

# PANOS LONDON ILLUMINATING VOICES

## Reporting research

Using evidence for effective journalism

This briefing is designed to help journalists better understand and communicate research findings to create debate about important development issues that affect ordinary people. It accompanies a series of media briefings on specific development research topics. These briefings and other resources can be downloaded for free from [www.panos.org.uk/relay](http://www.panos.org.uk/relay)

Researchers working for universities, governments or private companies are doing vital investigation into issues – such as clean water, food security and sexual health – that directly affect the everyday life of people around the world. However they often communicate the results only to other researchers.

Research findings can create powerful stories for news and features that are directly relevant to audiences. This briefing offers support and ideas on using research to create debates and inform people of problems and possible solutions that can change or even save their lives.

Promoting dialogue, debate and change

## Why report research?

Development research is a rich resource which can be used to create exciting stories which have impact:

**Research can provide vital information for audiences.** For example, an article based on findings from an agricultural research project on a new seed variety can inform extension workers about how to improve the crop resilience, yield, and income of farmers.

**Research can provide the basis for effective reporting which promotes accountability.** For example, Ugandan reporter Ssemujju Ibrahim used a research survey of 685 Ugandan women who nearly died in childbirth to tell the story of one woman's near miss during the birth of her thirteenth child. He also interviewed government officials about the research recommendations for reducing maternal deaths and made their answers publicly available, helping to make them more accountable.

**Research can draw in new audiences and provoke responses from policymakers.** For example, a talk show broadcast by Radio Gold in Ghana drew on research to ask how far education in Ghana had reduced poverty. The subject encouraged a new group of listeners – school pupils and students – to phone in. The resulting debate prompted a member of parliament to call on the government to fund educational reform.

**Research can provide sound evidence and hard-hitting facts.** For example, research into the working conditions for young women in wholesale shops in Jamaica revealed shopkeepers were in violation of labour laws and human rights agreements. The findings provided reliable material for a headline article on 'Modern Day Slavery'. They also provided the basis for lively radio debates on women's rights that drew in wide audiences.

'At one time, journalism for me only meant giving details of accidents and political killings, attending functions and writing about it. The use of academic research as the basis of my journalistic writings has helped make my articles more mature and complete. It also helps me address issues in a more informed and significant way that mere event reporting can never do.'

Thingnam Anjulika Samom  
North-east Indian journalist



Young people in Ghana reading a newspaper providing information on health and social issues. Research can provide evidence for reporting that attracts new audiences.  
GIACOMO PIROZZI | PANOS PICTURES

### Media coverage of new research findings on remittances leads to policy change in Nepal

From 1997–2000, a team of Nepali and British researchers examined the importance of labour migration and foreign remittances in Nepal. At that time migration was either ignored or viewed as 'bad' by government officials and non-governmental organisations (NGOs) in Nepal. The research findings showed that remittances were an important source of income, and that labour migration could be valuable. The media reported these findings. When the government of Nepal published its next Five Year Plan, policies related to foreign labour migration were far more favourable (Adhikari et al, 2002).

## What is development research?

Research asks questions and tests possible explanations and solutions using systems for detailed investigation and analysis. One important area of research seeks to produce evidence and new ideas on issues that affect the growth and development of countries or regions such as food security, economic growth and HIV/AIDS. It seeks to understand the reasons behind problems like poverty, exclusion, poor health, illiteracy and corruption.

The findings and recommendations of development research can inform and influence a country's national development plans and policies, and inform the opinions and decisions of ordinary people. Typically, the ultimate aim of this research is to improve the position of the poorest in society and the poorer countries in the world.

Among those who carry out development research are:

- academics at universities
- researchers at research institutes
- postgraduate students (MPhil, PhD)
- international organisations and NGOs
- government institutions
- professionals who carry out evaluations
- public campaigners who gather data to support their cause
- transnational companies.

### Who sets the development research agenda?

Decisions about what to research are often made by donor institutions and organisations in the North such as:

- multilateral organisations: eg World Bank, United Nations
- bilateral organisations: eg Northern government departments such as the UK Department for International Development (DFID), the Dutch government's Development Research Council (RAWOO)
- international NGOs: eg Oxfam, Save the Children, Human Rights Watch
- transnational companies: eg Monsanto, Shell.

Sometimes these organisations try to find out what is important to local people. For instance, Panos surveyed donors and found that RAWOO (the Dutch Development Research Council) held forums and workshops in Tanzania to discuss which research should be funded, taking its lead from Tanzanian researchers, civil society representatives, members of the business press and community members.

In this way, the RAWOO research agenda was led by the demands of Tanzanian people. However, research agendas may not always be grassroots-generated. Funders may not be well-informed or may have different priorities and neglect to consult people in developing countries.

Lack of funding often prevents universities and research organisations in developing countries from setting the research agenda themselves. This is especially true for organisations conducting social and economic research, which is less likely to be funded from commercial or government sources. Social and economic researchers in developing countries end up competing with better-connected Northern research organisations for funds from international donors (Killick, 2001). These donors often require that research is relevant to their own areas of interest, which can make it hard for Southern organisations to find funding for important research that falls outside these areas of interest.

### Examples of development research questions include:

- What factors explain the rise in drug-resistant TB in India?
- What mix of crops is optimal for food security in Sierra Leone?
- What explains the failures of current policies to improve the living standards of the urban poor in Bangladesh?
- What is the relationship between land policy and human development indicators in Tanzania?
- What are the determinants and impact of migrant remittances in Colombia?

'I think the research gives some sort of credibility to your reporting – it's not like you're pulling information out of a hat.'

**Journalist**  
interviewed as part  
of a Panos London  
research study, Jamaica



Young children living in the slums of Dhaka, Bangladesh. Development research seeks to produce evidence and ideas that help tackle poverty.  
GMB AKASH | PANOS PICTURES

## Finding the story

Research – which is often presented in long reports full of complex graphs and statistics – can be offputting. While the reports are a rich source of information, journalists who have worked with research recommend talking to researchers in person and over the phone to find the underlying story that is interesting and relevant to wider audiences.

Contacting researchers and asking them a few open-ended questions can help establish how their research connects with individual experiences and bigger policy debates.



Children working their father's fields in Swaziland. Research on livelihoods could be presented through a photo essay.

GRAEME WILLIAMS | PANOS PICTURES

### Questions to ask researchers

- What were your most important research findings?
- How do your findings affect ordinary people's lives?
- Who could benefit most from knowing your research findings?
- Do your findings contradict other views or sources?
- Do your findings suggest policy changes should be made? If so, which policies and why?

### Approaching researchers

There can be tensions between researchers and the media. Journalists sometimes say that they find researchers unapproachable, while researchers are often concerned that their research will be misrepresented. However, journalists and researchers brought together by the Relay programme on communicating research, implemented by the Panos Network, find they have a shared aim: to create debates about important development issues that reach out to ordinary people. It may help to emphasise this shared aim when you contact researchers.

## Ideas for using research

The data from well-conducted research can provide evidence to help challenge preconceived ideas and vested interests. The following topics are examples where research might provide the basis for news and features:

### Research on AIDS or malaria:

A round of interviews with different groups involved (eg researchers, policymakers, pharmaceutical companies, health professionals, NGOs, affected patients and their families) could lead to an article on the tensions between these groups.

### Research on post-conflict

**reconstruction:** Could be presented through a feature story of an individual who is putting back together the pieces of his or her life.

### Research on gender equality in society:

Could be presented through two side-by-side interviews: the first interviewee (perhaps an NGO worker) believes that gender inequality is a serious problem in society, while the second interviewee (perhaps a policymaker or local employer) believes that gender equality is not desirable.

**Research on land rights:** Could be presented through a short piece where the journalist presents the evidence about land rights and then offers their own opinion, inviting reactions from readers. The readers' reactions can be printed in a later issue.

**Research on livelihoods:** Could be presented through a photo essay where all the activities of a rural family are photographed over the course of a week. The journalist can inform readers whether this is a typical family (with a typical level of income) or whether the family is unusual in some way.

## Assessing research

One of the reasons research can be so valuable is because it is based on rigorous investigation and is considered to be hard evidence.

Like any information, it pays to approach research findings with a critical eye. By asking some straightforward questions, you can not only report research with confidence, but also hold researchers and research donors to account. Indeed sometimes the most interesting story is in questioning the research itself!

### What is the quality of the research?

While researchers typically go through rigorous education and have high standards for carrying out research, it is possible for the research process to be imperfect, undermining its quality. Here are some issues to look out for:

- **Ethics** – research should be conducted with respect for people, for knowledge and for the quality of the research. Researchers working in communities should be culturally sensitive and respectful, and should communicate their findings back to research subjects
- **Objectivity** – research aims to be objective. It should be about more than an individual researcher's opinion and should prove or disprove existing theories and generate new ones, producing evidence which may challenge the researcher's own beliefs
- **Methodology used in the research** – if a research team aims to find out why the rate of childhood deaths is high in a particular rural area, they should speak with a sample of local health providers and parents in that area. If the research team's methodology only includes speaking with health professionals in the nearest town, their findings may be inaccurate and ill-informed
- **Qualifications of researchers** – if a research team is carrying out an advanced piece of economic research, for example, at least one of the researchers should have advanced training in economics.



### Questions that can help you distinguish between good and poor research:

- Who did the research? Call their research director or peers in the field – are they well respected for their research?
- How was the research conducted?
- What did researchers expect to prove? Did they learn anything new? Did the evidence in their research surprise them?
- How did they decide which issue/people to research? How did they communicate their research findings? Interview the people being researched. What was their impression of the research process? Were they made aware of the reasons for conducting the research?

A presenter from a radio station in Botswana interviews schoolgirls. Asking research subjects about their impression of the research process can help assess the quality of the research.

GIACOMO PIROZZI | PANOS PICTURES

### 'Advocates' and coalitions linking research and media

Some researchers aim to use their research to influence policy. They may target the policies of local government, national government or civil society organisations (CSOs). Researchers who are attempting to change policy are often known as *advocates*. They think about who they need to communicate with in order to influence policy.

These researchers will want to build a relationship with the local and national media in order to publicise their work and raise public awareness so that people can hold governments to account. In these cases, media objectivity is crucial but this kind of research also provides opportunities for journalists to peg research findings to current policy concerns or events – for instance, media coverage of research on the status of women could be published or aired on 8 March, International Women's Day.

A forthcoming Panos study has found that CSOs can also play a lead 'advocate' role in coalitions and networks, linking researchers and the media to encourage wider public engagement and debate on key issues such as the 'Save Mabira Forest' campaign in Uganda, which links research on the economic value of the forest with campaigners and environmental journalists.



Children in a building destroyed by war, Mozambique. Journalists can find out how far research meets the needs and concerns of local people.

PENNY TWEEDIE | PANOS PICTURES

‘The Mozambique story clearly demonstrates the gulf that can sometimes exist between priorities of researchers and local people. In this case the former child soldier is more concerned about the day to day struggles such as lack of jobs, housing and so on and not his war traumas. On the other hand, researchers are preoccupied with the psychological rehabilitation of former child soldiers. This also brings into sharp focus the question of who is supposed to drive the research agenda. Is it the donors or local people?’

**Cephas Chitsaka** journalist, commenting on a Panos London research feature on child soldiers in Mozambique, ‘Mozambique’s healing lessons for Ugandan peacemakers’. For this and other features communicating research go to [www.panos.org.uk/relay](http://www.panos.org.uk/relay)

### Is the research meeting the needs of people on the ground?

Sometimes, there is a geographical and cultural distance between the people who commission development research, those who carry out the research, and the people who are supposed to benefit from the research – especially poor and marginalised communities.

Talking to these communities and asking for their reaction to research findings, you can find out how useful the research might be in practice and whether it actually reflects the communities’ needs and concerns.

### Who is funding the research?

The responsibility of researchers to those funding research can often influence how the information is used and transmitted. Journalists who are aware of these links can ask questions and draw conclusions, which can then be relayed to the target audience.

For instance:

- Some research on how mobile phones are used in Africa is funded by telecommunications companies who want primarily to make money selling mobile services
- Research on the prevalence of a disease in Asia might be conducted by a pharmaceutical company primarily to feed into their marketing strategy for selling a new medicine
- A European government might support a research project on the dynamics of conflict in the Middle East to inform national security policy
- An environmental rights organisation might commission research on the economic value of a forest with the goal of protecting it.

You can ask who has funded the research and why. You can also look at why particular findings and recommendations were highlighted. Sometimes, as in the debate around research on biofuels costs and benefits for the environment and the very poor, the clash of interests and motivations make for very interesting stories.

## A guide to research terms

### Quantitative and qualitative research Research terms and techniques

*Quantitative* research seeks to determine facts through measurement. It uses tools such as surveys and questionnaires to produce and analyse data in the form of numbers and statistics. *Qualitative* research is concerned with gaining a more in-depth understanding of people's behaviour. It may use interviews and focus groups with people or communities to reveal views, beliefs and preferences. Researchers often combine quantitative and qualitative techniques and information.

### Research approaches

- **Empirical** research is based on the scientific method of observation and experiment. For example, environmental scientists may conduct empirical research based on repeatable experiments using laboratory-based trials and field trials to test the resistance of different varieties of plant disease
- **Participatory** research involves the research 'subjects' (individuals and communities) in the process of research (eg girls of school age and their parents, the wider local community) and may use social surveys, sample group interviews and case studies to examine, for example, why only 30 per cent of girls attend school in a certain area
- **Applied** research seeks to test solutions to identified problems and other practical questions. For the example above, applied research would look at models and solutions for how girls' attendance can be increased.

- **Survey** – a data sample used to draw general conclusions about a population, eg a survey may chart how many people in a certain area earn below a certain income
- **Sampling** – choosing some people (a sample) who are broadly representative of the group to be studied
- **Focus groups** – a guided discussion with a group of people about the research questions
- **Case studies** – choosing a few cases to explore in more depth, eg a smaller group of people are invited to do longer one-on-one interviews in order to understand their life history and situation
- **Lab or field trials** – testing of a substance in the laboratory (lab) or in a controlled environment, eg testing seed variants on a test farm.

Researcher conducting a health survey in Bangladesh.  
JENNY MATTHEWS | PANOS PICTURES



### Development indicators

Understanding indicators can help you interpret development statistics with confidence.

- **Infant Mortality Rate (IMR)** – number of children per 1,000 who die before their first birthday
- **Maternal Mortality Rate (MMR)** – number of maternal deaths due to childbearing per 100,000 live births
- **Gini Co-efficient** – a statistical measure of the inequality of wealth distribution within a country or group
- **Human Development Index (HDI)** – used by the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) in the Human Development Report and composed of a range of indicators of health, education and training, and standard of living
- **Gross Domestic Product (GDP)** – the value of goods and services produced in a country
- **Gross National Product (GNP)** – GDP plus the net income received from outside the country.

## Research cited

Jagannath Adhikari, Ganesh Gurung and David Seddon (2002) – [www.gdnet.org/pdf/global\\_research\\_projects/br&p/Nepal.pdf](http://www.gdnet.org/pdf/global_research_projects/br&p/Nepal.pdf)  
T Killick (2001) – [www.odi.org.uk/rapid/Projects/R0008/Abstracts/doc002abs.html](http://www.odi.org.uk/rapid/Projects/R0008/Abstracts/doc002abs.html)

## Resources for journalists reporting research

### Eldis

A gateway to development research  
[www.eldis.org](http://www.eldis.org)  
email: [eldis@ids.ac.uk](mailto:eldis@ids.ac.uk)

### id21

Contains thousands of summaries of development research findings  
[www.id21.org](http://www.id21.org)  
email: [id21@ids.ac.uk](mailto:id21@ids.ac.uk)

### Research and Policy in Development (RAPID)

Free reports and papers on research communication, especially focusing on how to have an impact on policy  
[www.odi.org.uk/rapid](http://www.odi.org.uk/rapid)

### Research for Development (R4D)

Contains summaries of development research projects funded by the UK Department for International Development (DFID)  
[www.research4development.info](http://www.research4development.info)

### Inter Press Service (IPS) – Making Research Real

Journalism based on research  
[http://ipsnews.net/new\\_focus/changelives/index.asp](http://ipsnews.net/new_focus/changelives/index.asp)

### Scidev.net

News, views and information about science, technology and the developing world  
[www.scidev.net](http://www.scidev.net)

### Global Development Network (GDNet)

Promoting development research  
[www.gdnet.org](http://www.gdnet.org)

### Southern African Research and Documentation Centre (SARDC)

Improving knowledge about economic, political, cultural and social developments in Southern Africa  
[www.sardc.net](http://www.sardc.net)

### Development Research Network (D-Net)

Promoting the use of information and communication technology (ICT) for economic development in Bangladesh  
[www.dnet-bangladesh.org](http://www.dnet-bangladesh.org)

### Council on Health Research for Development (COHRED)

Knowledge sharing, advocacy and communication on health research  
[www.cohred.org](http://www.cohred.org)

## Articles about reporting research

'Warning: Habits May Be Good for You', *New York Times*, 13 July 2008, about how commercial market research has been harnessed by public health campaigners.  
[www.nytimes.com/2008/07/13/business/13habit.html](http://www.nytimes.com/2008/07/13/business/13habit.html)

'The bad news bearers', *The Times Higher Education*, 21 August 2008, about the tension for scientists in AIDS research between accurate reporting of results and encouraging policymakers to take action.  
[www.timeshighereducation.co.uk/story.asp?storyCode=403225&sectioncode=26](http://www.timeshighereducation.co.uk/story.asp?storyCode=403225&sectioncode=26)

Special issue of the web magazine *Glocal Times* on research communication.  
[www.glocaltimes.k3.mah.se/frontpage.aspx?issuelid=16](http://www.glocaltimes.k3.mah.se/frontpage.aspx?issuelid=16)

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The Relay programme works in developing countries to connect journalists and editors with researchers. It is implemented by the Panos Network around the world.

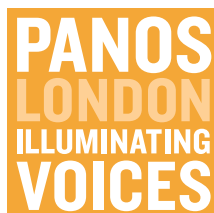
The following media briefings and other resources on communicating research are available for free download from [www.panos.org.uk/relay](http://www.panos.org.uk/relay)

- 1 **Common Ground? Investigating the importance of managing land**
- 2 **From soldier to civilian: The challenge of reintegration**
- 3 **Ensuring a food secure future: Ingredients for change**
- 4 **Good choice: The right to sexual and reproductive health**
- 5 **Better connected: Empowering people through communications technology**
- 6 **Climate change: Adapting to the greenhouse**
- 7 **Sorting fact from fiction: Improving media reporting on TB**



### Cover image:

A woman holds a water bottle she has just collected from the roof of her home in the Kibera slums, Kenya. Swiss researcher Martin Wegelin of the Solar Water Disinfection project claims that one day of exposure to sunlight in a plastic bottle can kill most of the bacteria in the water.  
SVEN TORFINN | PANOS PICTURES



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