTRAC: Monitoring and Evaluating Learning Networks
www.intrac.org/resources.php?action=resource&id=679