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TRANSLATING RESEARCH INTO ACTION IN COMPLEX CRISIS CONTEXTS

IMPACT Shaping practices
Influencing policies
Impacting lives

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INTRODUCTION

In 2024, nearly 300 million people were in need of humanitarian assistance and protection due to conflicts, climate emergencies and economic drivers (UN OCHA, 2023). This unprecedented vulnerability and growing dependency on humanitarian assistance highlights the need for informed, evidence-based approaches to address these complex challenges. While a good amount of data and evidence are being generated to support these efforts, the challenge lies in effectively translating this research into evidence-based action by integrating data into the response.

This disconnect between what the data indicates and the resulting action highlights a critical flaw in the humanitarian response system. Addressing this gap requires data providers like IMPACT not only to understand how evidence can be effectively integrated into decision-making, but also to critically evaluate how well this integration process currently works. Effectively evaluating the influence of data and research on decision-making is critical in humanitarian contexts as it can directly improve the responsiveness of interventions and ultimately contribute to saving lives. Without a proper evaluation, there is no clear feedback loop to improve these crucial processes.

This project contributes to filling the gap between the vast amount of humanitarian data that exists and its practical application in decision-making processes by answering the following question: *What are the best practices for effectively evaluating the impact of research on decision-making in humanitarian crisis contexts, and how can these practices be integrated into IMPACT's ME system/framework to enhance its effectiveness?* The literature review begins by analyzing how data and evidence are being used by decision-makers in humanitarian contexts and by examining the factors that hinder the uptake of data in these processes. It then moves on to establish an understanding of different types of data sources that can be used to evaluate the integration of data. It will then explore the literature on how to most effectively evaluate the impact of research in humanitarian contexts. A mixed methods approach will then be used to collect data, consisting of semi-structured Key Informant Interviews (KIIs), a survey analysis, and a ME Framework analysis. As a synthesis of the literature review and the different methods, current best practices by IMPACT and recommendations for improvement for maximizing and evaluating the impact of research in humanitarian contexts will be presented. This approach is designed to provide a comprehensive understanding of how data generated by IMPACT is currently used within humanitarian responses, how this uptake can be improved, and how the overall effectiveness of the organization's output can be evaluated best.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Use of Data and Evidence in Humanitarian Decision-Making

The Decision-Making Process in Humanitarian Contexts

Every day, humanitarian decision-makers are confronted with complex challenges that require timely and informed responses. Given the complex circumstances they encounter, the nature of these decisions can vary greatly, including the decision whether to initiate, conclude, expand, or reduce responses, determining the type of response needed, or identifying who should receive assistance (Knox Clarke & Campbell, 2020). In each of these cases, information needs vary according to the context and type of the decision-maker. However, all decision-makers must have a solid understanding of the situation - ideally based on data - before making any decision (Zhang et al., 2002).

Humanitarian decision-makers often operate in highly volatile, complex, or even chaotic environments where a large number of decisions about life and death need to be made under great time pressure and with incomplete information (Comes, 2016; Cosgrave, 1996; Zhang et al., 2002; Rahman et al., 2022; Kruke & Olsen, 2005). This uncertainty complicates their ability to comprehensively assess all options and plan effectively (Benini, 1997). Additionally, the decisions made by humanitarians often have significant consequences (Kowalski-Trakofler et al., 2003; Cosgrave, 1996). Thus, ethical considerations play a crucial role as the decision-makers might encounter dilemmas, acknowledging that their decisions can mean the difference between life and death for those affected (Clements & Thompson, 2004; Timmins & Thomas, 2024).

These unique circumstances can impact decision-makers in several ways. First, the high stakes and urgency of the situation can lead to heightened stress levels (Kowalski-Trakofler et al., 2003; Campbell & Knox Clarke, 2018). Second, the uncertainty coupled with a rapidly changing situation constantly producing new information can overwhelm decision-makers, leading to a cognitive overload (Comes, 2016; Buchanan & Kock, 2001; Paulus et al., 2018; Campbell & Knox Clarke, 2018) and eventually to an “analysis paralysis” (Aldunate et al., 2005, p. 29), where the decision maker is no longer able to even make a decision. Third, these circumstances can also cause biases (Comes, 2016; Paulus et al., 2022).

Humanitarian decision-making generally follows two main approaches (March, 1994; Knox Clarke & Campbell, 2020; Heyse, 2012). The rational/analytical approach focuses on selecting the best course of action by systematically evaluating a range of options. This involves collecting data to assess different alternatives and selecting the single best option, sometimes based on statistical methods. The goal is to reduce subjective biases and maximize transparency. However, it requires significant time and information, both of which can be limited in humanitarian contexts, making this approach particularly effective in protracted crises or in specific areas of humanitarian action, such as in logistics or supply chain management (Knox Clarke & Campbell, 2020).

In contrast, naturalistic decision-making (NDM), emphasizes rapid decision-making based on experience. Decision-makers respond to situations by drawing on past experiences and choosing a “good enough” course of action because it has worked in previous situations, rather than seeking the optimal one (Lipshitz et al., 2001). This allows decisions to be made much more rapidly, making NDM particularly well suited for emergency responses. However, this approach also requires the decision-maker to have a solid situational awareness (Zhang et al., 2002) and relevant past experiences to draw from (e.g., see Adams et al., 2015). Ultimately, the choice of decision-making approach depends on the context, urgency, and available resources.

Barriers to the Integration of Data Into Humanitarian Decision-Making

The integration of evidence into humanitarian decision-making faces several barriers, many of which stem from the complex and unique circumstances the decisions are being made in. The inherent uncertainty and complexity of humanitarian contexts are two crucial factors (Zhang et al., 2002). As the situation changes rapidly, data becomes outdated quickly and loses its relevance to the decision-maker. In this sense, poor publication timeliness may limit the usefulness for decision-making under time constraints (Knox Clarke & Darcy, 2014; Levine et al., 2011; Ndiaye, 2009).

The quality of data plays a crucial role in its usefulness for decision-making. Data that does not accurately measure what it intends to is significantly limited in value. Similarly, even high-quality data will be ineffective, if it does not anticipate and meet the decision-maker’s needs (Ndiaye, 2009; Darcy & Hofmann, 2003). Furthermore, data that is skewed by biases could lead to misinterpretation and reduced trust in the organization providing the data (Paulus et al., 2023; Ndiaye, 2009). Decision-makers may also be hesitant to use data from sources lacking credibility, highlighting the importance for providers to maintain a strong reputation as a legitimate and reliable source (Darcy & Hofmann, 2003; Ndiaye, 2009). The politicization of data further complicates the uptake of data (Colombo & Checchi, 2018; Darcy et al., 2013). In every discipline, and especially in the humanitarian

context, data and evidence are highly political (Promsopha & Tucci, 2023). For instance, even basic information such as census data of the baseline population in a certain territory can be used as a tool to serve specific agendas or interests (Knox Clarke & Darcy, 2014). Therefore, the ability of stakeholders to make a data-based decision is significantly dependent on political will (Bradt, 2009).

One of the most critical factors for the integration of data into decision-making processes is its presentation and visualization. Large volumes of poorly structured data can overwhelm decision-makers (Zhang et al., 2002; Comes, 2016). In this regard, even high-quality and highly relevant data might fail to be integrated because an ineffective presentation makes it difficult for decision-makers to extract the information they need. Data is also often not presented in a way that is easily understood by non-technical decision-makers (Darcy et al., 2013). Thus, an ineffective presentation of the data can severely limit their chances of being utilized (Darcy, 2009; Ndiaye, 2009; Knox Clarke & Darcy, 2014). Similarly, a lack of standardization and interoperability reduces the accessibility of data (Colombo & Checchi, 2018; Bradt 2009; Bharosa et al., 2009). If data cannot be easily integrated into existing decision frameworks, which in humanitarian contexts have to be flexible and adaptive by nature, its practical value is reduced. Thus, inefficient data management and sharing systems may limit the usage of data (Zhang et al., 2002).

Effective Data Sources for Measuring Research Influence

Measuring Research Influence Using Qualitative Data

The value of using qualitative data for research impact assessments lies in its potential to provide an in-depth understanding of experiences, insights, and narratives. With a deeper focus on IMPACT's work, the organization often leans on Key Informant Interviews (KIIs), focus group discussions (FGDs), participatory mapping and narrative responses to surveys in qualitative research design (IMPACT, 2024). IMPACT's KII (and similarly FGD) pattern focuses on individuals with in-depth knowledge of specific communities or sectors. Some of the main advantages of using KIIs and FGDs as data sources is their flexibility, their ability to create a line of rapport between the researcher and the participant, and the space they create for the researcher to conduct in-depth analysis with a relatively small sample size (Brown & Danaher, 2019; Young et al., 2018). FGDs allow for the exploration of shared experiences and perspectives, from an angle that KIIs cannot (IMPACT, 2024). However, some studies have highlighted issues with interview and FGD usage in the sector, specifically regarding transparency in sampling strategy, choice of questions, and means of data analysis (Young et al., 2018). This hinders the effectiveness of the data in tracing back the evidence-based reasoning behind decisions.

IMPACT's use of qualitative sources could be expanded to include more expert panels, official documentaries, and media reports, increasing the use of formats with direct interaction between researcher and participant. Expanding the use of document analysis, social media aspects and online platforms can help evaluate the impact of data by uncovering how it is referenced, interpreted, and applied across various contexts, as part of innovative community feedback mechanisms. In-depth analysis of written documents specifically provides insights into the quality and depth of engagement with the data by revealing the existing gaps in policy goals and their implementation (Kayesa & Shung-King, 2021). However, document analysis is criticized for usually lacking a clear methodological structure. It furthermore faces a larger efficiency issue when considering the gap between written policy and practice, which should be adequately accounted for (Kayesa & Shung-King, 2021).

Measuring Research Influence Using Quantitative Data

The value of quantitative methods, on the other hand, lies in their ability to provide measurable, comprehensive, and objective insights. Nevertheless, quantitative data are often regarded with skepticism, due to limitations in data literacy and the distrust of data relevance and accuracy (Beaumais, 2023). Resistance towards quantitative data additionally stems from its usual disassociation from and oversimplification of the given context (Beaumais, 2023). IMPACT focuses most heavily on wide-range surveys, market assessments and dataset compilations (IMPACT, 2023).

Over the past 25 years, the humanitarian sector (including IMPACT) has gradually depended more on quantification, specifically surveys and questionnaires, due to the strengthening of technological tools (Lawson, 2021). Coordinated decision-making between large actors such as government bodies, NGOs, and UN bodies could only be possible with tools that have such expansive analysis breadth (Saulnier et al., 2019). Nevertheless, on their own, surveys have been criticized for often lacking clear methodology and reporting, with added complexities regarding data literacy as well as presenting a higher difficulty of protecting ethical standards of data (Grais et al., 2009).

Datasets and statistical records include data from humanitarian information systems (i.e. needs or risks assessment or relief monitoring evaluations), budgeting, financial, and demographic data, performance indicators and crisis databases. For instance, the number of references and citations of a dataset in reports, policy briefs, or academic papers can be examined, giving insights into the dataset's importance and relevance. Moreover, data analytics such as downloads can be analyzed, revealing the frequency of data usage and their potential change over time (O'Leary, 2008). Thus, datasets and other forms of statistical records are useful in informing data preparedness, specifically regarding identifying gaps and areas of improvement within data preparedness components (Van den Homberg et al., 2017).

Evaluating Research Impact and the Effectiveness of ME Frameworks

Understanding Research Impact Evaluation

Research impact evaluation (RIE) is a complex but essential practice and can be defined as *“the process of collecting and interpreting data to assess the significance, reach, and attribution of impacts from research”* (Reed et al., 2021), requiring an evaluation of impact over varying timeframes and across social and spatial scales and encompassing outcomes at individual and societal levels, as well as at local and international levels. Recognizing the multidimensional nature of research impact requires accounting for the interplay of diverse actors involved in the research process (Wood & Wilner, 2024). In this context, it becomes evident that RIE should encompass not only the outputs of research but also the environment in which research is produced and disseminated (Penfield et al., 2013).

Impact materializes through knowledge dissemination, utilization, and application, contingent upon stakeholder engagement. It occurs only when stakeholders invest effort and resources in engaging with and implementing research findings. This iterative process fosters knowledge exchange, ensuring that research is perceived as legitimate. Thus, the effectiveness of research is gauged by its relevance, use, and ultimate societal impact (Budtz Pedersen & Hvidtfeldt, 2023; Zenda Ofir et al., 2016). Three primary criteria - credibility, relevance, and legitimacy - are foundational to translating research into impact (Reed et al., 2021), serving as cornerstones for key components of RIE, such as performance monitoring, stakeholder accountability, funding decisions, and strategies to maximize research uptake (Penfield et al., 2013).

Establishing causal relationships between research and its impacts is central to RIE. Research can be classified as either sufficient, meaning it independently generates impact, or necessary, where it is a crucial contributor but interacts with other factors to drive change. Causation in RIE is further explored through three frameworks: counterfactual causation, which shows an impact would not occur without the research; additive causation, highlighting how research variables interact to shape outcomes; and generative causation, examining the processes by which research drives change. (Reed et al., 2021).

Research Impact Evaluation Methods

First, it is crucial to define at which scale of analysis research impact is assessed. According to Pfeifer & Helming (2024), the scale of RIE can be divided into: single interventions, looking at individual studies and projects; organizational research communities, investigating cross-sectional studies; national research communities, resear-

ching at the national level engaging multiple actors; and international research communities, focusing on the international level where actors are connected through regional and international research networks.

A RIE framework should then be developed around: mission components, linking research activities to specific goals; inclusive components, engaging stakeholders in developing a problem formulation or analyzing their interests; strategic components, choosing the scale, aim, and timing of the RIE; and integrated components, understanding how research contributes to the transformation of complex systems by considering all dimensions and preconditions that lead to impact. The RIE can then be tailored to assess either processes, performing a formative assessment that focuses on the planning and managing of impact, or results, performing an ex-post assessment. Models can also integrate both perspectives to gain a deeper understanding of the processes of research creation and goals reached through its use.

According to Wood & Wilner (2024), the evaluation framework should be built around seven principles:

- Suitability for use: meeting the objectives of the intended audience
- Recognize impact across multiple dimensions
- Record perceptions of potential impact
- Ensure simplicity and cost-effectiveness of the RIE
- Consider the perceptions of main stakeholders
- Ensure that the method can be applied to multiple research domains/sectors
- Investigate the process of knowledge production

These principles provide a solid foundation for the construction of a RIE and serve as a guideline when choosing and developing evaluation methodologies. When designing a RIE, various approaches can be employed. Forward-tracking examines how research progresses into policy or practice, backward-tracking traces policy or practice back to its research origins, and Knowledge Exchange emphasizes the dissemination and uptake of findings (Morton, 2015). Additional strategies include indicator-based approaches, which utilize Theory of Change and Monitoring Frameworks to track processes and outcomes, and evidence synthesis approaches, such as meta-analysis, to determine if research outcomes sufficiently drive impact (Reed et al., 2021).

The literature provides a wide range of RIE methods to be used both in academia and the humanitarian sector (Reed et al., 2021; Penfield et al., 2013), of which the most relevant are:

- **Social Impact Assessment Methods:** Focus on the interactions between researchers and stakeholders, analyzing how networks and engagement foster impact.
- **Case Study Approaches:** Assess impacts by investigating specific cases tied to targeted indicators.
- **Experimental and Statistical Methods:** Use quantitative techniques to evaluate whether research serves as a sufficient cause of observed changes.
- **System Analysis Methods:** Employ tools like knowledge mapping and system analysis to explore and model the pathways of research impact.
- **Textual, Oral, and Arts-Based Methods:** Facilitate stakeholder-driven insights through interviews and focus group discussions to refine and enhance impact strategies.

Most RIE focuses on macro-level impacts, yet understanding micro-level impacts is crucial as they often underpin macro-level outcomes. Micro-impacts, as part of complex causal relations, can cumulatively lead to macro-level changes. These frameworks recognize that macro-impacts rarely stem from a single cause and highlight the overlooked influence of micro-impacts arising from research activities and societal uptake conditions.

One of the most recent and innovative frameworks is the Research Quality Plus Framework (Zenda Ofir et al., 2016) which highlights that the contexts in which the research is conducted and how the research has been managed should be considered in any RIE. The RQ+ framework consists of the analysis of three main components: key influences, research quality dimensions and subdimensions, and evaluative rubrics.

The analysis of key influences is about highlighting which factors are the most influential in determining the quality of research (e.g., research capacity, risk in the research environment, or maturity of research field). The research quality dimensions inspect the research integrity, legitimacy, importance and positioning for use. Finally, assessment rubrics are used to identify specific characteristics of each element and provide a measurement system for each of them. This approach highlights the importance of understanding both the internal and external factors influencing research, ensuring a nuanced and context-sensitive evaluation of its quality and impact. Applying an RQ+ approach can support the refinement of any ME framework by ensuring that evaluations of research influence go beyond outputs, incorporating contextual factors, stakeholder legitimacy, and the intended use of research in diverse humanitarian settings.

Limitations in ME Frameworks and Strategies to Overcome Them

The literature identifies two main challenges related to the assessment of research impact. The first one is normativity. When conducting research evaluation, what is considered impactful by one stakeholder group, may be considered harmful or counterproductive by

other groups. This is particularly true in the humanitarian sector, where different entities have conflicting interests and views on what data should be collected and how data should be used. The second issue is related to transitivity. When evaluating research, the impact of its production, use, and dissemination may be visible in a certain period and then disappear again, for instance, because new research takes over in a specific field of impact or because of sudden changes in the work context (Budtz Pedersen & Hvidtfeldt, 2023).

These two issues are composed of different elements, the main ones being (Penfield et al., 2013; Reed et al., 2021; Morton, 2015):

- **Timing of research:** The time lag between research and impact varies as there is a pay-off between the reliability of short-term recall of participants with the long term impacts emerging over time. The objective and perspective of the individuals and organizations assessing impact is key to understand how temporal impact is valued in comparison with longer-term impact.
- **Attribution:** The exploitation of research to provide impact occurs through a complex variety of processes, individuals, and organizations, and, therefore, attributing the contribution made by a specific individual piece of research is not straightforward.
- **Cost-effectiveness:** It is difficult to do RIE with a model that considers the complex character of the assessment and is reasonable in terms of costs in addition to the need to take scale and deadline requirements into account.
- **Quality of the assessment:** The multiplicity of paths that lead to impact make it difficult to employ objective and standardized metrics, leading to barriers to accuracy and comparisons among research projects.
- **Context:** The context, expectations, and needs of research stakeholders need to be considered.

One of the main strategies to improve ME frameworks is to use a mixed-method approach (Penfield et al., 2013; Reed et al., 2021; Wood & Wilner, 2024; Zenda Ofir et al., 2016), as the synthesis of qualitative and quantitative data from multiple sources enables research providers to gain a deeper understanding of the impact of their research. Moreover, a combination of immediate studies to capture short-term and local impacts, with a time-lag needed to understand long-term and wider impacts, can be used. Additionally, the involvement of stakeholders in the identification of indicators is also a good practice to strengthen ME frameworks (Morton, 2015) as they can fill data gaps and allow for triangulation (Zenda Ofir et al., 2016). Furthermore, stakeholders engagement can be used to identify the societal impact of research.

Contextual analysis is another crucial element. If research users find the research challenging or that it is countering policy trends, the use of contextual analysis and feed-

back from the users themselves can be used to demonstrate how the lack of impact or any unexpected impact is not related to the quality of the research itself, but to the context for its research use. Furthermore, ME frameworks should be built around a string logic modeling framework and should include a clear risks and assumptions analysis. These two elements enable RIE to truly capture all the elements that interfere with the correct use, dissemination, and management of research, and can be used in process evaluation to understand what has not worked internally (Morton, 2015). Finally, mapping micro-impacts can help identify all the components that contribute to impact without running into the problem of attribution. Using the concept of “contribution” rather than attribution can help researchers by suggesting that their research is contributing to outcomes, rather than causing them.

METHODOLOGY

In the data collection phase, a mixed methods approach was used, including Key Informant Interviews (KIIs), Survey Analysis, and Framework Analysis. This combination of qualitative and quantitative tools enabled a holistic understanding of IMPACT's ME systems. The study focused on a single case study - Ukraine - which was selected due to its well-established country team with strong visibility both in-country and globally, as well as its implementation of the 2024 REACH Multi-Sector Needs Assessment, which provided a solid base of programmatic and monitoring data. The presence of dedicated ME capacity in this mission also allowed for valuable insights into how internal capacities influenced monitoring practices.

All research participants were informed of the study's scope, how data would be used, and how their information would be stored securely. Informed consent was obtained during interviews. Confidentiality was prioritized throughout the research process, with all sensitive information securely stored to uphold ethical standards and minimize the risk of data breaches. Thematic analysis was used to interpret qualitative data from interviews and documents, supported by appropriate software tools. Quantitative survey data was cleaned and analyzed using Excel, offering insights into patterns of perception, engagement, and usage of IMPACT's outputs.

Key Informant Interviews

The KIIs provided valuable insights into stakeholder experiences with IMPACT's data, directly informing the evaluation of its outcome indicators. A total of nine interviews were conducted with participants representing IMPACT HQ, IMPACT Ukraine, UN agencies, INGO field staff, and other partners of IMPACT. These interviews targeted two main groups: decision-makers in humanitarian contexts as well as actors involved in humanitarian research and evaluation, to explore how they incorporate data into decision-making and how they assess research impact.

A purposive sampling strategy was used to identify key stakeholders within the humanitarian community, ensuring a diverse range of perspectives and roles. The interviews were semi-structured and followed an interview guide aligned with the project's main research questions. All interviews were conducted online, with audio recordings and detailed notes taken during the discussions. The collected material was then systematically analyzed to extract relevant findings and patterns.

Survey Analysis

IMPACT's partner feedback survey in Ukraine was reviewed and compared against both the qualitative insights gathered through the KIIs and the same survey conducted across six other countries. The online survey in Ukraine was conducted by IMPACT Ukraine in September 2024 and included insights from 34 respondents, while other locations had different collection timelines and numbers of respondents ranging from 13 to 144 with a total of 364 respondents across all contexts (incl. Ukraine). In all cases, the surveys targeted a diverse range of stakeholders ranging from academia to IOs and INGOs, and covered topics like decision-making processes, their relationship with IMPACT, and the perceived value of its research. This approach allowed for a contextualized understanding of how IMPACT's data was perceived and used across different operational environments. The results provided valuable, context-specific insights into the enablers and barriers to data uptake for evidence-based humanitarian decision-making.

The survey findings were systematically reviewed alongside the interview data to identify areas of alignment and divergence across stakeholder experiences. This triangulation process enabled the validation - or in some cases, the questioning - of patterns observed in the qualitative data. Together, these complementary sources informed the overall assessment of how the use and influence of IMPACT's research can be most effectively monitored, evaluated, and enhanced.

Framework Analysis

As a final step, a critical analysis of IMPACT's Theory of Change (ToC) and ME Framework was conducted to evaluate the effectiveness, relevance, and practicality of its indicators. This assessment drew on insights from the literature review, KIIs, and the Partner Feedback Survey, with a specific focus on whether the current indicators adequately reflect the influence and use of IMPACT's research in humanitarian decision-making. The analysis examined the robustness of the indicators, their adaptability across different crisis contexts, and their ability to capture both quantitative and qualitative dimensions of research impact. Based on this evaluation, a set of recommendations was developed to improve the ME Framework's strategic focus, usability, and capacity to reflect real-world research uptake. Grounded in a synthesis of best practices and field realities, these recommendations are intended to serve as a practical tool for guiding future evaluation efforts.

Limitations

The methodology of this research presents several limitations. First, the focus on a single case - Ukraine - limits the generalizability of the findings to other contexts. Second, the purposive sampling strategy used for the KIIs might create a selection bias, as participants were not recruited randomly but chosen based on their roles and relation to IMPACT, po-

tentially overlooking alternative perspectives. To partially address this, a broad variety from different organizational levels and sectors was included to diversify perspectives as much as possible. Moreover, the relatively small sample size of survey respondents and interviews may not fully capture all relevant perspectives, further limiting the representativeness and generalizability. Nevertheless, the triangulation approach of comparing insights from the KIIs with information from the survey helped identify recurring themes and validate key findings, strengthening the credibility of the results despite the limited data. Additionally, many interviewees previously were in roles in which they engage with IMPACT's work in a different way, allowing the interviews to cover multiple perspectives at the same time. Lastly, respondent bias is another concern as both survey participants and especially interviewees may be incentivized to provide socially desirable answers to not damage their relationship with IMPACT. To address this, interviews were conducted confidentially and participants were assured that their responses would be anonymized. Additionally, as the research was conducted by independent student researchers with no formal affiliation to IMPACT, this distance may have helped create a more neutral environment, encouraging open and honest responses.

ANALYSIS

Maximizing the Impact of Research

This subsection presents the main challenges that can affect the impact of research, followed by current best practices and recommendations on how to address these concerns to increase the research's impact.

Timeliness

In both the surveys and interviews, one of the most frequently mentioned obstacles to maximize the impact of research on humanitarian decision-making is the issue of timeliness. On the one hand, working in crisis settings naturally requires data to be available rapidly due to the dynamic and fast changing nature of these contexts. It is therefore inherently challenging to inform these urgent decisions in the first place. However, interviewees and survey respondents also pointed to a mismatch between the publication of recurring research products, such as the MSNA, and the timelines of key humanitarian planning and funding cycles. Several interviewees from partner organizations mentioned that most major funding allocations are made in the first quarter of the year, the MSNA data, however, is often not available in time to inform these processes and decisions. As one stakeholder put it: *"I believe the MSNA should be out a few weeks after data collection, even if it is raw data, even if it is just a snapshot of what the data is telling us or the highlights of the changes between 2023 and 2024."* This results in a situation where partners need to rely on outdated information from the year before, reducing the relevance of the data despite its high quality and thereby decreasing its potential to actually inform decisions.

Many of the challenges related to timeliness stem from the requirement that HQ needs to approve research outputs before their publication. This is especially true for operational decision-making, according to IMPACT internal staff: *"When you're trying to influence simpler programmatic decisions like sending ten generators to a specific place or five, there is absolutely no reason why someone in Geneva needs to review this data and the interpretation of the data. Because, frankly speaking, even if you're wrong, it's not the end of the world. With an MSNA, if you're wrong in your analysis, it is a big issue."* Therefore, while the rigorous review process contributes to IMPACT's reputation for high-quality research and is essential for flagship products like the MSNA, it automatically increases the risk of delays, especially when aiming to inform more operational, field-level decisions. This points towards a broader organizational gap: *"For a research organization that is working a lot with data and technical work, we haven't been really good at standardizing processes or*

using big trends like AI to validate things quickly.” Therefore, not making use of alternative review protocols based on automation and standardization significantly limits IMPACT’s ability to produce time-sensitive research.

Timeliness extends beyond the production of research, to include the alignment of feedback and engagement with the research cycle. Due to the demanding nature of the research and operational cycles, the question of when feedback is being requested, is of equal importance as obtaining the feedback itself, to prevent it from becoming a hindrance as opposed to its function as a tool of improvement. One interviewee flagged that especially during the proposal season of the cycle, engagement and strategic thinking falls out of the capacity of country teams. At the same time, placing feedback at the end of the research cycle does not aid the process as being treated as a key element of the research.

Current good practices addressing the issue of timeliness include:

- **Strong operational presence and rapid deployment capacity:** IMPACT maintains large, well-distributed field teams across the country, enabling fast data collection in response to emerging needs:

“We run huge field teams with enumerators all over the country. We can collect data on a dime if we need to.”

- **Providing preliminary data in selected cases:** Sharing raw data - particularly with trusted partners that have the analytical capacity - or preliminary information (e.g. in the form of dashboards) shortly after the data collection allows for quick insights into key themes and emerging trends without losing time waiting for the final, rigorous analysis.

To further strengthen IMPACT’s ability to produce timely and relevant data, the following practical recommendations are suggested:

- **Align publication timelines (especially for the MSNA) with humanitarian cycles:** Matching key planning and funding cycles ensures that the research is useful and relevant at the time when decision-makers need it.
- **Mainstream feedback throughout the research process:** Dedicating capacity to align the requesting of feedback with the timeline of research cycles allows for a higher rate of engagement.
- **Streamline and shorten reports:** Reducing the length and complexity of the reports allows for quicker production and earlier publication.
- **Simplify data sharing agreements:** Streamlining the legal and administrative procedures for data sharing ensures that relevant actors can use the data directly when it becomes available.

- **Improve internal review processes:** While rigorous validation remains essential for flagship products like the MSNA, faster internal review procedures could be developed for outputs that aim to support more operational decision-making.
- **Invest in process automation and standardization to improve responsiveness:** Leaning onto AI tools and similar technologies can accelerate validation processes for time-sensitive outputs, enabling a more timely delivery of research outputs.

Usability of Data

Another central theme that emerged across both the surveys and interviews was the question of data usability, which depends heavily on how the findings are presented, communicated and contextualized. Given the acute time constraints in humanitarian contexts, it may be hard for decision-makers to extract actionable insights from overly lengthy or complex reports. This is especially true for partners working in fast-paced environments at the operational level, who often need quick and digestible information to make decisions. Under these circumstances, there is little time to engage with technical language or complex methodological explanations. The current comprehensiveness of reports makes them less relevant and more time consuming to use: *“The only time I would really engage with IMPACT reports is when I was specifically trying to find something to justify what I knew I wanted to do already in a proposal.”* Furthermore, interviewees and survey respondents reported that the accessibility of the data may be limited especially for non-technical decision-makers with low data literacy. These groups may find it hard to understand the rationale or methodology of the data and therefore struggle to interpret the findings, which might reduce the uptake of it in their decisions and even decrease their trust in the research in general. Moreover, some survey respondents specifically report challenges with data accessibility in remote or low-bandwidth settings.

The relevance of research not only depends on the timeliness with which it is provided, but also on how well it reflects the specific needs and realities on the ground. Some interviewees pointed out that, while the comprehensiveness of the data is much appreciated, the research can sometimes be too broad or generalized, making it difficult to apply in localized contexts. Survey results substantiated this point, highlighting that the level of data granularity or localization sometimes can be a challenge. For instance, nationwide data from the MSNA has been reported to not be very applicable to the most heavily conflict-affected areas: *“The overall data set is reliable, but when you start chopping it to pieces, then it’s not the most reliable anymore because the MSNA doesn’t represent areas where humanitarians are working in the most. 90% of our resources are dedicated to those areas that for some reasons the MSNA is allocating only 10% of its assessment on.”* Therefore, the level of granularity or localization may often be limited when heavily affected territories are underrepresented in the sample, leading to results that do not accurately reflect the conditions on the ground. Ultimately, this reduces the relevance and reliability of the data for partners working in those areas.

While maintaining consistent mechanisms of research design is important, KIIs underlined that in some research programs IMPACT faces the issue of falling into a standardization trap. According to an interviewee, low levels of research localization and high levels of standardization stem from certain lack of clarity behind what the work is ultimately trying to accomplish: *“It's not knowing what we're trying to do. It's not knowing at what level we want to be measuring that impact, and it's also getting feedback from people and knowing the best ways to actually be measuring.”* This inhibits IMPACT teams from understanding the extent to which field partners utilize IMPACT's research.

Among the factors affecting both the timeliness and usability of research is the sheer volume of publications, which can overwhelm both IMPACT's teams and external stakeholders. As one interviewee remarked: *“That's one research every two days”*, a pace that challenges the ability to integrate findings meaningfully or respond swiftly to urgent needs. This high output can dilute depth and utility, particularly in data-heavy contexts.

Another significant challenge concerns the politicization of data. Some interviewees noted that data is more likely to be used when it aligns with the existing narratives and agenda of the stakeholders. In contrast, stakeholders often resist basing their decisions on data when it contradicts their perceptions, assumptions, or objectives, regardless of the quality or rigor of the research. As one interviewee put it: *“Data can challenge your perception of reality, but it IS reality. You don't agree or disagree with the data, you can only be surprised by it.”* This selective engagement undermines the objective value of the research and can limit its potential impact, as it becomes influenced by the biases of the decision-makers. Thus, while IMPACT may have limited control over if and how stakeholders decide to use their data, these dynamics present an ongoing challenge to ensuring that research actually informs decisions.

Regarding research usability, the following current practices by IMPACT have proven to be effective and should therefore be continued:

- **Comprehensive, detailed, and well-structured data:** IMPACT's research is valued for its depth, clarity, and organization.
- **Credible data and transparent communication of limitations:** IMPACT is known for being one of the most credible data providers, enhancing usability by allowing partners to confidently integrate the data into their decisions.
- **Consistent use of signature products:** The consistent use of flagship products (like the MSNA) across countries enhances data usability by providing familiar formats that enable partners to quickly integrate and compare findings from one context to another.
- **The use of operational tools like dashboards:** By uploading (raw) data to dashboards, preferably as soon as possible after data collection, IMPACT enables partners to explore and extract information themselves, enhancing quicker decisions.

- **Prioritizing concise and visual outputs:** Partners highly appreciate IMPACT's focus on presenting key findings through clear formats such as presentations, infographics, story maps, and visual summaries.
- **Effective at influencing strategic decisions:** IMPACT's data is especially highly regarded for its ability to inform evidence-based strategic decisions.
- **Qualitative expertise in Ukraine:** IMPACT's strong qualitative expertise in Ukraine is highly valued, and continuing to explore and integrate qualitative methods will further enrich the research IMPACT provides, adding depth, context, and narrative insights.
- **Context-specific and actionable data in Ukraine:** IMPACT is appreciated for producing tailored, context-sensitive data in Ukraine that aligns closely with the needs of local partners.
- **Strong coordination with other data providers:** IMPACT's efforts to collaborate with other data actors enhance the overall coherence and usability of information within the humanitarian response.

To further strengthen IMPACT's research usability, the following suggestions for improvement can be identified:

- **Provide tailored communication:** Adapt the format and delivery of findings to the technical capacities of different audiences (e.g. depending on availability of data teams within organizations).
- **Strengthen coordination mechanisms with other data providers through increased research collaboration:** Reducing the volume of standalone publications, merging related research cycles, and aligning dissemination efforts help avoid duplication, improve usability for decision-makers, and enhance the timeliness of research (i.e. Frontline Flow Monitoring collaboration between IOM and REACH).
- **Align the data with the type of decision to be influenced:** Tailoring research outputs to the specific conditions of different decision-making (e.g. at the strategic or operational level) ensures that the data is relevant and actionable for the intended audience.
- **Invest in more localized and granular data:** Ensure that the research design includes and prioritizes localized data from heavily-affected areas to increase trust in the data and to better inform decisions at the operational level.
- **Expand on offering a variety of data types and methodologies:** Different stakeholders have varying preferences for quantitative or qualitative data, and providing a mix ensures that the research meets diverse needs and expectations.
- **Highlight IMPACT's expertise in qualitative research:** IMPACT's capabilities in qualitative research should be more actively promoted alongside its well-established quantitative expertise.

Stakeholder Engagement

A key challenge to effective stakeholder engagement identified in the interviews and across the surveys is the lack of formal, structured engagement at the operational level in the field. As relationships are often managed centrally at the country office level, there is only limited interaction between IMPACT and its partners on the ground, reducing the opportunity to receive direct input or feedback from these stakeholders. Some report a lack of adequate forums for stakeholders to openly express feedback regarding data sources. Additionally, most interviewees noted that field engagement is at its highest during the research design phase, gradually decreasing during the implementation of the project.

Moreover, many interviewees noted that there is limited direct engagement with IMPACT outside of consortia or the UN system. It is difficult for certain NGOs to be actively involved in the research and consultation processes or to provide feedback, leaving them feeling disconnected from the research that is supposed to inform their work. As one partner put it:

“Within the consortium, it’s a beautiful relationship where we have a lot of engagements, a lot of information to digest that is shared weekly or biweekly with consortium partners. [...] But in general, not speaking of the consortium, we don’t have that direct interaction with IMPACT as humanitarian organizations. We only have it through OCHA and the clusters’ coordination teams. [...] We would like to see the NGOs more integrated in decision-making or consultations in those multi-sectoral assessments that are country wide.”

Relatedly, a disconnection also exists in how IMPACT’s work is perceived by actors at different levels. While engagement at the global level is reported to be mostly positive, field-level actors can be more critical when outputs do not align with the urgency of their information needs, revealing a mismatch between the pace of global versus field-level agents. Similarly, there is a perception by those stakeholders that IMPACT is not proactive enough in reaching out to partners to get their feedback. Some partners indicated that they must take initiative if they wish to provide input or discuss their needs: *“When we want to have something done, we need to reach out to IMPACT. It’s not the other way around”*. IMPACT’s own staff, on the other hand, does not share the same perception as they highlight their diverse outreach efforts and strategies. This discrepancy highlights a potential gap in communication between IMPACT’s internal teams and external partners.

Overall, a lack of face-to-face interaction for providing input and feedback could be identified as a crucial challenge in most interviews: *“You need to make sure that you are in the room and that people know you. [...] When you’re not in the room, it becomes extremely difficult to time your research well, to know the information needs, to know the discussions that are going on. You end up doing research in a vacuum.”* Without such per-

sonal interaction and the opportunity for face-to-face engagement, feedback by stakeholders tends to be less relevant, as exemplified by the low numbers of survey participants.

Another factor hindering effective stakeholder engagement is the high staff turnover within IMPACT, presenting a significant challenge to building deep, lasting relationships with partners. Frequent changes in personnel means that external stakeholders must constantly form new connections with new staff members, which hinders the development of long-term, institutionalized collaboration with partners. This is especially problematic when staff members with limited experience are sent into these complex settings, where established relationships are crucial. This lack of continuity in personal relationships can lead to a disconnect between data producers and data users, and could ultimately limit the credibility of the data.

Regarding stakeholder engagement, the following efforts have been working well, according to the surveys and KIIs:

- **Openness to feedback and adaptation:** In Ukraine, IMPACT is recognized for its culture of openness, actively encouraging partners' input and demonstrating a willingness to adapt based on constructive feedback.
- **Prioritizing building long-term relationships with partners:** IMPACT's long-term investment to stakeholder engagement in Ukraine is widely recognized and increases trust, improves the quality of feedback and inputs, and enhances the overall impact of research.
- **Effective engagement at donor level:** IMPACT maintains particularly strong relationships with donors, ensuring that their priorities and needs are well understood and integrated.
- **Effective engagement in consortia:** Participation in consortia provides an ideal platform for IMPACT for regular interactions and more structured and systematic collaboration with partners, resulting in more tailored research products.
- **Complementing active consultation with passive consultation:** Combining direct outreach for feedback and input with participating in partners' meetings and listening to ongoing strategic discussions allows IMPACT to understand real-time information needs that some stakeholders might not have the methodological language for.
- **Strong early-phase stakeholder engagement:** IMPACT actively involves partners during the initial stages of the research process - such as the drafting of Terms of Reference or designing the questionnaire.
- **Leveraging partners' data collection capacities:** By relying on partners' existing data collection capacities, IMPACT enhances ownership and stakeholder engagement throughout the research process.

- **Knowing your partner and adapting your engagement strategy based on their preferences:** IMPACT demonstrates an awareness of each partner's institutional context, communication style, and decision-making processes, allowing for more tailored and effective engagement:

"I think a lot of it really hinges on [...] understanding the way that person communicates. Because there are some organizations that love a (Microsoft) Teams call. There are others that will never jump on a Teams call with you, but will respond to an email in 15 seconds if you really ask a targeted question. So it's about developing a strategy that fits the partner themselves."

- **Simplified and informal stakeholder communication:** IMPACT's use of accessible channels like Whatsapp groups or informal coffee chats helps build and maintain strong relationships by encouraging informal but continuous conversations.

To further strengthen IMPACT's ability to effectively engage with key stakeholders, the following points are recommended:

- **Strengthen structured and systematic engagement at the operational level:** Introducing standing consultations with partners at the field level allows for more contextualized insights and ultimately leads to research outputs that better reflect the realities on the ground (i.e. through creating a structured platform at this level to receive constructive feedback on presentation styles and formats that make information retention easier for these stakeholders).
- **Broaden and diversify stakeholder involvement beyond consortia and the UN system:** Integrating NGOs in systematic consultation processes ensures that different voices are heard.
- **Bridge the gap between researchers and practitioners:** Reviewing established mechanisms to educate, include, and consult actors outside from researcher circles increases the trust of stakeholders in IMPACT methodologies (i.e. focus groups and key informant methodologies).
- **Reach out to partners more proactively to get their feedback and input:** Don't wait for stakeholders to initiate contact - proactively engaging them ensures that their needs are integrated throughout the research process.
- **Allocate time & resources to prioritize personal interactions with partners:** Regular, face-to-face interaction with key partners builds trust and improves feedback quality.
- **Identify a focal point in different organizations and at different levels:** Having clear points of contact across various layers of partner organizations enables smoother communication.

- **Increase engagement in later stages of the research process:** Engaging partners beyond the initial phases ensures that the final outputs are actionable and aligned with stakeholders' evolving needs (e.g. proactively informing stakeholders when an assessment is planned, allowing them to align their own timelines and anticipate using the results, maintaining communication throughout the research cycle, particularly during analysis and interpretation phases, or involving stakeholders in reviewing findings and reflecting on their implications).
- **Manage expectations by stakeholders from the start:** Setting clear expectations from the beginning by explaining the challenges of conducting research in humanitarian contexts and being transparent about limitations helps build stakeholder trust and reduces potential frustrations.

Evaluating the Impact of Research

This section outlines several key challenges identified in the interviews as well as during the survey and Framework analysis, followed by current best practices and key recommendations on how to address these issues to most effectively evaluate the impact of research.

Gaps in Feedback and Visibility of Research Use

In the interviews, all external stakeholders provided several concrete examples of situations where IMPACT's data directly influenced a decision in their work, underscoring that the research indeed can have a significant impact. However, it is rare that such direct feedback reaches IMPACT. Partner Feedback Surveys, the primary method for collecting feedback at the moment, also report that stakeholders widely and frequently use IMPACT's research outputs, however, they have very low response rates, making it difficult to gather consistent and comprehensive insights. At the same time, relying on such quantitative measurements like surveys, downloads, or references provides only a limited and often superficial understanding of how research is actually being used: *"If nobody is referencing your data, you probably have a problem But the reverse is not necessarily true. You can't say that because people are referencing your data, it is a useful indicator."* In other words:

"Sometimes one single presentation or one single download can have more impact than 300 downloads of people who just looked at the research quickly and then closed the document."

Informal feedback, which could provide more nuanced insights, is expressed to IMPACT staff only very rarely, and even when it does, there currently is no systematic way for such feedback to be tracked. Additionally, policy decisions are often made behind closed doors,

and partners frequently rely on more anecdotal evidence rather than scientific research processes. This reliance on informal or anecdotal insights may make partners more reluctant to share with IMPACT if and how they are using their research. In summary, one of the key challenges in evaluating the impact of research is the overall limited feedback received from partners, making it very difficult to know how research is being used and what specific decisions it has influenced, especially at the operational level. As one interviewee summarized it: *“What happens with our research is pretty much a black box.”*

Current good practices addressing the issue of gaps in feedback highlighted in the surveys and interviews include:

- **Use of surveys as a consistent feedback tool:** Despite low response rates, IMPACT’s continued use of surveys provides a mechanism for gathering partner feedback and tracking the use and relevance of its research over time.
- **Systematically tracking partner requests:** IMPACT Ukraine piloted a system to track partner requests raised in meetings or conversations, enabling them to later reflect on what had been addressed immediately, what required future research, and what could not be fulfilled.

To further strengthen IMPACT’s ability to gather more actionable insights and better evaluate the impact of its research, the following recommendations are suggested:

- **Emphasize informal feedback and develop a system to document this kind of feedback:** Introducing a system to track more nuanced and informal feedback ensures that it contributes to the overall understanding of research impact.
- **Embed feedback collection into existing interactions:** Integrating feedback collection during events, meetings, or conferences can be a more natural and less time-consuming way of gathering feedback than surveys.
- **Establish feedback loops:** Showing the partners that their input has a direct impact on the research process and outcome encourages them to provide more feedback.
- **Strengthen and invest in long-term relationships with partners:** Building strong relationships with partners encourages open dialogue and a more consistent flow of feedback.

Internal Gaps in ME Capacity

Besides the limited direct feedback on research use, organizational and internal gaps in ME processes also present a significant challenge to evaluating the impact of IMPACT’s research. One of the main difficulties raised by interviewees is the lack of a strong internal ME culture within IMPACT.

ME processes currently are not consistently mainstreamed across the organization, leading to a fragmented and inconsistent approach to how research outcomes are tracked and evaluated by different individuals at different levels, with some staff members or teams placing more emphasis on it than others, depending on their individual priorities. According to the interviewees, the importance of ME is not always recognized across the organization, and as a result, it is not systematically integrated into all stages of the research process. This inconsistency in internal ME practices is further complicated by the high staff turnover. Frequent changes in personnel, particularly in field offices, automatically lead to a loss of institutional memory. Furthermore, in many smaller missions, there is no designated ME staff. This reflects an under-prioritization of ME within the organization, as ME responsibilities are often seen as secondary to other tasks. This lack of focus on ME not only affects the quality of research impact assessments but also undermines the ability to improve research strategies over time.

The following current efforts regarding IMPACT's organizational culture around ME have been identified in the surveys and interviews:

- **Initial efforts to expand ME staffing** at both HQ and field levels have taken place, demonstrating organizational recognition of the need to strengthen ME capacity.
- **Partner Feedback Surveys are now in use** as a means to systematically collect external input, showing that feedback mechanisms are being institutionalized beyond ad hoc or informal channels.
- As noted by HQ staff, there is **growing momentum to integrate ME and lessons learned processes more seriously** into organizational workflows. As one interviewee observed: *“Recently we're really starting to treat ME and lessons learned a bit more seriously.”*
- **Field perspectives are increasingly being acknowledged** and considered in internal learning processes - an improvement compared to past practices where HQ-level decision-making tended to dominate.
- Finally, there is an internal recognition that **the primary challenge is no longer defining indicators, but rather institutionalizing tracking efforts consistently across the organization**. As one HQ staff member pointed out: *“The main challenge now is not the indicators anymore, but our ability to track them at an organizational level and consistently over time [...]. We have a lot of turnover in missions, so the institutional memory is not always very strong.”*

These efforts could be complemented by the following suggestions to further strengthen IMPACT's internal ME capacity:

- **Flag ME importance at all levels to institutionalize a strong ME culture:** Emphasizing the value of ME at every organizational level ensures that it is consistently integrated into all activities of the organization.
- **Invest in training and internal awareness about ME as a priority:** Providing staff with training on ME practices and raising awareness about its importance ensures that all employees, regardless of their role, understand ME's value and are able to apply it effectively in their work.
- **Designate dedicated ME staff across missions:** Appointing ME officers in each mission ensures that there is a person responsible for overseeing ME processes and maintaining consistency.
- **Establish capacity for post-reporting dissemination tracking:** Designating staff focused solely on dissemination beyond presentations and summary emails can ensure that findings are actively communicated, contextualized, and followed up with stakeholders.

Complexity and Limitations of Existing ME Framework

One of the most frequently cited issues in interviews is the current ME Framework implementation burden at field level. Though the tool is designed for use across HQ and country missions, its application is widely perceived by field teams as overly technical and resource-intensive: *“I would say the Framework is very good in theory, but it does require a lot of work and sometimes that deters people from wanting to engage with it.”* As a result, data entry is often incomplete or inconsistent, and teams experience what has been described as “checklist fatigue.” As one field-based interviewee noted:

“Sometimes some of the things we do can feel like a ticking the box exercise.”

A further challenge lies in the overreliance on quantitative metrics. The majority of indicators, especially in the User Monitoring and Usage Monitoring tabs, are numeric - capturing clicks, downloads, views, and document mentions. These indicators are helpful for measuring reach, but they fall short of assessing influence or behavioral change. Also, the Framework's reliance on citation tracking as a proxy for influence is problematic. While mentions of IMPACT products in HRPs or donor strategies are counted in Usage Monitoring and External Engagement Monitoring, these citations may not always signify actual use. In some cases, research may directly inform a strategic decision without being formally acknowledged. In others, a citation may be included for symbolic purposes without reflecting real integration of findings. The current Framework lacks the means to differentiate between these scenarios.

Relatedly, the Framework provides limited insight into qualitative and micro-level change. More informal or incremental forms of research influence - such as partners referencing

data in coordination meetings or adopting terminology from IMPACT analyses - are not captured by existing indicators despite their importance: *“I think one of the clearest indications that you can have as an organization is when you are able to shape narrative. [...] It is when you start hearing people chatting about (IMPACT) specific concepts or terminology in meetings, then you know that you are really having an influence.”* In the Feedback Monitoring tab, for example, the focus is primarily on Partners Feedback Survey, which tend to have low response rates and do not reflect the full range of relational engagement. Yet, it is these small-scale interactions that are often the earliest signs of meaningful uptake.

Another key limitation is the lack of formalized feedback loops. Field teams reported that while feedback from partners is sometimes received, mostly informally, it is rarely systematized or used to adapt data production or ME indicators. Although satisfaction metrics exist in the Framework, there is no follow-up to understand the reasons behind a high or low score, nor to integrate that learning into future planning. The absence of structured reflection mechanisms means the Framework risks becoming static rather than adaptive. Backward-tracking remains another major gap. While the Framework is rich in forward-facing indicators, tracking production and dissemination, it rarely follows the trail from a decision back to the data that may have informed it. For example, if a partner shifts its targeting strategy after reviewing an IMPACT product, that change might only be visible through anecdotal evidence, which the framework is not currently equipped to gather or record.

Finally, a Theory of Change (ToC) was initially included in the ME Framework, its integration remains partial and underdeveloped. At the time of analysis of the Framework, IMPACT's full strategic plan for 2025-2030 had not yet been finalized, which meant that only selected components - namely, two cross-cutting secondary outcomes and two primary global programmatic outcomes under Roadmap Objective 1 (REACH) - were incorporated. Country-level outcomes were left to be defined by field teams as relevant to their context. This explains the lack of strategic completion in the current version, which does not explicitly include the ToC. However, even for the elements of the ToC that were developed, the Framework does not consistently articulate clear causal pathways from outputs to intended outcomes. While outcome indicator groups and cross-cutting outcome labels were included in earlier versions to signal these links, they have since been removed or may not have been sufficiently explicit. As a result, although outputs like HRP citations or partner engagement meetings are tracked, the Framework still falls short in explaining how these activities contribute to influence, behavioral change, or policy outcomes. This weakens its ability to demonstrate meaningful impact as opposed to symbolic recognition.

While the current MEL Framework presents notable challenges in its implementation and usability, several strengths and existing practices reflect thoughtful design and a foundation to build upon:

- **The Framework is recognized as highly comprehensive**, encompassing a broad spectrum of elements related to research production, dissemination, feedback, and quality. As one HQ team member noted: *“It captures very well everything that we can think about in terms of evaluating our impact.”*
- **Its development drew on both global and field-level experience**, ensuring a balance between strategic priorities and operational realities. According to one respondent: *“It was developed by people working at the global level but that also had field experience before.”*
- **Missions are granted a degree of autonomy** to adapt the Framework to their needs. This flexibility is appreciated in principle, although actual adaptation is constrained by limited capacity and the framework’s complexity.
- There is a **growing focus on accountability** across various components of the Framework, especially in how data is shared with partners and how feedback is being more systematically considered.
- Internally, there is increasing recognition that the challenge lies not in the design of indicators, but in developing the **right tools, practices, and organizational habits** to make the Framework operational and useful. As one HQ stakeholder observed: *“I think it’s not so much about the indicators but about the tools to track them [...] We need to have a MEAL culture at IMPACT, and paradoxically, we don’t have it yet.”*

To improve the usability, relevance, and strategic value of the ME Framework, a number of practical and structural changes are recommended, aiming to ensure that the Framework better captures the actual influence of IMPACT’s research, reflects the diversity of operating contexts, and is usable across both HQ and field teams. While the Framework already outlines which indicators are mandatory or optional, who is responsible for data collection, and the monitoring frequency, the tool still feels overly heavy, particularly for field teams managing competing priorities. To reduce reporting fatigue and improve data quality, it may be beneficial to prioritize a core set of high-value indicators based on strategic relevance and feasibility. In practice, HQ could focus on collecting automated digital metrics - such as downloads or dashboard views - while field teams concentrate on capturing relational and contextual insights, like concrete examples of data being used in coordination or advocacy efforts. Tiering indicators by importance could further clarify expectations and support more focused, meaningful monitoring. As one interviewee put it: *“You need to find a balance between the inputs the field teams need to provide and the things HQ can do by itself.”* Documentation requirements for country missions should be limited to those elements they are best placed to provide. Also, to reduce entry barriers for

field teams, particularly those with limited capacity, a simplified version of the Framework should be developed. This could include pre-filled templates, dropdown selections for standard entries, and visual guides. Brief onboarding tutorials could help new staff engage with ME processes more effectively and consistently. A simplified Excel version of some tracking tools already exists and could potentially be improved, but it would still add up to the overload of work that technical and non-technical staff responsible for ME in the country team would face when working on the current version of the Framework.

Although the Framework includes a broad array of activities and outputs, its utility is limited by the absence of a comprehensive and operational Theory of Change. Expanding and finalizing the existing ToC would help clarify how IMPACT's research contributes to intended outcomes such as improved humanitarian planning, targeted resource allocation, or strengthened advocacy. A more robust ToC would also support critical reflection on indicator relevance - for example, linking training outputs to intermediate outcomes like enhanced data literacy or improved decision-making. Filling in the gaps of the current ToC would make it a more actionable tool for both strategy and evaluation. The number of indicators could be reduced by consolidating those that overlap or offer low return on investment. Priority should be given to those indicators that yield the greatest insight with the least reporting burden: "I think we are trying to track too many things with the Framework. [...] We want all of these indicators, but realistically it is not feasible. We should refine it and focus on a few key indicators and then really zoom in on those and try to gather some qualitative insights that help analyze those few indicators."

To better capture how research is used, the Framework should incorporate structured qualitative approaches such as short interviews, outcome harvesting, or partner reflections. A central repository or light database could be used for teams to log influence stories. These might include, for example, a partner adjusting targeting after reviewing REACH data or a cluster lead quoting IMPACT findings during a coordination meeting. Such qualitative data would enhance understanding of how research contributes to decision-making, even in the absence of formal citations or written feedback. New indicators should be introduced to reflect micro-level changes - such as shifts in discourse, workshop outcomes, or the behavior of individual actors - as well as long-term influence. Missions should be able to document how relationships, data trust, or usage evolve over time, especially across recurring responses or protracted crises.

The Framework would also benefit from stronger learning loops: annual reflection workshops, held at both HQ and regional levels, could provide a space for teams to discuss what worked, what didn't, and how tools or processes were adapted to local needs. Narrative reporting should be encouraged, allowing teams to explain changes that numbers alone cannot capture. A basic system should be introduced to track how IMPACT responds to partner requests. Even an Excel-based log could capture whether questions or requests

were later addressed through new or updated research products, allowing the organization to measure responsiveness, rather than focusing solely on production volume.

Lastly, the Framework should reflect the importance of context and trust. Indicators should be developed to capture efforts toward localization and political or cultural adaptation. A light-touch tool could also be introduced to measure perceived trust, such as a short annual survey alongside field teams logging informal trust signals - such as verbal affirmations in meetings, repeated use of specific data products, or spontaneous partner requests for collaboration - which, when aggregated, provide valuable qualitative insight into how IMPACT's work is perceived and relied upon across different contexts.

CONCLUSION

Previous research has consistently highlighted a variety of challenges in integrating data into decision-making processes and evaluating the impact of research. These challenges range from technical obstacles, such as data quality and accessibility, to gaps in ME frameworks, and have to be addressed to ensure that research and data translate into action. This analysis reflects many of these concerns identified by the literature, highlighting that IMPACT is also confronted with the barriers identified in previous studies. Through a mixed-methods approach, including semi-structured interviews with key informants within and outside of IMPACT, a survey analysis, and a review of the current ME Framework, this report offered a more nuanced understanding of these challenges. In particular, the use of semi-structured KIIs created a platform for interviewees to share context-rich, detailed narratives and experiences of research uptake. Despite the relatively small sample size, the structure of the interviews created a space of trust, allowing participants to speak in-depth and share honest reflections. Therefore, this report offered a comprehensive analysis of how IMPACT can maximize the impact of its research and best evaluate it.

Maximizing the impact of research in humanitarian settings requires more than producing high-quality data, as research processes need to be aligned with the realities and needs of those people that use and work with it. As this analysis has shown, diverse challenges persist that hinder the effective use of IMPACT's research in decision-making. The timeliness of data publication is essential, especially in dynamic crisis environments where decisions must be made quickly. However, lengthy review processes with HQ often delay the publication of findings, limiting their relevance for decision-makers. Moreover, research outputs are not always tailored to the specific needs on the ground or accessible and understandable enough for non-technical audiences. This disconnect between research and practice is further complicated by the limited interaction between IMPACT as a data provider and its data users throughout the research cycle. This is especially true for smaller, operational partners on the ground that do not have direct access to IMPACT through the UN system or consortia.

Addressing these challenges requires a variety of measures regarding how research is produced, communicated, and engaged with. Timely data production and dissemination - aligned with humanitarian cycles and supported by optimized internal review processes - can significantly enhance the relevance and uptake of research findings. Equally important is improving the data usability by simplifying presentation formats, promoting localized and tailored outputs, and ensuring accessibility for non-technical users. Finally, stakeholder en-

agement throughout the research cycle not only improves IMPACT's collaboration with key partners, but also ensures that the research reflects the decision-makers' needs, ultimately increasing its potential of actually being integrated into their decisions.

The effectiveness of research impact evaluation relies on tailoring frameworks to the specific contexts in which research is conducted and applied. Emphasizing flexibility ensures that evaluations account for diverse temporal, spatial, and socio-political factors that influence research uptake and outcomes. This includes aligning evaluation efforts to the needs of stakeholders and assessing trust levels in research outputs. Participatory approaches that involve stakeholders in defining indicators, providing contextual feedback, and co-creating solutions enhance the uptake and application of research ensuring its legitimacy, relevance, and societal impact. Similarly, by fostering a demand-driven approach, power dynamics shift from supply-centric efforts to those addressing community needs.

Combining quantitative and qualitative methods strengthens the robustness of RIE and method diversification remedies the limitations that each of them possess separately. Employing forward and backward tracking methodologies, as well as incorporating micro- and macro-level impact analyses, provides a comprehensive understanding of the research's contribution to systemic change. Mapping micro-impacts, for instance, highlights smaller yet essential components of change that feed into broader systemic effects. Moreover, recognizing the complexity of causation in research impact, ME frameworks should prioritize understanding contributions over strict attribution.

Impact evaluation should integrate insights from three complementary levels: organizational performance, process quality, and user engagement, ensuring that research outputs are not only technically sound but also effectively disseminated and practically applied. Effective RIE frameworks link research activities to specific goals and missions, aligning system objectives with broader organizational strategies and ensuring that evaluations not only measure outputs but also gauge their alignment with and contribution to overarching humanitarian and policy objectives.

The review of IMPACT's ME Framework highlights a fundamental tension between its comprehensive structure and practical usability. While the Framework is robust in tracking research outputs and engagement activities, it struggles to capture how research is actually used in decision-making. Key gaps include the need to further develop and operationalize the existing Theory of Change to clarify the pathways through which research contributes to impact, an overreliance on quantitative metrics, and a lack of flexibility to adapt to field realities. Field teams in particular face challenges in implementing the Framework due to its technical complexity and reporting burden, often resulting in in-

consistent data entry and limited engagement. Moreover, the Framework overlooks qualitative and micro-level signals of influence - such as changes in discourse, partner trust, or informal feedback - that are often the first signs of meaningful uptake. Addressing these limitations through simplification, clearer role division, qualitative methods, and stronger learning loops would make the framework a more effective and context-responsive tool. In doing so, it could more accurately reflect the nuanced ways that humanitarian research informs operational and strategic decisions.

In conclusion, effectively integrating research and data into humanitarian decision-making and evaluating the impact of research requires a multifaceted approach. By prioritizing stakeholder engagement, tailoring the Framework to specific contexts, and leveraging both quantitative and qualitative methods, IMPACT can effectively evaluate research outputs and impacts. Ultimately, such an integrated approach strengthens the practical utility and relevance of research, contributing to the development of evidence-based solutions and ensuring its effective application in addressing humanitarian challenges.

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