

Improving Applied Research in Humanitarian Crisis: Lessons Learned from IMPACT's Experience

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Learning plays a pivotal role in development and humanitarian contexts, where the dynamic and volatile environments mean the ability to learn and adapt is key to ensure the effectiveness of the response to affected communities. IMPACT Initiatives, operating in such challenging environments, must cultivate a culture of continuous learning to respond to evolving situations and adapt to newfound knowledge. This entails creating an enabling environment that **promotes continuous learning and transparency, or, in other words, becoming a 'learning organisation'**. This requires having robust learning mechanisms at the organisational level, including channels for capturing, disseminating and incorporating lessons learned (LL). One such channel is the Research LL matrix, a tool that IMPACT's teams use to reflect on, and document, key challenges and successes related to research implementation in the field.

To contribute towards wider organisational learning on research implementation, a baseline analysis was carried out by IMPACT's global Research Department, during which **all LL shared between 2018 and June 2023 were analysed in order to identify patterns in challenges and successes faced during research implementation across different contexts**. This analysis provides insights that we hope will be valuable in shaping best practices and enhancing the effectiveness of research in crisis settings. Here are the main things we learned:

Key Figures

13,700+

information products from
1,000+ research projects
implemented between
January 2018 and June 2023

536

lessons learned analysed
from **114** research projects
implemented in **23**
countries.

Figure 1: Main lessons learned by stage of research implementation



Cross-cutting:

Clarify expectations, roles and responsibilities in a terms of reference;
Take into account staffing and capacity before project starts;
Map stakeholders and maintain relevant relationships through close involvement and regular meetings

Planning as the cornerstone for quality research

Quality research in crisis settings hinges not only on rigorous methodology but also on strong planning and time management. In our experience, inadequate time allocations and unrealistic deadlines often lead to rushed work and challenges reaching quality standards. Poor planning can also cause operational hurdles and heavy workloads can lead to stress and high turnover, both hindering overall research implementation. To avoid these pitfalls, **it is crucial to assess staffing needs and capacity before the project begins, set realistic timelines based on available resources, while factoring in external variables** like rainy seasons, public holidays, and religious events. Additionally, developing contingency plans can safeguard against unforeseen challenges and ensure the research process runs smoothly.

Collaboration is another key element at this stage. Engaging with all stakeholders early on is can help addressing potential obstacles, and it is **essential to establish clear terms of reference before data collection begins**, ensuring that roles, responsibilities, and expectations are well defined and understood by all parties involved.

Training, monitoring, and continuous improvement to ensure data quality

The importance of robust enumerator training and strong data cleaning processes to achieve high data quality should not be overlooked. Inadequate training often leads to suboptimal implementation of data collection procedures, resulting in compromised data quality. Allocating more time for comprehensive training sessions—incorporating practical tests and interview simulations—helps ensure enumerators are well-prepared. Additionally, implementing a feedback mechanism and creating a platform for continuous learning can address concerns and fine-tune the data collection process in real-time.

A recurring challenge faced by our teams was to ensure data quality, often linked to a limited understanding of tasks and capacity gaps. While internal guidelines and tools

introduced since 2020 have mitigated this issue to some extent, there is a need for further dissemination and capacity-building activities to reinforce these practices. **Daily data cleaning was also emphasized as a crucial practice** for maintaining both data quality and the timeliness of the information products.

Clear communication and coordination to maximize efficiency

Efficient research implementation relies heavily on strong internal communication and coordination. When these elements are lacking, often coupled with unclear division of roles and responsibilities within the team, confusion, inefficiencies, and delays typically follow. To address these challenges, **terms of reference should serve as a reference point, and roles and responsibilities, including those for external engagement, should be clearly delineated.** Organising regular in-person meetings and sharing information through emails, instead of private chats, were identified as strategies to enhance cooperation and communication. Lastly, in high-turnover environments such as crisis contexts, it is essential to properly conduct handovers when required, ensuring that institutional memory is preserved and continuity is maintained.

Effective external engagement for impactful research

Strong external engagement is critical for ensuring that research findings are both useful and utilized. While relationship building is context-specific, it often requires **regular, close communication with external stakeholders**, paired with a deep understanding of their expectations. When done effectively, **the benefits of strong coordination and consultation are felt throughout the research cycle**, from more rigorous methodology to successful dissemination of findings and identification of LL. In particular, **joint analysis and sharing products with partners for their feedback during the drafting phase were identified as good practices** worth replicating. These strategies enhance the relevance and value of information products, as well as create buy-in for the results and promote use of findings in decision-making.

Maintain strong relationships with local stakeholders and authorities is equally important. Paying courtesy visits to community leaders before data collection begins, involving local authorities, along with partners and donors, in methodological reviews and sample selection, and validating findings with respondents and partners were suggested to reinforce these relationships. Indeed, not sharing findings with affected communities and local authorities can undermine local trust and jeopardise future activities as communities might be reluctant to participate and authorisations harder to obtain.

To support this process, developing external engagement guidelines and providing foundational training at country level could help country teams navigate these challenges. Specific guidelines on organising joint analysis workshops would also equip teams to implement these practices more effectively.

Lastly, having a clear dissemination plan is necessary. Without one, confusion on how to proceed often arises, leading to weaker and more limited dissemination of research findings, ultimately reducing their use and impact. **A well-defined dissemination strategy, including timelines and target audience, should be developed at the outset of the research.** This plan should

identify decision-making milestones, specifying when and how key stakeholders will be informed. Effective dissemination, including sharing findings back with communities and gathering their feedback, requires time and resources, which should be factored in at the planning stage.

CONCLUSION

This learning exercise has not only enhanced IMPACT's understanding of best practices and challenges faced implementing research in the field, but also **identified key areas for improvement and growth.** By translating these insights into concrete action points, IMPACT can enhance the quality of its work across different contexts and research programmes.

IMPACT shares these lessons learned externally to hopefully provide valuable insights and foster cross-organisation learning and transparency. By publishing these findings, IMPACT seeks to contribute to improved applied research practices across the sector, ultimately ensuring high quality data is available for evidenced-based humanitarian decision-making. This collaborative approach underscores IMPACT's commitment to promoting learning and accountability both internally and system-wide.

Methodology Overview

This learning exercise aimed to answer the following research questions:

- 1) What are the most common problems encountered by IMPACT staff implementing research projects across different country contexts?
- 2) What are the recommendations shared by country teams on how to solve these issues?
- 3) What are some best practices in research implementation that could be replicated across different contexts?
- 4) What steps could IMPACT take to address these issues and implement these best practices?

In total, **536 LL taken from 114 LL matrices shared by 23 different country teams were included** in this baseline analysis. Most of them were on research design (167), data collection and processing (153) and cross-cutting considerations (166). The following limitations should be kept in mind when reading the results: 1) a low completion rate with LL matrices shared for a minority of research implemented; 2) a limited understanding of the concept of "lesson learned"; and 3) the fact that most matrices were from 2020 and included mainly challenges.

ABOUT IMPACT

Created in 2010, IMPACT is a Geneva-based NGO and the largest independent data provider in contexts of crisis. It aims to promote evidence-based decision, shape practices and influence policies in humanitarian and development settings, to positively impact the lives of communities.

IMPACT has an established field presence in over 30 countries and is composed of more than 400 staff. Through our team of assessment, data, geospatial, and thematic specialists, we implement people-centred research and set standards for collecting and analysing rigorous, high-quality data in complex environments.

IMPACT takes an initiative-based approach to structuring its programming, with REACH, AGORA and PANDA, in direct partnership with aid actors.