

Reflections on ongoing research uptake and impact activities on unsafe abortion in Zambia and discussion of implications

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The focus of this workshop was to reflect on both uptake and impact of research, framed around an ESRC-DFID funded project on pregnancy termination trajectories in Zambia. This project, headed up by Dr Ernestina Coast, was followed by an additional ESRC Impact Maximisation Grant and therefore provided an excellent example of how research impact can be pursued and achieved. Together with her colleague Dr Emily Freeman, Ernestina introduced the room to the research project in Zambia, and used this as a case study to demonstrate impact and to instigate and inspire discussions relating to participants' own potential impact strategies, with an emphasis on the fact that these strategies need to be tailored to the specific research project for maximum success. The workshop involved a combination of presentation and informal discussion, during which the room divided into small groups to consider responses to key questions and to share the resultant insights.

The small group discussion points were separated into three collections of related questions. The first of these asked workshop participants to discuss the following:

- What are some instrumental outcomes in your work?
- What are some substantive outcomes in your work?
- How would you measure success?

The second:

- How important are personal connections in your research setting?
- How have you made those?
- How could you make them?

And finally:

- How do you/will you track impact?
- How have you encouraged all team members to contribute to monitoring impact?
- How will your records of impact be used?

The workshop began with an introduction to the core considerations that would be outlined during the session:

1. Getting the aim of our impact maximisation strategy straight
2. Creating and capitalising on social networks
3. Tracking impact

Alongside this was an emphasis on stakeholders: the breadth of stakeholders which may be involved in the project – ranging from academics to the media, and from healthcare

professionals to the individuals who require pregnancy terminations –, the need to design a study that is relevant to the stakeholders, the ways in which to involve and inform stakeholders on research and findings, and the unexpected ways in which unforeseen stakeholders may emerge through the process of conducting research and from research findings.

Whilst focusing on extrapolating themes and thoughts relating to impact in a general sense, the workshop included a contextual overview of the research on pregnancy termination in Zambia, highlighting the high costs of unsafe abortions to both individuals and to the Zambian healthcare service. It also revealed that a lack of awareness of the circumstances under which abortion is legally permitted among the general public, the police force and the media alike led to misconceptions, and was a key driving force in the pathway to unsafe abortion in Zambia among the women interviewed.

The range of circumstances under which abortion is legal in Zambia is anomalous for the Sub-Saharan African region, and this project therefore has the unique opportunity to bring together a multidisciplinary team of researchers on an important and challenging topic that will have broader lessons for development elsewhere in the region. Hand-in-hand with this misconception of legality is a media tendency to illustrate abortion stories with pictures of heavy pregnant or Caucasian women, or even dead babies in some cases. The project team are therefore considering the development of an image bank of appropriate images for media use.

The key takeaway message from the workshop was the importance of sharing methods, findings and insights at every opportunity, planning research projects that are relevant to stakeholders and have stakeholders involved as partners, tailoring your methods and frequency of impact communication both with and for specific stakeholders, and the need to be willing to be flexible and adapt to situations that unexpectedly open doors for you. Central within this is enhancing the visibility of your research through various platforms, including well-indexed, open access information in addition to more informal communications through social media such as Twitter and blogs, and a willingness to be proactive in the spreading of your knowledge, ideas and approaches. Ernestina and Emily also highlighted the internal conflicts that academics can experience when an opportunity to communicate their message comes to light before their research has been published academically. Whilst it is always preferable to publish findings in a peer reviewed publication before disseminating them through other channels, there are times when you simply need to capitalise on an opportunity. Alongside this, however, there is also a need to always know your audiences and your limitations, and to be prepared for unintended consequences and ethical responsibilities; social science research, especially that focusing on controversial topics such as abortion, can provoke strong responses and researchers therefore need to be responsible and aware in the presentation of their findings.

A final key aspect of the presentation was the fact that policy is not based on any single piece of research but rather is the result of a body of research and a wider movement that has built up over a number of years, which together can produce instrumental and substantive outcomes. It is therefore vital to track impacts through well-maintained impact logs, to ensure channels of communication with both personal and professional contacts and networks thereof are kept open and active, to provide stakeholders with links to other relevant bodies of research, and to always be open to the opportunities for impact maximisation that may present themselves to you, however unexpected.