

Wednesday  
13 May 2020

# HUMANITARIAN RESEARCH LEARNING SERIES: INSTITUTIONAL AND FUNDERS' PANEL

## EVENT DETAILS

**On the 13th of May, DSAI's Humanitarian Action Study Group held the first webinar in its Humanitarian Research Learning Series.**

The series aims to support and facilitate high quality research, exchange of ideas, relationship-building and networking among the academic and practitioner community working on humanitarian action and in humanitarian contexts in Ireland.

We are grateful to the speakers for their contributions:

- **Mary McCarthy**, Policy Lead - Research, Development Cooperation and Africa Division, Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade;
- **Dr Eavan O'Brien**, Assistant Director - Impact and Partnerships, Irish Research Council; and
- **Dr Stephen O'Driscoll**, Challenge Research Manager (Lead - AI for Societal Good Challenge), Science for Society Directorate, Science Foundation Ireland.

**For more information and updates on DSAI events, and to become a member, please visit [dsaireland.org](https://dsaireland.org).**

## BACKGROUND AND RATIONALE

This discussion brought together speakers from across three key institutional funding bodies in Ireland - the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, the Irish Research Council, and Science Foundation Ireland - along with participants from across humanitarian research, practice and project development. It sought to address the following questions:

- What are the hallmarks of good humanitarian research?
- What are good practices in humanitarian research partnerships?
- How might the COVID-19 crisis affect organisational priorities or funding for humanitarian research?

## OPPORTUNITIES FOR RESEARCH

Reflecting on the importance of humanitarian research to Irish Aid, Mary McCarthy emphasised that **A Better World** serves as a strong anchor, confirming research and learning as key components of Ireland's approach to international development. There is a clear understanding of the value of an integrated research agenda that takes an inter-disciplinary, and also intersectional approach to the questions: Who are the furthest behind? And what are the most effective routes to reaching them, and empowering people on the margins?

Eavan O'Brien and Stephen O'Driscoll outlined a number of funding streams through the Irish Research Council and Science Foundation Ireland. The IRC's **New Foundations** and **COALESCE** awards and SFI's **Future Innovator Prize** were highlighted in particular. Commonalities across both organisations included the opportunities for funding at all career stages, and the emphasis on partnership with government, civil society, and enterprise. See the list of resources on p. 4 for further details on funding opportunities.

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Engaged  
research is  
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- Campus Engage

### HALLMARKS OF HIGH-QUALITY RESEARCH

The discussion highlighted several hallmarks of high-quality research. Research is often judged on **quality** (including who is involved in the research and what is their track record); **clarity** (does the proposal identify a clear question, approach and purpose); and **innovation** (is there evidence of innovation in tackling long-standing challenges, applying new methods, and/or communicating findings).

The importance of **ethics** was highlighted throughout the session. There was a specific discussion of how proposals that demonstrate in-depth consideration of ethical matters throughout the cycle of a project are often assessed highly, as opposed to those that approach ethics in a superficial way, or only in some phases of the project.

### END-USERS AT THE OUTSET: "WHO DO YOU SERVE?"

A common thread across the discussion was the importance of **putting intended beneficiaries at the centre** of research, or as Stephen O'Driscoll prompted researchers to consider: "Who do you serve?" Research should not be done *to* a group of people, but *with* their involvement from the beginning.

This is often best achieved through partnering with organisations working with communities for an extended period of time. **Successful, equitable partnerships** are based on a process of co-creation and will show a clear rationale for the inclusion of different partners and their unique contribution at every stage. Eavan O'Brien encouraged participants to recall that engaged research is done *with* partners, rather than *for* them. Resources from Campus Engage can help researchers to design collaborative, engaged research (see the list of resources on p. 4 for further details).

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### OUTPUTS AND IMPACT: "A DECK OF CARDS"

The Q&A raised the question of the best approaches to communicating findings and demonstrating impact. Several speakers highlighted the importance of using **accessible language** for a broader audience, and tailoring material to different end-users.

While researchers can often communicate more technical findings to peers and programming staff, **effective policy briefings** are often succinct, accompanied by a short executive summary of key findings, and include a focus on the implications for donors (the 'so what' of findings). It was also recommended that, where applicable, researchers include visuals and infographics to communicate complex findings in an accessible way. Examples were also given of innovative approaches to disseminating results, such as through **visual arts, theatre and video**. Selecting an appropriate format was likened to choosing from a 'deck of cards' - drawing on different formats for different intended audiences.

### THE GLOBAL CONTEXT: RESEARCH & COVID-19

Mary McCarthy noted how the current global health crisis highlights the need to work across disciplines and silos, draw on evidence, and put learning into practice. The crisis has demonstrated the capacity to adapt quickly and respond effectively across the field, but as we enter a challenging economic period, speakers felt it will be ever more important to **demonstrate the real-world impact of research**.

Beyond short-term impacts, all presenters emphasised that research will continue to be central to international development. Researchers should retain areas of existing expertise, while considering ways to take account of COVID-19 in their work.

We will organise our research agenda around our policy priorities: gender equality; reducing humanitarian need; climate action; and strengthening governance [...] We will also encourage a challenge-based approach to research, with a focus on outcomes for those furthest behind.

- A Better World

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## RESOURCES

Ireland's policy for international development, [\*A Better World\*](#) (2019).

Irish Research Council list of [funding opportunities](#) and anticipated call schedule.

Science Foundation Ireland list of [funding opportunities](#) and related guidance.

Irish research [Funders' Joint Statement on COVID-19](#) (dated 13 March 2020).

The [San Francisco Declaration on Research Assessment \(DORA\)](#) (2013).

Campus Engage's [How to Guide: Engaged Research - Practice and Principles](#) (2019).

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## FIVE TIPS FOR EFFECTIVE HUMANITARIAN RESEARCH

- When **identifying research areas**, consider the broader policy context. For example, how does your proposed research align with the SDGs at a global level, or key policies such as *A Better World* at the national level?
- When **designing research**, include partners from the outset and at every stage of the project. Strong partnerships are based on the co-creation of knowledge, and demonstrate that partners have been involved in design, planning and implementation. Consider applying for seed funding, such as the Irish Research Council's New Foundations grant, to facilitate network-building.
- When **planning research**, incorporate in-depth ethical considerations at every stage of the project cycle. Particularly given the challenging and complex contexts in which humanitarian research is carried out, it is important to identify potential risks and demonstrate the ability to adapt and be agile in your approach.
- When **carrying out research**, make sure individuals and communities who are the intended beneficiaries or end-users of the research are engaged throughout the process. Consistently revisit the question of what impact your research will have on intended beneficiaries, adopt an effectual approach, and consider strategies such as engaging stakeholders from outside academia as expert representatives.
- When **communicating findings**, plan for a range of outputs in different formats. Use accessible language and target policy audiences with short, focused material that emphasises the implications of the study's results for donors and governments. Consider innovative formats for disseminating more widely, such as visual arts, theatre and video.