

Evidence Synthesis Research Awards (ESRA): a response from ESRC and DFID March 2016

In 2014 ESRC and DFID set four groups of researchers a challenging task: to look across the more than 100 diverse projects funded through our Joint Fund for Poverty Alleviation Research and synthesise and assess the evidence they had generated on a number of themes.

We hoped these studies – known as Evidence Synthesis Research Awards (ESRA) - would answer two different sets of questions we had. Firstly, what had been the Joint Fund's contribution to knowledge on the themes selected, what gaps existed in the portfolio, and what were the implications of this? And beyond that, what could these studies teach us about how research within such a diverse funding programme coheres and diverges, and how synthesis of this can be effectively generated?

The Joint Fund is deliberately non-thematic in how it awards funding within its overall broad focus on poverty alleviation: decision-making has always been driven by research quality and potential for impact, rather than an attempt to construct a thematically coherent or complimentary portfolio. So we chose to focus the synthesis studies on both cross-cutting topics – research methods and gender – as well as themes related to specific scientific or policy issues – health and children and young people – which we knew had some presence in the portfolio.

The teams of authors read through dozens of research proposals and scores of journal articles, as well as talking to grant holders and others, to produce the final ESRA reports, the first of which is being published today. The results are valuable pieces of research and rich sources of information, both in the main reports, case studies, and the annotated bibliographies of Joint Fund research, which we hope will be of interest to a broad range of audiences.

Each report highlights the specific achievements and contributions of Joint Fund research – to knowledge about development issues, to methods and approaches to researching these, and to supporting social and economic impact. Case studies throughout the reports highlight examples of excellent practice within and across the portfolio. The ESRA also helpfully point to spaces where more research would be valuable, issuing challenges both to researchers and funders to consider how they continue to drive as well as respond to evolving development agendas and changing global circumstances. A series of summaries to capture these findings and their implications for policymakers as well as for researchers is also being published to accompany the main reports.

Beyond this, the ESRA also show what a deliberately broad programme like the Joint Fund can achieve. Thematic openness does not mean bodies of knowledge will not emerge across a portfolio: a third of projects generated insights on children and young people, and more than half generated insights on health, despite neither being a specific focus of research calls. Yet within that there is still great diversity: for example, no two grants relevant to children and young people were examining the same issue, and diverse approaches to including consideration of gender were also found.

The ESRA also show how attention to cross-cutting issues can be supported: 60 per cent of grants included some level of gender analysis, rising over time as call specifications encouraged researchers to embed consideration of gender and structural inequalities. Similarly, the mixed methods studies that the Joint Fund encourages have become increasingly common, without removing space for high quality single method research and the valuable contributions this can also make.

What the ESRA studies also confirm is that synthesising research from across broad portfolios is challenging, even when thematically narrowed. Boundaries to syntheses may be better drawn in ways other than a common funding source, though that could limit data to published findings, bypassing some of the nuance and detail the ESRA could explore. Understanding the context in which research is commissioned, generated and produced is also critical: diversity has strengths as well as bringing challenges, and can contain common experience which researchers within such broad schemes may still gain valuable lessons from sharing.

As the Joint Fund moves into its second decade, the lessons from the ESRA form an important contribution to understanding both its achievements and future direction. We hope that other funders, researchers and policymakers will also be able to draw upon the answers – and questions – which they prompt.