

POLICY BRIEF

LESSONS FOR RESEARCH FUNDERS FROM LOCALLY LED ACTION RESEARCH ON WOMEN'S EMPOWERMENT AMONG PASTORALISTS

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Key findings and recommendations

- Research funders should fund action research as it helps to address the need for immediate tangible benefits.
- Flexibility with progress milestones and disbursement schedules helps researchers cope with volatility and unpredictability.
- Research proposals need to articulate how access and trust of both women and men will be gained if the aim to shift gender norms is to be achieved.
- Research funders should set expectations appropriate for the type of implementing organisation carrying out the research, to support better outcomes.

Introduction – Addressing the lack of evidence from FCAS with locally led research

Conducting action research on women's empowerment in fragile and conflict-affected situations (FCAS) poses a particular set of challenges. These challenges are sometimes similar in nature, but different in dimension, to the usual ones that arise from research on gender, and research conducted through international funding partnerships.

Although definitions of FCAS vary, some estimates suggest that 1 billion people live in FCAS, and that this number may include 60% of all poor people in the world by 2030 (IMF, 2022). Pastoralists and agro-pastoralists living in FCAS face particular challenges, and women and girls are typically especially marginalised.

The need to promote women's empowerment among pastoralists and agro-pastoralists in FCAS served as the motivation for an action research initiative funded by Canada's International Development Research Centre (IDRC), and implemented in partnership with Supporting Pastoralism and Agriculture in Recurrent and Protracted Crises (SPARC). This initiative prioritised locally led projects selected from a competitive two-step proposal process.

The **Fulbe Development and Cultural Organisation (FUDECO)** implemented a project, 'Achieving gender equality, increasing social inclusion and empowering pastoralist women and girls through participatory action research', in six states of northern Nigeria. This evaluates the effectiveness of ongoing pastoralist women and girls' empowerment initiatives through participatory action research, co-developing metrics of women's empowerment that are appropriate for pastoral contexts.

The **Centre for Population and Environmental Development (CPED)** implemented a project, 'Empowerment of women in pastoralism and agriculture in Nigeria's Sahel region', in two states of northern Nigeria (one of which overlaps with the FUDECO project). This CPED project aims to contribute to the improvement of the status of women in pastoral communities in Nigeria's Sahel region by making the voices of women and girls heard.

Kenyatta University (KU) implemented a project, 'Building gender-responsive climate-resilient communities in South Sudan', in Jonglei State. In partnership with the Catholic University of South Sudan and Agricultural Market Development Trust, it is applying a gender-transformative approach to increase the understanding of the priorities and aspirations of women

and girls living among pastoralist and agro-pastoralist communities. This is with a view to addressing the impacts of climate change and conflict on livelihoods.

This brief distils lessons from these locally led projects, and targets research funders who want to fund research in FCAS. It adds to existing studies on research in FCAS, much of which are written from a largely global North perspective and focus on how to engage as an outsider (e.g. Shanks and Paulson, 2022; UKRI and UNICEF, 2021). Some of the lessons that we detail here are not exclusive to FCAS – but those particular contexts exacerbate how the issues they address manifest (Idris, 2019).

Lesson 1 – Research funders should fund action research

Conducting research in any context often raises questions as to the immediate benefits to the participants in that research. This is frequently an issue with research in developing countries. In FCAS, where there are extreme humanitarian needs, these concerns are heightened further. Action research helps to address the need for immediate tangible benefits.

Lesson 2 – Flexibility with disbursement schedules and progress milestones helps researchers cope with volatility and unpredictability

By definition, FCAS are affected by weak governance, political instability and economic insecurity. This leads to volatile and unpredictable conditions which for practical and security reasons make conducting research difficult. This is true even if the researchers are local to and familiar with their research environment.

All three of the projects were affected by such conditions in multiple ways. Political uncertainty is an ever-present threat. For example, in the run-up to Nigeria's elections in 2023, non-governmental organisations (NGOs) were banned from working in certain locations. Consequently, FUDECO had to postpone work in Adamawa State and focus on other sites until the ban was lifted. The uncertainty around the timing of elections in South Sudan was even more challenging for the KU team than it would have been for a South Sudanese organisation, partly due to the remote base and reliance on planned fieldwork campaigns of the research.

Related to the elections – or plans for them – each country also experienced currency volatility, with rising prices and cash scarcity. In response, both CPED and

FUDECO used alternative cash transfer methods such as point-of-sale bank agents, mobile banking and other electronic payment systems. This only worked, however, for vendors, transporters and researchers with their own bank accounts. CPED also established relationships with trusted fuel stations, and made flexible vehicle arrangements for field visits.

In addition to weak governance, political instability and economic insecurity, the research teams from all three projects had to manage increasing climate unpredictability. Flooding was experienced in both Nigeria and South Sudan. In the latter, some local research team members temporarily migrated to Kenya and Uganda.

Typically, research grants and contracts are planned around timelines with orderly and logical progress milestones and payment schedules. This helps present, budget and justify the proposed work. However, it can also create additional barriers for researchers operating in unpredictable and volatile contexts, unless the funder is willing and able to work with the research teams to adapt timelines and plans to the realities on the ground.

The three projects were funded by IDRC through Cowater International, which was already managing the SPARC programme. Serving as an intermediary between research funders and researchers, Cowater was able to absorb some of the project risks, and work with both the research funders and researchers to respond flexibly to the needs of the work. Progress milestones and accompanying disbursement schedules were developed collaboratively between Cowater International and the research teams. An initial upfront payment enabled the work to begin, and a process of quarterly reporting allowed for adaptive co-management of the grants.

Payment schedules and milestones were modified at least once for each team during the projects' timeline to cope with unforeseen circumstances. A streamlined and efficient process that facilitated this was key to avoiding further disruption to plans. The contract amendment process was simplified so that agreement could be reached in a matter of days. Having the capacity to provide a larger upfront payment and fewer regular milestones (say six-monthly as opposed to quarterly) would have also helped all the teams to manage cashflow. This was not least because volatility and unpredictability often necessitated delays and then expensive fieldwork periods squeezed into suitable sometimes shorter windows of activity, giving rise to variable periods of high expenditure.

Compared with peaceful and stable contexts, research funders need to recognise that there are legitimate extra costs for security and risk management for researchers

working in FCAS. For example, ground transport in both Nigeria and South Sudan needed careful management due to the risks of banditry and highway robbery.

SPARC used a range of processes to minimise the risk to researchers working in FCAS. As per IDRC's rules, the projects were subject to security screening and vetting. All the research teams underwent security training funded by the programme and submitted risk matrices and security risk management plans which were updated on a quarterly basis.

Lesson 3 – Research proposals need to articulate how access and trust of both women and men will be gained if the aim to shift gender norms is to be achieved

For action research to be conducted in any circumstances, it is essential to gain the trust of local populations and often the community leaders and those actors with whom access to local populations is typically negotiated ('gatekeepers'). This is even more important in FCAS, where trust levels, and the perceived legitimacy of research in general, is often low.

There is an extra dimension to trust-building when the aim of the action research is to promote women's empowerment. In all three projects, the teams sought appropriate research permissions from a range of relevant gatekeepers. The process of broaching issues of women's empowerment and gaining access to communities generated some initial lessons for the projects.

In Nigeria, the CPED team initially attempted to establish women-only Community Project Implementation Committees (CPICs). This first met with resistance from male gatekeepers. Likewise in South Sudan, the KU team's attempts to get women and men to attend meetings initially failed when male community gatekeepers only invited men to participate. This would obviously undermine the aim of women's empowerment.

Addressing gatekeepers' resistance to women's participation required reflexivity, adaptability and persistence. It involved confronting the very norms and inequalities that the projects sought to address. Realising that men needed to be onboard to have any success in changing gender relations, the CPED team altered their approach and invited men – as well as women – to join the committees. The integration of men strengthened the ability of the committees to address gender-related challenges and promote sustainable change.

Likewise in South Sudan, sustained engagement throughout the research process engendered trust. On the team's second visit, the gatekeepers had greater

CPIC members of Mariam Community in Tafawa Balewa Local Government Area of Bauchi state in Group Photograph. © Sylvia Baji



familiarity with the research and greater trust in the researchers. Then, the same request for both women and men to participate led to 6 women joining. At the time of the third visit, 23 women attended.

In northern Nigeria, the militant Islamist group Boko Haram has provoked suspicion of education and furthered the belief that education undermines culture. The FUDECO team purposefully included many educated young women from pastoralist backgrounds in their research. This created relational links with communities and helped dispel myths about education, meaning families were more willing for their girl children to participate in education. Making it clear that women's empowerment was for the benefit of family and society reduced the men's fear that it would come at a cost to them.

All three projects saw significant change in gender attitudes over time. Particularly in the cases in Nigeria, both CPED and FUDECO are now seeing men championing women's involvement in roles that were previously socially ascribed to men.

Research funders supporting action research for women's empowerment in FCAS therefore need to ensure that proposals include details of how research teams intend to navigate access to their research communities. Even when women's empowerment is the aim, these plans should include engagement of women and men.

Lesson 4 – Research funders should set expectations appropriate for the type of implementing organisation carrying out the research, to support better outcomes

The practical nature of action research means it can be facilitated by a greater range of organisations. Indeed, the significant humanitarian needs of FCAS bring an influx of non-state (and often international) actors to fill the gaps left by the absence of strong institutions. As well as traditional research institutions, such as universities and think tanks, NGOs are increasingly engaging in research activities. Projects in this study were led by a think tank (CPED), an NGO (FUDECO), and a university (Kenyatta University).

Funders should consider the type of organisation that they support to conduct action research since, as with individuals, organisations and their representatives are subject to 'positionality'. The people 'being researched' will have preconceptions about the researchers and the organisations they represent based on previous experiences; this will condition the research process and potentially the results. Research funders need to be sensitive to the positionality and the comparative strengths of the different organisations engaging in the research, and set expectations that are appropriate to the type of organisation, to support better outcomes.

Each of the three teams had to manage expectations and base them on people's perceptions and the role of the three organisations in the community previously. So in South Sudan the word 'project' was avoided, while in Nigeria the term 'NGO' was not used, since in both cases this language tended to raise expectations among research participants about the immediate tangible benefits that would be provided to them.

In the most extreme scenario, association with international NGOs could increase the risk of kidnapping for ransom in Nigeria. As a locally based organisation that regularly carries out development interventions, FUDECO particularly had to manage expectations among communities and negotiate their interest in the action research. As an NGO, FUDECO's strength was in delivering research findings into formats that were accessible to local communities – and ensuring that the community informs their own future development interventions.

CPED's advantage is its research capacity to generate papers, as well as its respected position in policy influence. KU's deliverables centre on its strength in producing peer-reviewed papers – and providing capacity-building to South Sudanese students and institutions. Ensuring that deliverables and intended outputs fit with the strengths and priorities of the enabling organisation is key. The other side of this is that research funders should look at what they want to achieve through their funding, and choose the types of organisations best suited to deliver those goals.

Conclusion and recommendations – Funding effective locally led action research in FCAS for women's empowerment

Conducting action research on women's empowerment in FCAS poses a particular set of challenges. These challenges are sometimes similar in nature, but different in dimension, to the ones that arise from research on gender, and research through international funding partnerships.

Research funders will be more effective where they are sensitive to the challenges of designing and implementing locally led action research on women's empowerment in these contexts.

Action research is key for FCAS as it helps to address the need for immediate tangible benefits.

Volatility and unpredictability require constant monitoring and assessment. Research teams need to be flexible and adapt to local circumstances. This may mean moving their research sites, or changing the timing of their field visits, or adapting the methods they use. Research funders need to appreciate that flexibility with disbursement schedules and progress milestones helps researchers cope with volatility and unpredictability.

Negotiating and gaining access to the intended research participants, and building trust among them so that the research can proceed, is essential to successful field-based action research. Working on women's empowerment in highly gender-unequal societies specifically requires getting gatekeepers who are men (at community and household levels) to buy into the process. Failing to do this, and focusing solely on women, is likely to be unsuccessful due to those male gatekeepers resisting and undermining efforts, or retaliating against the women who do participate.

Research funders need to be sensitive to the need for both women and men to participate. When evaluating proposals on women's empowerment, research funders need to ensure that proposals include this, and then support those plans where it is included.

Managing expectations is common to most field-based research. This is, however, augmented when conducting action research in FCAS because of the extreme humanitarian needs brought about by conflict and fragility. Weak governance capacity also means a wide range of organisations are present and will play a role in the research. Research funders should ensure that they fund action research in FCAS, and that they negotiate outcomes that suit the priorities and capacities of the types of organisations that they fund.

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Acknowledgements

This policy brief was carried out with the aid of a grant from Canada's International Development Research Centre (IDRC), awarded in partnership with the Supporting Pastoralism and Agriculture in Recurrent and Protracted Crises (SPARC) programme, which is funded by the United Kingdom's Foreign, Commonwealth & Development Office (FCDO).

The brief draws on the experiences of the three research teams, comprising Job Eronmhonsele, Andrew G. Onokerhoraye, Dicta Ogisi, Bilkisu Yayaji Ahmed, May Nwoye, Bibi Umar Muhammad, Gideon Omuta, Onovughe Ikelegbe, Barakatu Yerima, Johnson Dudu, Eddy Akpomera, Rebecca John-Abebe, Verere Balogun (CPED); Usman Ibrahim, Zubairu Adamu, Auwal Yahaya, Rukkaiyatu Bashir Ribadu, Umar Hassan, Adamu Zubairu, Jamila Hassan, K.W. Emmanuel, Nafisatu Dahiru Mohammad, Sarli Sardou Nana, Khadija Mahmoud, Zulfikhu Ahmed Bello, Musa Isa Arrifi (FUDECO); and Joy Obando, Chris Shisanya, Thomas Kibutu, Pacificah Okemwa, Susan Mwangi, Fiona Ngarachu, John Maraigua, Okumba Miruka, Tedson Nyongesa, John Mutonyi, Faith Mutavi, Kennedy Gitu (KU).

We thank Elizabeth Daley, Emma Archer, Guy Jobbins and Heidi Braun for reviewing; Rajeshree Sisodia and Julie Grady Thomas for support with publication; and Becky Owens for copyediting, Lucy Peers for designing and Nina Behrman for proofreading this brief.

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Climate change, armed conflict, environmental fragility and weak governance, and the impact these have on natural resource-based livelihoods, are among the key drivers of both crisis and poverty for communities in some of the world's most vulnerable and conflict-affected countries.

Supporting Pastoralism and Agriculture in Recurrent and Protracted Crises (SPARC) aims to generate evidence and address knowledge gaps to build the resilience of millions of pastoralists, agro-pastoralists and farmers in these communities in sub-Saharan Africa and the Middle East.

We strive to create impact by using research and evidence to develop knowledge that improves how the UK Foreign, Commonwealth & Development Office (FCDO), Canada's International Development Research Centre (IDRC), donors, non-governmental organisations, local and national governments, and civil society can empower these communities in the context of climate change.

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How to cite: Vincent, K. Eronmhonsele, J., Kibutu, T., Okemwa, P. and Nana, S.S. (2025). *Lessons for research funders from locally led action research on women's empowerment among pastoralists*. Policy Brief. London: Supporting Pastoralism and Agriculture in Recurrent and Protracted Crises (SPARC) (<https://doi.org/10.61755/KYJK5636>).

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Funded by



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This work was carried out with the aid of a grant from the International Development Research Centre, Ottawa, Canada, and by UK aid from the UK government. The views expressed herein do not necessarily represent those of IDRC or its Board of Governors, or the official policies of the Canadian or UK governments.