Engaged Research for Societal Benefit

A Call to Funders

Input and feedback welcome

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Introduction

To make progress on pressing global issues—to create healthy, equitable, peaceful, just, and sustainable societies—funders, researchers, governments, boundary spanners, community groups, civil society actors, and others will need to draw together diverse types of knowledge. For example, to address pressing societal challenges like climate change or health pandemics, actors from across sectors must bridge knowledge cultures to weave together policy acumen, practical know-how, Indigenous Knowledge, lived experience, research, and other types of evidence.¹

Engaged research is an approach that can help draw together different ways of knowing.²

As defined by a recent National Science Foundation report, engaged research is “research conducted via meaningful collaboration among scientists and [other groups] that explicitly recognizes that scientific expertise alone is not always sufficient to pose effective research questions, enable new discoveries, and rapidly translate scientific discoveries to address society’s grand challenges.”³

This approach recognizes the importance of research evidence while rejecting the idea that it is the only or most important form of evidence. Research evidence, as defined by the William T. Grant Foundation, is “evidence derived from studies that apply systematic methods and analyses to address predefined questions or hypotheses.”⁴ As such, engaged research offers a way to integrate other forms of knowledge (e.g., lived experience) into research evidence through systematic testing or analysis to address predefined questions.

This approach is not new. In fact, related methodologies called by different names have deep roots in many Indigenous cultures and long histories in a variety of academic disciplines.⁵,⁶ However, newfound interest and investment provide an opportunity to explore the potential of engaged research to spur progress toward the achievement of intended societal outcomes on issues as wide ranging as health, education, climate and environment, and peacebuilding.⁷

The potential of engaged research hinges on its association with the conditions that facilitate research use in decision-making (e.g., trust in the research results) and its ability to integrate different types of knowledge and expertise.⁸ In addition to producing new knowledge, engaged research processes can create and strengthen the relationships, administrative capabilities, and other conditions needed to identify or implement pragmatic and sustainable solutions to complex challenges.⁹ Furthermore, systematic evaluation can help us better understand what works for research to make a difference in policy, practice, and community settings—and the conditions under which engaged research supports the achievement of desired outcomes.¹⁰

Workshop on Engaged Research and Its Use

In October 2023, a group of scholars, funders, boundary spanners, government representatives, and other experts from around the world, convened by the Transforming Evidence Funders Network and the Aspen Global Change Institute, gathered for a workshop to assess the evidence about and opportunities related to engaged research and its use.¹¹,¹²

Care was taken to invite participants that represent a wide range of knowledge cultures, including a variety of Indigenous Knowledge traditions, academic disciplines (e.g., community psychology, epidemiology, anthropology, public policy), and issue areas (e.g., health, education, governance, etc.). Participants joined from Brazil, Canada, Colombia, India, Malaysia, South Africa, Tanzania, the United Kingdom, and the United States. Despite the diversity of backgrounds and expertise represented, there was striking convergence in the priorities and challenges that face these experts in their disparate contexts.

Drawing on their wide-ranging expertise and experiences, the group generated a series of recommendations for funders and others who are interested or invested in producing new knowledge and want to:

- Support the achievement of equitable and sustainable societal outcomes by ensuring those closest to the problem are included in the research processes driving problem-solving efforts;
Workshop participants noted that engaged research is not a cure-all, is not an appropriate approach in every context, and that there is still much to learn about the conditions required to deliver its intended benefits. Further, participants cautioned funders to carefully consider the costs and potential unintended consequences of engaged research (e.g., diminished capacity for participants’ other key efforts) that may be associated with the significant time and capacity required for meaningful engagement. At the same time, participants affirmed that broadening awareness of and deepening investment in engaged research approaches holds great promise for groups whose missions call them to conduct research that will benefit society.

Address Systems with New Momentum Behind Familiar Recommendations

Recognizing the important role funders play in resourcing—and therefore influencing—research ecosystems, we offer a set of recommendations for funders who are interested in unlocking the power of engaged research to deliver better outcomes for society. While the focus is on funders, all these recommendations require funders to collaborate closely with other actors, including community groups, civil society organizations, local actors, research organizations, boundary (i.e., intermediary) organizations, and other funders.

Importantly, these recommendations are not new. In fact, many of these have been advocated for by a wide range of groups for decades. Indeed, many funders have extolled the benefits of engaged research, and in many cases are already supporting it.

For example, a 2018 scan of 26 health research funding agencies across Australia, Europe, and North America found that the most common funder-driven strategy for ensuring research-generated evidence is used in the real-world is strategically tailored funding opportunities (grants) to link researchers with research users. However, the study also found that funder efforts to get evidence into practice were not always themselves evidence-based.

Indications of new momentum

There are several factors that indicate new momentum behind evidence-informed funder efforts to support engaged research, and growing windows of opportunity for funders to advance the recommendations outlined below.

- First, there is growing interest and investment in engaged research from a wide range of influential funders and other actors.15,16
- Further, previous calls for engaged research have often been siloed by issue area, geography, or methodological approach. However, these silos seem to be weakening—as demonstrated by the enthusiastic participation of our diverse workshop participants and other interdisciplinary, cross-sector, and global initiatives.17,18,19,20
- And finally, research about the conditions and mechanisms that enable research to make a difference in policy, practice, and community settings has generated a body of knowledge that can help weave these efforts together and help us understand how and under what conditions engaged research can help facilitate the achievement of intended outcomes.21,22,23

To capture this new momentum and take advantage of this window of opportunity, workshop participants recommend that individual funders take a collaborative approach that considers how the below recommendations can be integrated, sequenced, and leveraged against one another into strategies that address entrenched system-level challenges.
Recommendations

1. Incentivize Engaged Research

Studies show that, when resourced appropriately and conducted thoughtfully, engaged research can produce knowledge that is rigorous, legitimate (relevant to context and objectives), and well-positioned for use (timely and actionable). In addition to creating knowledge, engaged research can support the collective sense-making required to support knowledge use by deepening relationships, improving services, and informing practices across the wide range of contexts in which people from different sectors collaborate to make decisions. Funders can incentivize this important work by:

**Communicating the unique value and impact of engaged research**

This may include highlighting its ability to weave together multiple ways of knowing, to lay the groundwork for coordinated action and collaboration, to foster inclusion and ethics in research processes, and more. Too often, the value of engaged research is challenged on grounds of research quality. Therefore, communicating its value will likely require emphasizing the long history engaged research has across a variety of academic disciplines, encompassing a diverse array of rigorous research methods, and additionally emphasizing the growing evidence base on the impact of engaged research.

**Rewarding engaged research**

It will be important to encourage and reward this work across career stages in academia, government, and non-governmental organizations. This may include support for trainings, awards, projects, programs, networks, and salaries or endowed positions. For example, to support the professional development of researchers in higher education institutions who want to participate in engaged research teams, funders may look at promising faculty reward systems that are being developed across the U.S., in Southern Africa, and elsewhere around the world. These systems can better recognize the societal contributions of research and expand measures of success beyond scholarly metrics like publication and citation counts.

**Creating, testing, and refining methods for assessing quality and impact**

To reshape incentives and build knowledge about what works, funders can support efforts that improve evaluation of engaged research. Some innovative efforts have developed indicators of effectiveness to help understand the health and likelihood of impact for engaged research projects and approaches for defining and evaluating the quality of engaged research. Other efforts have developed trainings to allow engaged research participants to better understand and cultivate the conditions that lead to impact.
To unlock the potential of these collaborative approaches, it is important to consider engaged research within the broader contexts of the organizations, cultures, and systems in which it takes place. Studies show that the factors in the broader context where engaged research takes place (e.g., different work cultures in partner organizations) can be critical for enabling or impeding the use or engaged research in decision-making and other outcomes of interest. Funders can cultivate the enabling conditions for ethical and effective and impactful engaged research by:

**Promoting the principles of engaged research**

As engaged research gains popularity, there is also a tendency to view engagement with partners as a check-the-box activity, that can be done without proper attention to important principles that govern ethical and effective engaged research. Therefore, while incentivizing engaged research, funders need to ensure that they do not inadvertently promote ineffective or unethical engagement. Not all researchers nor every initiative should be pushed toward engaged research, but engaged research principles (e.g., mutual benefit and respect, shared responsibility, ethical engagement) should help inform and transform research culture and research ethics. These principles can shape everything from how funders scope their priorities, to how organizations structure their capacity, to how researchers design their agendas, to how each actor evaluates their efforts and beyond.

**Developing funding, financing, and administrative mechanisms**

(e.g., grant opportunities, multiple income sources for projects, and resource governance structures, respectively) that provide researchers and partners with the time and flexibility needed to develop trusting, mutually beneficial relationships. In some cases, this may require investment in institutional changes that support:

- Early-stage relationship development (e.g., resources to explore new collaborations and invest in potential partners)
- Long-term investments that focus on the sustainability of collaborative engagements (e.g., staff dedicated to a partnership rather than a one-time, collaborative project)
- The ability to pay groups outside of universities for their time and work
- Capacity and capability development for boundary spanners, brokers, or intermediaries who can help identify, cultivate, and sustain partnerships but do not necessarily participate actively in research production or application
- Manageable administrative burdens (e.g., in university review boards or funder reporting requirements), which can otherwise sideline engagements before they can begin

**Investing in systematic learning and evaluation about engaged research and research use**, building on the substantial body of research that already exists. It will be important to continue and coordinate the multiple new and existing investments focused on studies that help us better understand the essential elements that allow engaged research to make a difference. Not all engaged research is effective, and in some cases, when conducted poorly, engaged research can also have negative implications. Therefore, studies focused on the different approaches to engaged research and research use are critical for understanding the mechanisms and conditions that allow engaged research to drive progress. Conversely, studies of engaged research can also help build knowledge about other evidence-informed decision-making strategies by building knowledge about the conditions associated with increased use of research in decision-making. Fields such as the Science of Actionable Knowledge (SOAK), Implementation Science, and other studies about improving the use of research evidence can be critical to building our understanding of these systems.
Invest in Infrastructure for Engaged Research

Studies across contexts show that engaged research typically requires significant investment of time and other resources, including supports that equip participants to use research findings in decision-making (e.g., resources to deliver research to the right place, at the right time, from the right source, and in the right format). Engaged research often requires tailoring project design and funding to the contexts and the specific goals of the research partners. To tailor engaged research to specific local and cultural contexts often requires a diverse array of organizations. Funders, with partners, can build much needed supports by:

Creating professional development pathways

Initiatives that equip the engaged research workforce with the competencies needed to do their work ethically and effectively are essential. This is distinct from, but complimentary to, the efforts to incentivize engaged research. While incentives encourage and reward participation in engaged research, these efforts also should equip participants with skills, knowledge, experience, and values needed to do the work well. This may include specialized trainings; guided opportunities to participate in high-quality engaged research for early, mid, and late career professionals; and regularly updated performance measures to match specialized competencies and context-specific goals.

Resourcing boundary spanners, local actors, and the full evidence ecosystem

Studies show that boundary spanners (i.e., intermediaries, brokers) play a critical role in the evidence ecosystem, facilitating relationships and cultivating the collaborations that are central to engaged research. Too often, these critical connectors—with distinct knowledge, skills, and capacities—are often underfunded and undervalued. To address this, some funders have begun investing directly in boundary spanning organizations to support the capabilities needed to create and maintain the connective tissue between diverse participants and organizations involved in engaged research. Other key partners in engaged research are also underfunded and undervalued. For example, research funds often flow to or through universities and other research organizations. This can work well, but it can also entrench harmful power dynamics and assumptions about whose knowledge, expertise, and experiences should be considered and prioritized in engaged research processes. Some funders have taken a different approach by funding community organizations to manage the research budget. By funding community groups, civil society organizations, or other local actors directly, funders can reverse the common dynamic where universities pay community partners as subcontractors. This reversal may help upend related assumptions about which groups’ knowledge counts.

Encouraging flexibility, course corrections, and context-specific evaluation

Engaged research should avoid being prescriptive, and instead, allow partners to lean into the collaborative nature of the work and tailor their approach, and goals, to their context. Evaluation and systematic learning efforts (described above) should be tailored to the context-specific nature of engagement efforts. One way to do this is to promote the use of general design principles that can be applied flexibly and adaptively to the priorities and needs of the groups involved.
A Call to Engagement for Funders

To find solutions to pressing societal challenges, we need to be willing and able to consider multiple forms of evidence, weaving what we know from policy acumen, practical know-how, Indigenous Knowledge, lived experience, research, and other forms of knowledge. Engaged research offers a promising approach for bridging different knowledge cultures in ways that can help drive progress toward healthy, equitable, peaceful, just, and sustainable societies.

Funders are uniquely positioned within the global research ecosystem to leverage the growing interest and investment in engaged research across sectors, issue areas and geographies to call attention to system-level challenges warranting system-level solutions. To accomplish this, funders should collaborate with partners including their funding peers, community groups, Indigenous peoples, civil society organizations, local actors, governments, research organizations and institutions, boundary (i.e., intermediary) organizations, and others to:

- Incentivize engaged research,
- Create the enabling conditions for ethical and effective engaged research, and
- Invest in the infrastructure for engaged research.

We invite partners to join us as we work to break down silos around engaged research theories and practices to build on each other’s successes and tackle shared challenges.

Connect with any of the ongoing activities referenced in this paper or offer comments or critiques to inform future versions of this living document: Ben Miyamoto at bmiyamoto@pewtrusts.org. Join the conversation online: LinkedIn (https://www.linkedin.com/groups/14133560/) | Explore new research and practice on making and using research evidence, across disciplines and policy domains by subscribing to the Transforming Evidence newsletter: (https://transforming-evidence.org/newsletter).

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