

WHO COUNTS, WHO CARES?

PROMOTING ENGAGEMENT AND IMPACT

Organizing and conducting a scientifically rigorous longitudinal study is a complex, expensive undertaking. Increasingly, donors also expect researchers to add stakeholder engagement activities to their plans and budgets.

The goals of such engagement activities are:

- to maintain participation by individuals included in the studies
- to network more effectively with relevant stakeholders, including other longitudinal study practitioners, NGOs, academics, donors and government officials who can support the study
- to encourage evidence-informed policy by building connections with politicians, senior bureaucrats, media and others who influence public discourse and policies on which the research may have impact
- to provide plain-language results from longitudinal studies to those who have invested in them: citizens, governments, donors and survey participants.

Longitudinal researchers are learning to build and maintain contact and influence with stakeholders. But it's not easy, given that studies run for 10, 15, 40 or more years. Many funding agencies don't want to invest in stakeholder engagement, and many researchers continue to be focused on academic priorities (journal publications) rather than public priorities.

"We're not taught to be marketers," said Maureen Samms-Vaughan, a medical doctor and professor leading the Jamaica Birth Cohort longitudinal study. "We are social scientists, economists, medical people, nutritionists ... But marketing is what we have to do if we want to keep participants engaged in our studies and if we want our results to

have impact with the public and policymakers."

Longitudinal research isn't always set up to "address the questions that governments want answered," said Rachel Hinton of the UK Department for International Development (DFID). Additionally, said Samms-Vaughan, "There are times when the research doesn't support the government's policy direction. That's when being the expert with public credibility really matters. We use radio talk shows and public radio a lot. Politicians are unlikely to challenge the credible expert in the public sphere."

Hinton notes, "Research uptake and communications ... is a relatively small portion of spend in research programmes but it is a critical component ensuring results are accessed by key decision makers." DFID has supported a number of conduits linking longitudinal research in low- and middle-income settings to policy realms. The African Evidence Network (www.africaevidencenetwork.org) is an example of a group with an interest in evidence, its production and use in decision-making.

Others note that engagement is more about keeping a finger on the public pulse, while enjoying the freedom to conduct research that may not be appreciated by decision makers at a particular moment in time. Investments in longitudinal research can build basic infrastructure, which can allow researchers to respond more quickly to agendas as they shift over the years. Equally, this highlights the need to use longitudinal studies for their strengths, and use them in conjunction with other approaches (e.g., policy evaluations)



The Global Longitudinal Research Initiative (GLORI) aims to improve the practice and use of longitudinal methods and evidence. Read the full report of the October 2014 Symposium that inspired GLORI's formation at www.unicef-irc.org/knowledge-pages/Symposium-on-Cohorts-and-Longitudinal-Studies-2014/1088. To learn more about GLORI, read *Strength in Numbers: How longitudinal research can support child development* at www.UNICEF-irc.org

rather than in isolation. This also reflects on the structure and limitations of donor funding, which is not always conducive to results over a longer time horizon.

Engaging study participants requires a well-thought-out approach. The UK's Millennium Cohort Study (MCS) notes, "We carried out focus groups (of participants) and realized how little the cohort knew about the study and the importance of their involvement. One key aspect of ensuring engagement thus far has been providing cohort members with annual feedback of findings from the study, mainly to parents of children in the cohort. We send them via post and the Internet. These marketing tools must be interesting, relevant, important, clear, eye-catching – and brief!"

Here are some approaches to engaging the general public in longitudinal studies:

1. RELEVANCE: To ensure their studies are relevant to the public interest, researchers can develop formal and informal networks with donors and decision makers in the political, policy and programming levels of government. They can also monitor news media and other means of influence to keep abreast of, and engage in, relevant public debate. Studies can also be set up to encourage these links.

2. ENGAGEMENT: In the overcrowded, noisy world of information, it is challenging to keep participants, donors and policy leaders involved in a study over the long term. Participant attrition over survey rounds is a major issue for longitudinal studies.

To address this, some funders of longitudinal studies insist that communications strategies and budgets be part of the project from inception. As the UK-based ALSPAC study shows, participant contact should not be limited to tracking respondents down before each new survey wave begins. Communications between waves, particularly to relay findings and their policy implications, will help survey respondents to remember the study and feel they are part of something important, demonstrate the study's value to remind donors and governments of its value, and prepare the ground for uptake of longitudinal evidence into policy. Useful marketing tools include branding a study with a catchy name/acronym and logo, seeking out media interviews and making speeches. These will build name recognition, reputation, participation and influence.

