

Funding locally driven research-based evidence: what works and what doesn't?

The Jacobs Foundation worked with a small team of Research and Social Entrepreneurship Fellows to better understand the landscape of locally driven research and learning agendas and their funding vehicles, design features, and the factors that lead to their success or failure.

The Jacobs Foundation recently created a new effort—Leveraging Evidence for Action to Promote change (LEAP)—to further engage its global network of Research and Social Entrepreneurship Fellows in its overall mission of ensuring quality education for children across the globe. As part of this work, the Foundation worked with a small team of Fellows to learn more about the main elements and success factors pertaining to mechanisms that support and fund locally driven research and learning agendas. The aim was to glean valuable insights that can guide the foundation's future investments and serve as inspiration for others working to generate and translate evidence to inform policy and practice.

The enduring challenge of translating research insights into impact on the ground

One crucial challenge facing many country education systems is the fact that locally relevant research-based evidence is not always systematically generated and applied to inform policy and practice. A significant reason for this is the lack of effective funding mechanisms specifically available to deploy funding for evidence generating activities and their translation into decision-making processes.

To better understand what is and is not working in addressing this challenge, the LEAP Fellows team created a comprehensive landscape map and analysis of leading Research & Learning Agenda (RLAs) processes and their Funding Vehicles (FVs) to draw out and distil relevant learnings for the Foundation and the field more broadly.

The team defined RLA processes as a set of questions, planned activities and products that facilitate learning and decision-making within an organization or system; FVs are the financial structures and accompanying funding instruments that support RLA activities. These are viewed as complementary tools that interact with each other in specific ways—RLAs determine what programs, partners, and challenges should be funded and FVs provide the financial capital to deliver on the priorities set out by the RLA.

The following criteria guided the selection of RLAs and FVs for review, conducted through desk-based research and expert interviews:

- Are they education-interventions focused?
- Are they of sufficient size?
- Is there evidence of multi-stakeholder engagement?
- Is there evidence of excellence in research, and availability of funding for that research?
- Is there evidence of impact on policy and practice?

Drawing inspiration from lessons learned to guide future research and funding efforts

The landscape analysis yielded further insights into the numerous layers of complexity that influence the success and failure of RLA and FV mechanisms. One key highlighted challenge, for example, is the lack of stewardship across the “research-project-policy” value chain, with most funding going to research but not implementation, and pilot projects but not capacity-building. In addition, often research does not seem to respond to on-the-ground problems that need addressing and occurs through a top-down approach without significant early buy-in across the stakeholder network (government, academia, NGOs). Working only with specific actors may deepen the fragmentation in the system and exacerbate existing silos.

Based on this, there are some key takeaways about what makes RLA and FV efforts more effective which can serve as inspiration for existing and future such mechanisms:

- **Engage the “triad” of actors:** The government, NGOs and academia all need to be engaged from the start in the generation of ideas and possible solutions to the challenges they are facing. This can entail the use of a public value approach where key stakeholders collectively deliberate and define how they will contribute to the generation and use of research.
- **Leverage funding across the value chain:** Actors should look at combination-funding across the value-chain—research, pilots, programs, and capacity building—and consider how to best deploy both outcome-based funding and short-term funding to avoid, and where appropriate, align with political cycles and dynamics.
- **Enhance the research design:** It is important to keep the openness of perspective with respect to the research design, relying on different research methods (both experimental and non-experimental) and defining the minimum quality standard used in evaluating research proposals.

Overall, the key aspirational characteristics identified in future research and funding mechanisms include: dynamism in funding type and nature, ability to provide much-needed finance across the “research-project-policy” value chain, and agility to work across—and in partnership—with the many different actors in each national context.

Finally, there seems to be a significant need for mechanisms that enable countries to effectively include policy makers and local communities in the gathering, analysis, dissemination, and application of research evidence. This is especially important in the context of education where it takes time for an intervention to have an impact, and to understand whether the effects are sustainable in the medium and long term.

While this research was limited in scope and time, the LEAP team hopes that it serves as inspiration for the Foundation and broader field and that it adds to the body of knowledge on what works and does not in supporting the uptake of research-based evidence for impact.

This blog article draws on the LEAP Report “Multi-stakeholder Research and Learning Agendas & Research Funding Vehicles for evidence use” authored by Clint Barlett, Pamela Jervis, Seye Odukogbe and Martina Viarengo, and supported by Nick Valenzia (LEAP Core Team Lead).