From Evidence to Action:

Challenges to Evidence Uptake and Impact

"The cost of not implementing good research is borne by survivors"

— Dr. Juliana Rinaldi Semione – University of Nottingham Rights Lab

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Background

On 10-12 November 2020, the USAID Asia Counter-Trafficking in Persons project hosted the 2020 CTIP Evidence Summit, "From Evidence to Action" A main goal of the Summit was to address major issues surrounding research dissemination and uptake in the counter-trafficking field—specifically, how we can ensure that research is *appropriate, useful, and has lasting impact.*

Research[1] does not always have its intended impact in the counter-trafficking field. Overall, evidence uptake is limited. This is a considerable issue, as research is expensive and time-consuming. When evidence fails to translate into action, it shortchanges the researchers who struggle to realize impact from their work and the project implementers[2] who are frustrated at their inability to utilize research in service of more effective counter-trafficking work. More importantly, the consequences of research merely "sitting on the shelf" are felt by the trafficking victims and survivors who do not see the benefits of this research in support services or preventative systems. Although vulnerable populations face the consequences, the responsibility falls on researchers, funders, and practitioners. Based on a synthesis of the outcomes from two Summit sessions that tackled this topic head on, this brief provides much-needed recommendations on how to remedy the disconnect between evidence generation and evidence uptake or impact – that is, "the use of research evidence by researchers, policymakers, implementers or practitioners to inform policy or practice"[3] and "the demonstrable contribution that excellent research makes to society and the economy."[4]

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[1] Research is, "any form of disciplined inquiry that aims to contribute to a body of knowledge or theory. University of Nottingham, "Code of Research Conduct and Research Ethics" (University of Nottingham, June 2020), 28, https://www.nottingham.ac.uk/research/resources/documents/code-of-research-conduct-and-research-ethics-v7.0-june-2020.pdf.

[2] Project implementers, for the purposes of this report are organizations that deliver direct victim services, engage in advocacy or policy work, or carry out other counter-trafficking initiatives. Project implementers often rely upon research to influence their initiatives. They might fund research or participate in it, as well.

[3] Malaria Consortium, "Guide to Developing and Monitoring a Research Uptake Plan," 2016, 2, https://www.malariaconsortium.org/media-downloads/799#:~:text=3-,What%20is%20research%20uptake%3F,(e.g.%20Ministry%20of%20Health).

[4] UK Research and Innovation Economic and Social Research Council, "What Is Impact?," UKRI Economic and Social Research Council, accessed May 3, 2021, https://esrc.ukri.org/research/impact-toolkit/what-is-impact/.

These two Summit sessions were:

> **"Barriers to Evidence Uptake – Civil Society Organization (CSO) perspectives":** Ninety participants from CSOs[5] and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) in the Asia region attended this session, representing approximately 15 countries. Participants shared their experiences and feedback in breakout rooms and were divided into seven language groups. The full group reconvened in a plenary session to report the issues discussed in the breakout rooms. Much thoughtful feedback and many excellent recommendations were brought forward. The full discussion can be seen here in English (it is also available in Bangla, Burmese, Khmer, Nepali, Russian, and Thai alongside the other recordings from the Summit).

> **"Cultural and Logistical Barriers to Research and Dissemination":** This session focused on the dissemination and uptake of research mostly from the perspectives of academics, donors, and large NGOs. The session was led by Dr. Juliana Rinaldi Semione, based on her publication, Preparing for Impact: How we can overcome barriers and cultivate a culture of collaboration, understanding, and respect to achieve impact on survivor support. Six breakout rooms were created around the themes presented in the paper. In the plenary session, the 50 participants shared openly and honestly about what challenges they faced and recommendations for ways forward. A recording of this session can be found here.

Introduction

The discussions during these two Summit sessions revealed several common barriers to evidence uptake, mostly shared from the perspectives of project implementers. This brief synthesizes the two sessions and distills the key themes that emerged, reflecting attendees' recurring concerns and values. Listed in alphabetical order, the most frequently discussed barriers to evidence uptake were challenges around *access, collaboration, engaging funders, ethics or approval processes, feasibility, funding, relevance, time,* and *understanding.* In addition, to these key themes, two identified needs from the participants were *knowledge consolidation* and *strategy unification.* This brief examines each of those themes and needs, as well as some of the solutions proposed by attendees.

Though each theme is unique, they are often interrelated. This means that the presence of one barrier, for example, may exacerbate another. But it also means that addressing one may reduce the effects of another. This brief should be read with that in mind. Recommendations for how researchers and research institutions can address these matters are made throughout. Additional

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[5] "CSOs can be defined to include all non-market and non-state organisations ⋯ in which people organise themselves to pursue shared interests in the public domain. They ⋯ include membership-based CSOs, cause-based CSOs and service-oriented CSOs." https://www.oecd.org/dac/peer-reviews/Final_How_DAC_members_work_with_CSOs%20ENGLISH.pdf

recommendations for funders, project implementers, and researchers are proposed in a complementary resource, which can be found here.

Researchers typically place a high value on evidence uptake and impact, but impact efforts are often relegated to the end of the research process. This happens for a variety of reasons, rooted in the definition of evidence uptake given above. After all, "the use of research evidence"[6] cannot occur until a research project is complete, and so researchers and project implementers alike do not focus on impact until then. However, **evidence uptake and impact result from actions and decisions that are taken throughout the research process, from the initial research design through to the dissemination of the completed research project.** It is important that this brief be read with an eye to the entire research process–not just the end. Figure 1 represents the idea that impact– the desired outcome of evidence uptake–should inform every part of the research cycle. [7]
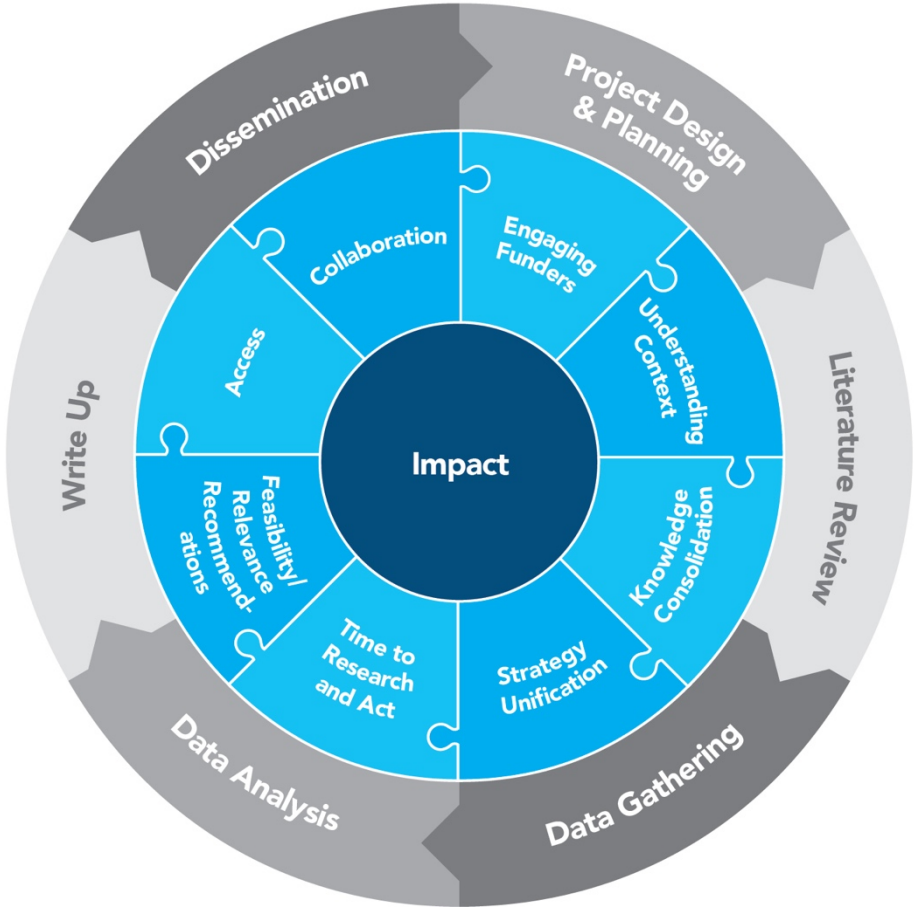

Figure 1: Diagram shows the recommendations for more evidence uptake in the research cycle

[6] Malaria Consortium, "Guide to Developing and Monitoring a Research Uptake Plan,"
[7] Adapted from Edinburgh Napier University Information Services, "Research Cycle," Edinburgh Napier University Information Services, accessed May 3, 2021, https://staff.napier.ac.uk/services/information-services/research-cycle/pages/home.aspx and Elizabeth Garcha, "Evaluating and Recording Impact" (University of York), accessed May 3, 2021, https://www.york.ac.uk/media/staffhome/research/documents/impactconferencemarch2015/Impact%20conference%20- %20Evaluating%20and%20Recording%20impact%20-%20parallel%20session.pdf.

Access

Lack of access is an obvious barrier to evidence uptake. That is, project implementers are not always able to locate or obtain research findings (e.g., briefs or reports) once research is completed. **Findings are not always shared with project implementers,** despite their interest in learning from and utilizing research. Project implementers in both sessions voiced frustration not only at the lack of research available to them, but at the time they spend looking for research. The development of multi-stakeholder forums or platforms were recommended by participants in order to understand which project implementers are active in the field, make contacts, and be able to share findings within those forums on a regular basis moving forward. This would also help project implementers to become aware of researchers and research organizations, as well as upcoming research projects, so that they can be proactive to engage when something interests them. Some multi-stakeholder forums do exist, but the most effective forums are likely to be those that are formed at the regional level and meet regularly.

An additional obstacle to access is **the overly complicated or dense language** that is used by some researchers. One stakeholder said that the language of research can be "too wordy," and can "make people feel dumb." In a previous publication, this barrier was linked to the reality that some researchers do not want to present their work in simple language because doing so may cause their academic peers to take the work less seriously.[8] But not using clear, understandable language can create a barrier in two ways. First, if project implementers feel intimidated by "overly technical or highly specialised language," they are unlikely to try to implement the recommendations. Second, and more basically, if project implementers cannot understand the research, then they cannot use it.[9]

A final access concern is related to this; **findings are sometimes not presented in an audience's first language.** Researchers should consider budgeting for the translation of briefs or reports when applying for funding. If an organization is funding its own research, this should be taken into consideration internally. If research is not available in an audience's first language, project implementers may not be confident that they have understood the findings well enough to understand the research's implications for their work or feel confident enough to implement the recommendations.

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[8] Juliana Semione, "Preparing for Impact: How We Can Overcome Barriers and Cultivate a Culture of Collaboration, Understanding, and Respect to Achieve Impact on Survivor Support" (Independent Anti-Slavery Commissioner, July 2020), 26, https://www.antislaverycommissioner.co.uk/media/1433/iasc-review-preparing-for-impact-july-2020.pdf.
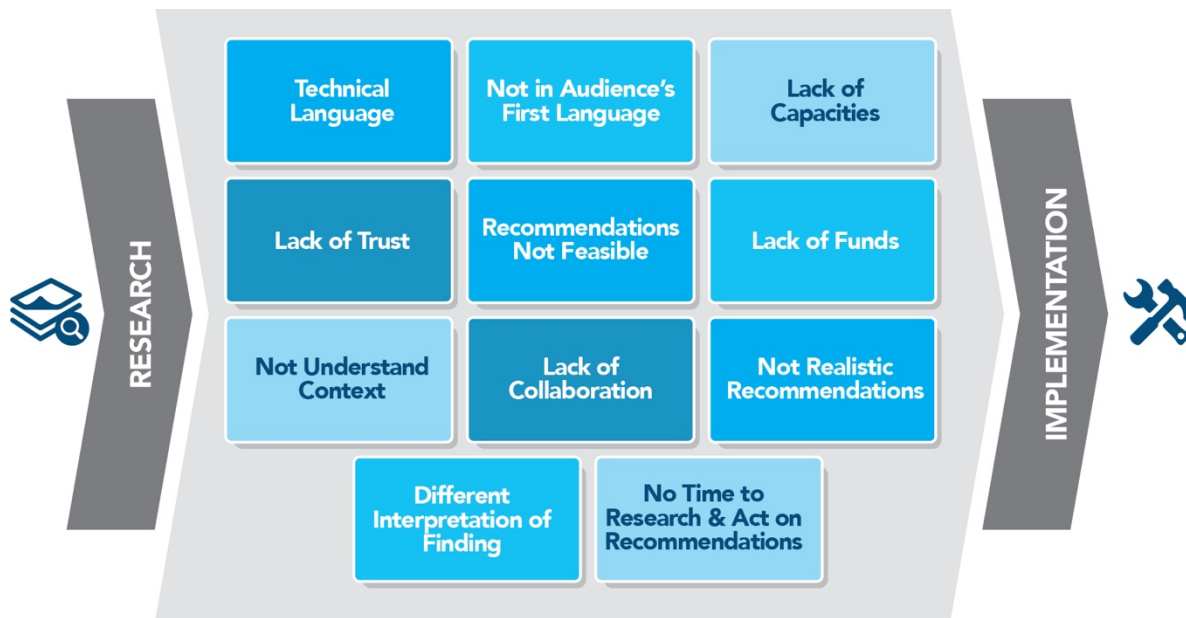[9] Semione, 26.

Figure 2: Diagram shows barriers to evidence uptake

Collaboration

Project implementers demonstrated an appetite for collaboration with researchers and with one another. **Collaboration is as much about relationship building as it is about working together on specific projects.** One of the ways in which collaboration supports evidence uptake is that it can ensure research and recommendations are relevant. It also creates a "landing pad" for research, according to one breakout group; project implementers who already feel a level of investment or ownership of the research will be more likely to follow the resulting recommendations.

Collaboration should also involve designing research together. Multiple project implementers said they wanted to be involved in all stages of research projects. This includes co-writing research questions at the inception of a project, to jointly interpreting the findings and co-writing recommendations.

While researchers from the outside (e.g., from international NGOs or universities) should also seek to understand the local context, they cannot be expected to learn and internalize every nuance. This is where collaborating with project implementers finds one of its great strengths; **a benefit of collaboration is that outside researchers' technical and academic skills can be leveraged, while local academics and local NGOs ensure that the local context is accounted for.** In doing so, they help to ensure the relevance of the research for the intended audience.

Finally. collaboration involves **coordination between funders, project implementers, and researchers.** For example, it is common for one researcher or research organization to be unaware that another is conducting similar research in the same area, at the same time. But by coordinating

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between similar projects, researchers and project implementers can all benefit from sharing information, working more efficiently, and preventing redundant research. While all parties must contribute for effective coordination, researchers can ask funders, project implementers, and other researchers whether they are aware of any parallel research being conducted. In addition to inquiring about what other work is being done, researchers should make their own work known to any other funders, project implementers, or researchers in the area. As stated above, specialized forums would be extremely useful mechanism for this.

Engaging funders

Another theme that emerged was the influence that funders have on evidence uptake. Whether it is their particular research interests or the scope of activities that they are willing to fund, **funders are an important stakeholder group because they influence the relevance and feasibility of research**–whether they are aware of it or not.

As such, funders should be included in communication and collaboration more often. Researchers should bear in mind that different funders will have varying degrees of counter-trafficking subject matter expertise and varying degrees of familiarity with the local context of a given research project. (As is discussed in this brief, the same can be said of researchers themselves.) Funders can also represent a variety of sectors, including the private sector and the government. The inclusion of funders in communications and the collaborative efforts that take place between project implementers and researchers will increase funders' understanding of what research is needed, what resources are required to conduct that research, and what resources are required to implement the recommendations that result from it.

Ethics or approval processes

Academic research must be subjected to an ethics process, often facilitated by an ethics committee at the institution where a researcher is based. This process, however, was seen as a barrier by project implementers. From their perspective, the ethics process is a barrier to conducting research in general and, therefore, to even the possibility of evidence uptake.

One of the reasons that the ethics process is considered a hindrance is that **members of ethics committees often lack subject matter expertise;** they do not understand counter-trafficking as a field of study or the realities of working with victims and vulnerable people. The absence of subject matter expertise on ethics committees needs to be addressed by researchers when they

submit ethics application forms. Though it may require extra time and effort, researchers should be as clear and specific as possible about what they are researching, why they are researching it, and how they will proactively address specific, local ethical concerns or vulnerabilities. They should do so in collaboration with CSO partners, where appropriate. Besides the increased likelihood of receiving ethical approval for projects, another benefit of a clear and specific application is that it can preempt a committee's concerns or questions and expedite the ethics process, reducing delays to the research getting underway. Researchers should further be prepared to answer any of a committee's clarifying questions promptly.

There are also occasions when approval for research is needed from a government or other authority. **Project implementers voiced frustration at how long this can take;** by the time approval is received, the proposed research may no longer be timely or relevant. These drawn-out processes can also mean that some stakeholders are excluded from research altogether. One CSO said its own country was left out of research because the government approval process took too long. Researchers should communicate with authorities and stakeholders on the ground as early as possible to understand what approval processes are necessary, how much time they require, and what possible barriers to approval might exist.

Feasibility

Feasibility speaks to research recommendations. If recommendations are not feasible, then they will not be followed by project implementers.

A pattern of "lofty" and "high" research recommendations was identified by project implementers, who said that what they really need is recommendations that are "achievable" or "practical." This was identified as a "major gap." One consideration that researchers should make is whether project implementers realistically have the capacity to implement recommendations. Among other aspects, this consideration involves thinking through who should implement each recommendation and how much money and time each is likely to cost those individuals or organizations. A high-cost recommendation, for example, is unlikely to be actioned by an NGO with tight budgetary constraints.

Additionally, researchers should avoid writing vague recommendations, as wider-reaching, non-specific recommendations will not easily translate to specific, practical actions for a project implementer to take. One attendee said that specific recommendations give project implementers a clear way to "move forward." Researchers can increase the likelihood of evidence uptake by being precise about what actions project implementers should take, rather than making broad suggestions and leaving project implementers to infer what they should do next. Sometimes. lofty recommendations–for example, calling for sweeping policy change–might be

necessary based on the research findings. However, these recommendations should be written as **"tactical, community-based," specific actions or next steps.**

Another consideration in writing achievable, practical recommendations is **whether they are in line with government priorities, the objectives of a specific CSO program, or the memorandums of understanding that might exist between project implementers and funders or governments.** If recommendations are not in line with these, then they will likely be considered unfeasible. Whenever possible, researchers should clearly state what priority or objective each recommendation aligns with.

There is one final aspect to feasibility that is important to acknowledge: **a realistic view of what evidence can be produced by the researchers themselves.** Given their own constraints around funding, time, and expertise, researchers should be up-front with project implementers and help to set reasonable expectations for the final report, as well as expectations around what kinds of recommendations are likely to accompany it.

Relevance

Another barrier to evidence uptake is the sometimes-irrelevant research and messaging that undergirds recommendations. Irrelevant research is viewed as low-quality and unusable by some project implementers. This not only creates a barrier to evidence uptake but may limit a researcher or research institution's future work with project implementers who take this view.

Project implementers said that one factor in the relevance of research is that **researchers often come from other countries, regions, or organizations and are unfamiliar with the local context** of the area they are conducting research in—and the area in which their recommendations would be implemented if taken up.

Another issue is that research is sometimes **missing information** that project implementers consider relevant. One CSO said that destination country data was missing from previous research projects, which were rendered useless to them as a result. Further, researchers should seek to understand project implementers' experience with existing or previous research. Researchers should ask project implementers what research or other "data streams" they consider relevant and important. Ideally, this would happen at the beginning of a research project. While all researchers should engage over this question with stakeholders on the ground, it is especially important for researchers who are not counter-trafficking subject matter experts.

Relevance is also compromised when research does not address the **concerns or knowledge gaps that are important to project implementers and other counter-trafficking actors on the ground.** Sometimes, research speaks more to the interests of funders or the researchers themselves,

instead. This creates a real barrier to evidence uptake because project implementers are left unconvinced by–or uninterested in–the research, and therefore are unmoved to act on it. By contrast, recommendations that support project implementers 'goals and objectives are considered "strong" and "helpful."

Time

Time is often a scarce resource for project implementers. This affects their ability or capacity to read research and to act on research recommendations. While the responsibility for overcoming this barrier to evidence uptake must lie partly with project implementers, researchers can help.

Lack of time can limit project implementers' capacity to search for and to read research. Researchers can share findings directly and proactively with specific project implementers who might benefit from them. This could mean emailing individual CSO staff members rather than a general or shared email address for an organization. Or it could mean presenting findings in a clear, succinct manner in the multi-stakeholder forums mentioned in the "Access" section above. Main research findings, implications, and recommendations should be condensed into one-page briefings or other similar overviews. Tactics like these mean that project implementers can spend less time searching for research and more time reading it.

Project implementers also struggle to find the time to act on research. One attendee bluntly said, "We don't have time to implement recommendations." Researchers should take this into consideration when writing recommendations. In order for a recommendation to be actionable, it must be feasible within real-world time constraints. (This is mentioned in the "Feasibility" section above.) Researchers should think about how much time their recommendations could take and should break down time-intensive recommendations into steps. A good way to determine whether recommendations are too time-intensive is to discuss a first draft with a small number of trusted, relevant stakeholders.

Understanding

Researchers need to **understand the "whole picture"** – what the government, international community, and trafficking victims are saying. Understanding the "whole picture" goes beyond learning the current priorities of a CSO or government (as discussed in the "Feasibility" section). It includes learning the culture, history, or values of local counter-trafficking efforts and organizations. It also includes the pressures and issues of concern experienced by stakeholders on the ground. Understanding these things enables researchers to effectively translate their much-valued skills and training in ways that are usable and logical to local CSO staff and other potential research beneficiaries. Researchers will not usually be able to fully internalize all of these things, but by regularly collaborating and communicating with project implementers, they can substantially grow their understanding and increase the impact of their work.

Another example is **learning the cultural and political barriers** that might be specific to a time or region. Understanding these will enable researchers to understand both the agilities and constraints of their intended audiences and should inform how research recommendations are written–including the tone and sensitivity with which they are written.

Understanding is a two-way street and there is room for improvement on the side of project implementers. Two breakout rooms reported that project implementers sometimes demonstrate a lack of interest in research projects or in implementing research findings. One thing researchers can do to help increase evidence uptake is to help project implementers understand the **importance and relevance of any new research** through strategic, clear communication. Researchers should help project implementers understand how new research will relate to existing research, how it will fill knowledge gaps, and who stands to benefit from it.

The final thread in the discussion around understanding is this: researchers sometimes do not appreciate that **changes to programs or policies can be risky** for project implementers. The latter usually have responsibilities to funders, the government, and to victims or survivors, so any recommended changes may be received with skepticism and caution if project implementers feel they have not been adequately understood by researchers.

Knowledge consolidation

Some attendees highlighted how **existing data is decentralized and difficult to find.** Existing counter-trafficking data and research are "scattered," leaving project implementers unsure the scope of existing knowledge and where to find it, and unable to utilize it effectively. (It should be noted that this is demonstrative of the access challenges discussed above.) This speaks to the

need for some form of knowledge consolidation or an "integrated database." Knowledge consolidation is the curation and maintenance of data and research around a given topic (in this case, the counter-trafficking field) hosted on a platform that is, ideally, freely available to a wide range of stakeholders.

Summit attendees are not the first counter-trafficking stakeholders to highlight the need for knowledge consolidation.[10] A single, comprehensive online database would be a tremendous undertaking and would require constant maintenance as new research is produced. However, individual research organizations can show a commitment to addressing this need by consolidating any research they have produced, or which they consider important, and making it easily navigable and freely available to stakeholders. Adding a well-organized "Research" section to an organization 's website is one way to achieve this. This would contribute to evidence uptake because it **makes research easily available to a wide audience—and for an indefinite period.** Researchers can also make their work more easily discoverable by learning basic search engine optimization techniques, highlighting findings and recommendations on social media, and publishing in open access journals when their work is featured in academic publications.

Strategy Unification

The need for strategy unification was also raised by attendees. Strategy unification is pre-planned, organized efforts to make the most of research. Both project implementers and researchers can engage in strategy unification. Summit attendees suggested that there are three ways that counter-trafficking research would benefit from strategy unification.

The first is **researchers and project implementers strategizing to interpret findings and implement recommendations together.** Attendees said they see no collaborative effort to translate evidence into action. Researchers could take a more active role in collaborating with project implementers during and after the completion of research to support them in action plans for implementing specific recommendations or following up with them in the weeks and months after research completion. For example, a researcher and CSO could review a draft of a research report together to ensure that the findings are logically presented from the perspective of the CSO, and that the recommendations are feasible. They could then agree who within the CSO would be responsible for implementing the research recommendations. The researcher could follow up after a pre-agreed period of time to ask for an update on which recommendations have been completed and which are still underway, demonstrating ongoing support of translating evidence into action.

The second is that **there appears to be no robust strategy concerning how research works**, according to project implementers. For example, project implementers do not see a consistent

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[10] For an example of this discussion and possible ways forward, see Semione, Appendix A.

logic to research dissemination. Researchers can help to resolve this frustration by creating a dissemination plan early in a project and informing project implementers of that plan. Such a plan would include stating who the intended audience is (especially if the audience is wider than a single CSO), when the completed research will be disseminated, and how it will be disseminated (in a large report with an executive summary, in a documentary, etc.). Individual research organizations could consider creating a dissemination plan that is consistently followed across all or many of their research projects, so that project implementers in a given region always know how and when to access research.

The third component of strategy unification focuses on **increased transparency from researchers or research institutions.** Transparency around who initiated a research project, who is funding it, why they are funding it, and how all of this might influence the methodology and research output could help project implementers understand how research works and what a funder or organization's internal research strategy is. It would also increase project implementers' trust in research. Without this, project implementers may feel like bystanders or may feel alienated by research–even if that research concerns them or the people they support. This is all the truer if a single funder or organization produces multiple research projects in one region over an extended period of time.

Conclusion

The purpose of this paper is to highlight the major barriers to evidence uptake in the field of counter trafficking in persons (CTIP), as directly experienced by civil society organizations (CSOs), international non-governmental organizations (INGOs), and researchers. The findings from this paper have come from two sessions held at the 2020 CTIP Evidence Summit, entitled "From Evidence to Action."

Findings show that researchers and project implementers alike face an array of interrelated challenges that take place at every stage of the research process – from calls for proposals to dissemination. This paper synthesizes the experiences of those working in CTIP and presents the challenges in 10 different, but interrelated, themes: access, collaboration, engaging funders, understanding context, ethics/approval processes, feasibility, relevance, time, understanding, and lack of knowledge consolidation and strategy unification.

As can be seen in Figure 1 of this paper, these themes are mutually reinforcing and can work together to either inhibit or allow evidence uptake. This means that all the challenges must be tackled to ensure impact. In order to do so, USAID Asia CTIP has created a practical tool for funders, researchers, and project implementers to tackle these challenges so that evidence can create impact in the field of counter trafficking. Please see *From Evidence to Action: Practical guidance for increasing evidence uptake and impact in trafficking in persons research* on the USAID Asia CTIP webpage.