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CEDIL Evidence Brief 10

Making and justifying evidence claims in international development

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Introduction

In the last few decades, there has been an increasing use of, and demand for, high-quality research among decision-makers in international development. Wanting to know whether, how and where interventions work, they find statements made or implied to be supported by research evidence. These statements are 'evidence claims'. Other people may question whether the evidence supporting the claims has been compiled or scrutinised appropriately. This raises the question of how such evidence claims are framed, justified and communicated.

A new review aims to address this important question by reviewing research findings from impact evaluations and systematic reviews to understand the nature and the scope of evidence claims produced from low- and middle-income country (LMIC) research. This evidence brief shares key findings from this review.

How did we get the results?

We analysed impact evaluations and syntheses funded by the Foreign, Commonwealth, and Development Office (FCDO, formerly Department for International Development) to identify the nature of claims made, and how they are developed, justified and communicated. We included 78 studies, published in 2017 or later, that assessed the impact of any intervention programme LMICs, often in humanitarian settings: 47 impact evaluations and 31 systematic reviews. We also drew on literature from other disciplines to summarise the current debates about making and justifying claims.

Findings

Overall, we found that most of the evidence claims were framed by research teams from medium- or high-income countries (n=75), with fewer than five per cent of included studies and reviews led by researchers from low-income countries (n=3). The nature of claims focused broadly on intervention outcomes and effects (impact), implementation factors, choice of research designs and methods, the credibility of the research, and knowledge gaps. Claims and justifications were typically communicated

using a variety of tables, graphs, diagrams, and geographical maps, while claims about empirical knowledge were communicated using standardised outputs such as forest plots, charts, and online evidence maps (a visual presentation of the body of evidence).

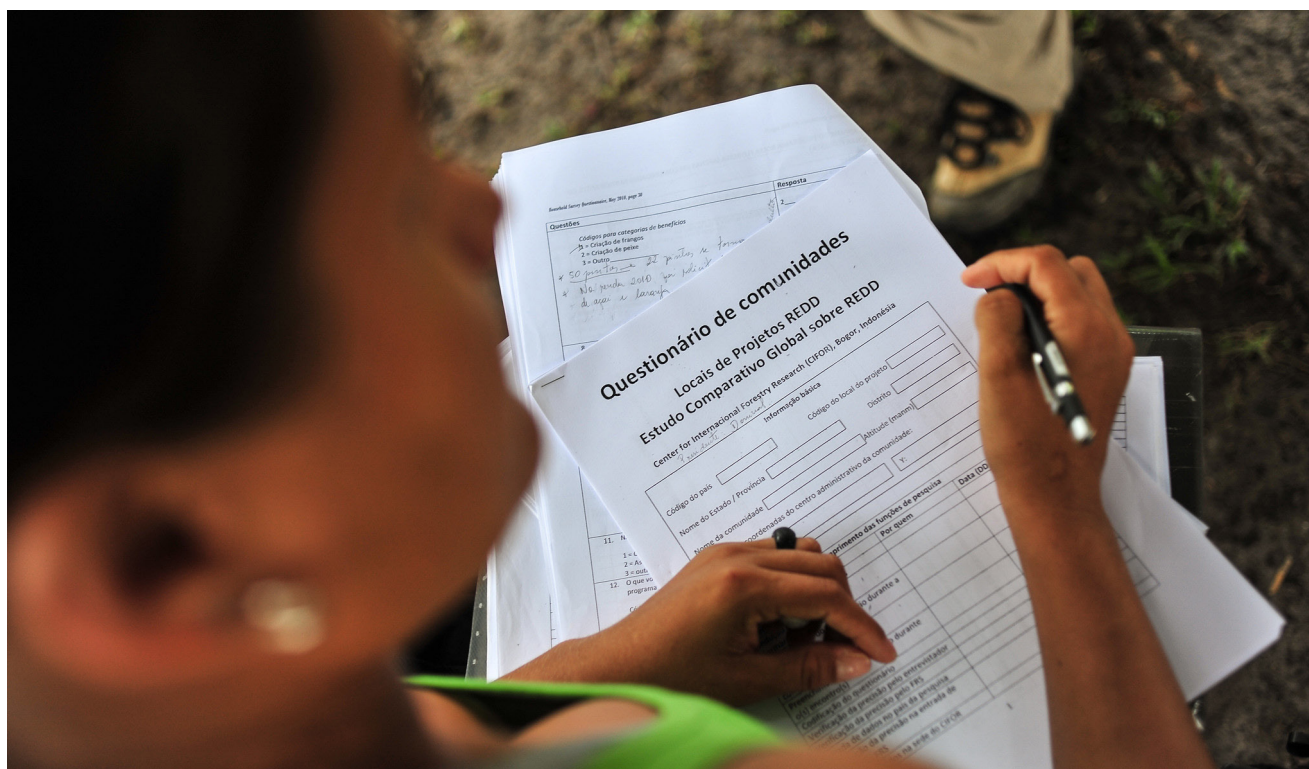
Within the **impact evaluations**, we found that claims about impact were primarily justified in terms of their technical quality. This justification was occasionally complemented by consideration of the appropriateness of the study design and research methods to address the research questions.

Claims about methodology were justified by considering whether findings warrant conclusions of causality. Meanwhile, claims about quality and validity were implicitly justified through the employment of well-established study designs such as Randomised Controlled Trials (RCTs) or triangulating data from different sources. The choice of study designs other than RCTs were often justified by their feasibility for researching in humanitarian contexts.

Claims about how generalisable the findings might be rested on the characteristics of the study population, the study settings, and theories about how programmes work.

Within the systematic reviews, we found that evidence claims about intervention impacts were justified on the basis of the quantity, quality, consistency, and coherent focus of the evidence. How to approach the task of reviewing studies systematically is justified by the type and consistency of the studies available to answer review questions. Claims made about the quality and validity of review findings are justified by employing international methodological standards for addressing the review questions. Although RCTs met international methodological standards, they encountered problems when contexts changed unpredictably, such as in settings affected by conflict. While other impact evaluation methods suited such contexts better, they lacked international methodological standards to guide them.

Social values were recognised in all the systematic reviews, although they were not necessarily framing the work. Involving stakeholders in framing systematic reviews and integrating social values into questions and analyses appears to be associated with greater use of their evidence by policy organisations.



Implications for research

Claims made by research often go beyond impact. How claims about equity, innovation, scale-up and sustainability are framed, justified, and guided by international standards should be further explored. This endeavour can inform the development of appropriate and novel research designs and methods to produce credible, reliable and relevant evidence to support these claims confidently.

Ethical research standards including programme timing and targeting should also be routinely considered when designing impact evaluations and implementing programmes to enhance applicability whilst producing socially responsible research.

Evidence diversity can play an important role in supporting claims about sustainability and scale-up. It brings evidence from various research designs, sources, voices, and origins, strengthening collaboration and pertinence to evidence-informed decisions in international development.

Implications for users and commissioners of evidence studies

The findings from the review highlight the nature of evidence claims for informing decisions in international development. To strengthen confidence in decision making, evidence users and commissioners should:

- Develop evidence standards to support study authors to make, justify and communicate claims. The evidence standards should consider methodological rigour, contextual appropriateness, as well as social values underlining interventions and methods when framing research.
- Have clear objectives to create equal partnerships between those involved in co-production of evidence and evidence users. This may increase the likelihood of long-term programme impact and sustainability.
- Consider approaches to engage with stakeholders under uncertainties and within limited resources for articulating research needs, framing and communicating research (see https://eppi.ioe.ac.uk/EvidenceAndUncertaintyToolkit/Engaging_stakeholders_with_evidence_and_uncertainty.html).

About this brief

This brief is based on the following syntheses working paper: Bangpan, M., Draper, A., Minchenko, D., Stansfield, C., Dickson, K., Tripney, J. and Oliver, S. (2023). Making and justifying evidence claims: evidence synthesis of impact evaluations and systematic reviews in international development, CEDIL Syntheses Working Paper 10. London and Oxford: Centre of Excellence for Development Impact and Learning. <https://doi.org/10.51744/CSWP10>

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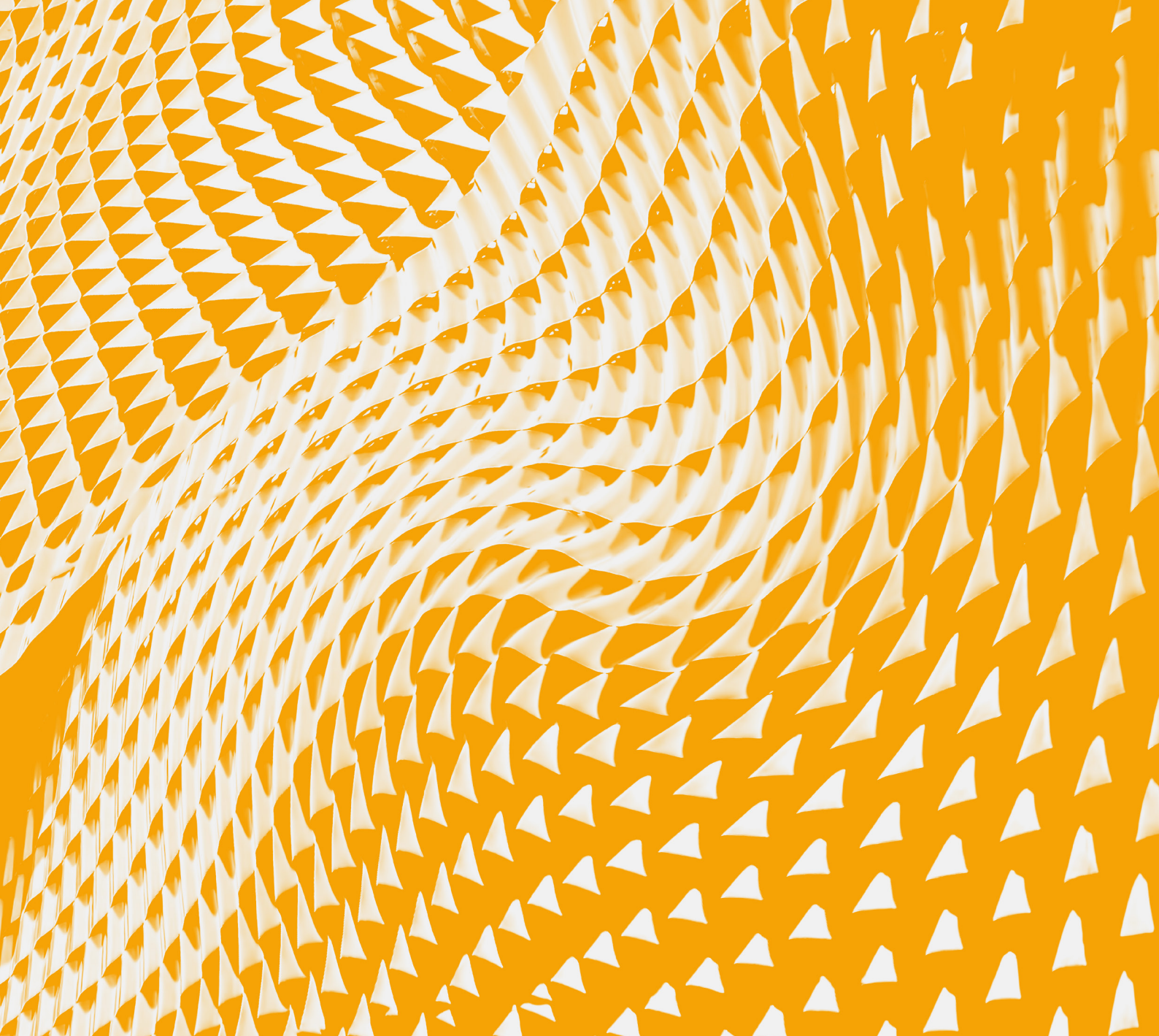
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