Delivering research programmes in FCAS: Summary of lessons learned

Brief

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About the Research Commissioning Centre

The Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office (FCDO) Research Commissioning Centre (RCC) has been established to commission and manage research to enhance development and foreign policy impact. Led by the International Initiative for Impact Evaluation (3ie), the University of Birmingham, and an unmatched consortium of UK and global research partners, the RCC aims to commission different types of high-quality research in FCDO's key priority areas.

About the brief

Throughout 2024-2025, the Research Commissioning Centre (RCC) completed several lines of work to support FCDO's aim of delivering effective research programmes in fragile and conflict-affected settings (FCAS). This document summarises the main lessons from these different areas of work, in the interest of providing a concise presentation of these lessons and capturing the most important actionable insights.

Review process

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Introduction

Throughout 2024-2025, the Research Commissioning Centre (RCC) has completed several lines of work to support FCDO's aim of delivering effective research programmes in fragile and conflict-affected settings (FCAS). This document summarises the main lessons from these different areas of work, in the interest of providing a concise presentation of these lessons and capturing the most important actionable insights. The main sources of information for this summary include:

1. An evidence map of social science research methods used in FCAS
2. A review of delivery models for FCAS research programmes
3. A review of the SPARC Programme (Supporting Pastoralism and Agriculture in Recurrent and Protracted Crises), conducted by the International Centre for Evaluation and Development (ICED)
4. An evidence gap map of impact evaluations and systematic reviews on interventions to promote resilience in the Middle East, Sahel, and Horn of Africa

Despite ubiquitous descriptions of states and subnational areas as "fragile," there is not yet one common definition of "fragility" across academic and policy spaces.[1] Accordingly, there are a range of typologies to categorize fragile states and rankings to measure them based on differing criteria.[2] Nonetheless, fragile contexts share some essential features, as highlighted by the OECD: "Fragile states or provinces lack the ability to develop mutually constructive relations with society and often have a weak capacity to carry out basic governance functions".[3]

With respect to research practice, fragile contexts differ along several axes: the level of violence, the duration of fragility, the degree to which state authority is absent, and the overlap with socio-economic underdevelopment. Each axis of variation presents unique challenges for research delivery. Increasing levels of violence and insecurity pose clear operational risks. Longer-term fragility hollows out existing institutions. The absence of state authority – or the presence of authority from another armed group – can pose ethical challenges in addition to practical ones. Finding local partners in fragile contexts that are also extremely socio-economically underdeveloped can be especially difficult. All of these challenges can be overcome, but only with appropriate planning and mitigation strategies.

[1] Ferreira, Ines A. "Measuring state fragility: a review of the theoretical groundings of existing approaches." *Third World Quarterly* 38.6 (2017): 1291-1309.
[2] For example, the World Bank's Country Policy and Institutional Assessment (CPIA), Fund for Peace's Fragile States Index, and George Mason University's Stage Fragility Index all rank states via different criteria and definitions.
[3] OECD. *Fragile States: Resource Flows and Trends.* Conflict and Fragility, OECD Publishing. (2013): 1. http://dx.doi.org/10.1787/9789264190399-en.

Designing effective FCAS research programmes

Setting objectives and scope

When designing an FCAS research programme, it is essential to begin by defining the programme's core objectives. Although research programmes typically have multiple goals, some will be more central than others. For example: is the most important goal to generate knowledge, influence policy, strengthen capacity, or provide adaptive learning for ongoing interventions?

Clear articulations of core objectives are especially important given the often unpredictable nature of working in FCAS. Unforeseen changes on the ground and disruptions to the workplan often necessitate changing the strategy. In such situations, it is useful to have a clear understanding of which aspects of the programme are mission-critical, and which are valuable but more peripheral to the programme's core goals. Clarity and agreement on the core objectives amongst interest holders can guide decisions about how to respond to unforeseen challenges in ways that may sacrifice certain objectives in the interest of preserving the most important ones.

Early scope-setting should also define the duration of research activities that will be needed to address the research questions at hand. If the objectives call for a long-term approach, the design team should think about what interim outputs can be built into the plan. Such interim outputs can provide important early insights about the alignment between the programme's design and the needs and challenges of the context, allowing for crucial course corrections.

Interim outputs can also make valuable, if incomplete, contributions to answering the ultimate research questions, which may be useful if changing conditions preclude the successful execution of the entire research programme. With a clear theory of change, evidence relating to several interim, mid-point indicators can be greater than the sum of their parts, showing impact pathways even if not all research outputs are mature. In other words, FCAS research programmes should not be designed in an "all or nothing" fashion, whereby useful insights will come only at the end of the programme, and only if all goes according to plan.

Identifying research gaps and priorities

An important early step in designing an FCAS research programme is to identify extant research gaps. Research programmes should not duplicate existing work, so it is important to know what has been studied, where, and with what methods. Research gaps can come in several forms, and scope-setting exercises should take account of which types of gaps exist and which are most important to fill via the planned research programme. This is not to deny that additional research in comparatively well studied areas can provide useful insights on important questions. But where resources are limited, it is often best to direct them to the most understudied locations and topics.

At the same time, whilst filling research gaps is ultimately essential to carrying out well informed programming in FCAS, programme design teams should also be aware of the

trade-offs that come with prioritising certain research activities. Current gaps may well exist in large part due to the greater difficulty and higher costs associated with conducting research in particular locations, directed at particular questions, and/or employing particular methods. For example, long-term longitudinal studies may be scarce because they are frequently disrupted (or not attempted) because of shocks that limit access to areas and people of interest for data collection. Consequently, funds spent on conducting research in the most understudied areas may not "go as far", in terms of answering research questions, as funds directed at less challenging settings. This is not an argument for further neglecting loci of existing research gaps, but rather for adopting realistic expectations about what research objectives can be achieved in a given setting for a given budget in a given amount of time. These realistic expectations should be reflected throughout the design and management of research programmes, including in theories of change, logical frameworks and in the ways programme outputs are quality assured.

The identification of priority research gaps should be tailored to the objectives of a particular research programme – what counts as a critical gap in the context of a particular programme will depend on the role of the programme within the agency or institution's broader strategy. However, the RCC's scoping work (including the map of FCAS research methods and the map of effectiveness evidence on resilience and livelihoods in the Middle East, Sahel, and Horn of Africa) has identified several broad gaps that future research should prioritise filling. The subsections below summarise these gaps to provide a starting point for future FCAS research prioritisation exercises.

Geographic gaps

Some areas have been the subject of considerable research over the last 10-20 years, whilst others have much more limited knowledge bases. The review of FCAS research methods identified several conflict-affected areas with limited knowledge bases across a range of methods, including Myanmar, Mozambique, Chad, Cameroon, and the Democratic Republic of the Congo. In contrast, Burkina Faso is relatively well studied among FCAS countries, being the subject of over 1,000 studies. Likewise, Afghanistan (697 studies) and Mali (496) have fairly broad research bases that should be carefully scoped before investing in new research.

Meanwhile, the evidence map on resilience interventions identified several geographic gaps in the impact evaluation literature in particular. Countries like Syria, Iraq, and Sudan are subject to country-wide conflict exposure but virtually no impact evaluation research, at least in the areas of livelihoods, resilience, and food security. Reasons why fewer studies have been conducted in these countries in the Middle East and North Africa may include the difficulties of working in extremely conflict-affected areas, political instability, language barriers, and a perceived trade-off between funding for research versus humanitarian action.[4]

[4] For more details, see "Where's the Evidence? A Call for Research in the MENA Region's Time of Crisis," https://www.3ieimpact.org/blogs/wheres-evidence-call-research-mena-regions-time-crisis

Sectoral and thematic gaps

The RCC's scoping work (both the review of FCAS research methods and the resilience evidence map) indicates significant concentration of research effort in a small number of sectors, namely health, agriculture, and social protection. Those three sectors represent 79 percent of all studies identified in the research methods paper. There are notable gaps on topics like governance and institutions. These gaps are particularly problematic given the centrality of governance to the challenges inherent in FCAS, including service delivery and resilience of public institutions.

Methodological gaps and opportunities

It is important to consider methodological gaps because different types of research methods are suitable for providing insight on different types of questions. If a narrow range of methods dominates the research literature, this suggests that certain types of research questions are receiving scant attention and therefore only certain types of practical questions can draw guidance from existing research. For example, a relative lack of impact evaluations on major policies and interventions leaves decision makers with limited information on whether those interventions are achieving their aims and should be continued.

Mixed-methods study designs are particularly useful for leveraging the insights that various approaches (e.g., quantitative and qualitative designs) can supply to the different dimensions of a research question. Analysis of the FCAS research landscape suggests that although mixed-methods studies are growing more common, they still make up a fairly small proportion (12%) of the FCAS literature overall.

The RCC has also found that it is common for studies in FCAS to address questions of cause and effect: about half of the studies identified in the FCAS methods landscape study take up causal questions. But such studies do not always rely on the most well-established methods for causal inference. Randomised controlled trials (RCTs) and quasi-experimental methods are relatively rare in FCAS (although the resilience evidence map suggests these methods may be common in non-conflict-affected areas of countries with regionalised FCAS exposure, such as Ethiopia). This gap suggests a limited evidence base regarding the effectiveness of interventions to improve lives in FCAS.

Opportunities may exist for researchers who apply advanced analytic techniques to existing or remotely-sensed data. Primary data collection is common in FCAS, perhaps because secondary data (e.g., administrative datasets) may be unavailable or unreliable. However, where established secondary datasets do exist – such as Demographic and Health Surveys (DHS) or surveys by the World Bank – these have generally been used only in studies employing basic analytic techniques. This suggests opportunities for using advanced methods to draw insights from existing datasets. Satellite imagery and other remotely-sensed data also offers new possibilities when measuring outcomes like environmental health, crop yields, and overall economic activity. These approaches may be especially valuable in FCAS owing to the high costs and risks involved in primary data collection in such settings.

Embedding equity and inclusion in the planning phase

There are two senses in which equity and inclusion can be embedded in an FCAS research programme. One concerns the research to be undertaken: are the research designs suitable for shedding light on questions of equity, and will the results be useful in designing programmatic responses that reduce inequalities, rather than exacerbating them? The second concerns the processes of planning and executing the research programme itself. Do the processes of setting priorities, formulating plans, making decisions, and disseminating findings reinforce existing power dynamics, or do they ensure appropriate buy-in and ownership from all interest holders?

Equity and inclusion in research design

To ensure that considerations of equity and inclusion are adequately integrated into FCAS research programmes, these considerations should be embedded in the planning process from the earliest stages. It can be difficult to fully integrate equity-sensitive approaches into research programmes if these have not been planned for from the beginning. For instance, it is often important to have longitudinal data on inequality-related outcomes, so that the impact of evolving conflicts and crises on entrenched inequalities can be assessed. If measurement of these outcomes is only introduced later in the research process, valuable opportunities to observe changes over time may be lost.

The RCC's resilience evidence map demonstrates that it is quite rare for quantitative impact evaluations in FCAS to account for equity in their research designs. This suggests the existence of blind spots in the research community that limit the equity-sensitivity of the research literature. Certain common research practices, like measuring food security at the household level, can obscure important dimensions of inequality, such as unequal distributions of food within households.

Promoting local ownership and leadership

Ethical and practical considerations both suggest that interest holders based in FCAS should own and lead research programmes conducted in their settings. From an ethical standpoint, FCAS-based institutions should have substantial input into the process of setting research priorities that reflect local communities' needs and values. From a practical standpoint, research targeting FCAS will be more relevant if it is designed and led by those with deep understanding of the local context, including, for example, local sensitivities that should be respected in the data collection process. Moreover, local researchers and institutions will have more established networks in the context of the research, leading to improved prospects for influencing local policy.

Despite these considerations, analysis of authorship patterns on published research works shows limited participation from FCAS-based researchers and institutions, with lead authors frequently based at institutions at high-income countries. The reasons for this imbalance include both structural inequalities between the Global North and the Global South and the destructive effects of conflict on research institutions based in conflict-affected areas. In contexts of extreme fragility, local research institutions may not be able to function, and individual researchers may face may limitations on their activities.

Several steps may help ensure local ownership and leadership:

Formalising requirements for local involvement

Research commissioning teams can promote local ownership and leadership through formal requirements built into the commissioning process. For example, requirements could be set regarding the number of research grants awarded to FCAS-based institutions or consortia led by such institutions.

Leveraging existing relationships with local partners

RED leads in FCDO have emphasised the importance of working with trusted FCAS-based partners to deliver research in FCAS, but working exclusively with trusted partners undermines incentives to expand research networks. One solution is to use existing relationships to expand the network of trusted partners. For example, funders could play a matchmaking role to pair promising new partners with established, trusted ones, with the goal of establishing the new partner as a trusted source for future projects.

Long-term investment in local capacity

Partnerships should be undertaken with an eye towards the long-term growth of local capacity. This can encompass training, mentorships, institutional infrastructure, and systems for collecting, managing, and sharing data. These investments will help ensure that over time, greater proportions of FCAS-based research will be designed and led by FCAS-based researchers and institutions.

Delivering and managing FCAS research programmes

Balancing responsiveness and long-term strategy

Funders' interest in implementing a long-term, coherent research agenda at the institutional level is in tension with the inherent unpredictability of carrying out research in FCAS. New crises may emerge and planned activities may become infeasible due to security or other concerns. Such challenges can make it difficult for agencies to ensure their research portfolios are functioning as a coherent whole, with complementarities amongst the various activities.

To manage this tension, agencies should remain flexible with respect to individual projects and activities, whilst maintaining a core set of objectives and continually assessing the value of ongoing and potential projects and activities relative to those objectives. Again, it is useful to have clarity on which strategic objectives are most central and which are more peripheral, to aid in assessing trade-offs between activities that may support different strategic objectives.

Addressing operational challenges

Operational challenges are particularly common in FCAS-based research. Managing these challenges requires careful contingency planning, robust monitoring, and overall flexibility.

Security risks

Security risks are one prominent example. Such risks apply to both researchers (including, but not limited to, enumerators collecting primary data) and research participants. Processes to continually assess and monitor risks, as well as plans for safeguarding, should be in place.

Funders and leaders of research teams should be prepared to forgo planned research activities if doing so is necessary to safeguard researchers and participants. It is also important to be cognizant of the risks that research participants may incur as a result of supplying information. Local partners are key to understanding these risks and designing research activities in ways that mitigate them.

Access limitations

Areas of ongoing or planned research activities may become inaccessible due to evolving security situations, unreliable transport infrastructure, and so on. Plans should be in place for how to address changes in site access, whether by relocating, rescheduling, or changing the scope of research activities.

Funding and administration

Traditional funding mechanisms and procurement processes may be less suitable for the demands of FCAS-based research, which can require rapid changes. Accountable grant funding mechanisms were deemed more favourable than contracts. In the case of the latter, inflexibility was a constraint and this limited the extent to which necessary adaptations could be made. Flexible funding and procurement mechanisms, such as funds set aside at the outset of the programme to address emerging priorities, can improve agencies' ability to manage operational challenges in FCAS.

Summary of recommendations

1. **Don't try to be everything to everyone: Define clear objectives and scope.**
    a. Identify mission-critical objectives to guide trade-offs when conditions change.
    b. Design programmes to generate valuable interim outputs which can have pathways to greater impact rather than relying solely on end-line results.
    c. Identify and prioritise research gaps – geographic, sectoral, and methodological – based on strategic relevance and feasibility.
    d. Target policy impact that is achievable in the context, given the degree of fragility and the level of state capacity.

2. **Let the question guide the research: Choose appropriate research designs.**
    a. Select research designs that align with the programme's purpose – exploratory, descriptive, causal, or adaptive.

b. Balance ambition with feasibility, considering access, data availability, and security. Realism should be reflected throughout programme design and quality assurance processes.

c. Promote methodological diversity and use of mixed methods to strengthen validity and contextual understanding.

d. Leverage existing secondary datasets before commissioning new data collection, and explore cost-effective approaches like remote sensing when new data are required.

3. Keep equity and inclusion at the core of programme design

a. Integrate equity considerations from the outset, ensuring research designs capture inequality dynamics.

b. Collect disaggregated and intra-household data where possible to expose hidden inequalities.

4. Promote local ownership and leadership of research.

a. Require and incentivise local institutional leadership in research consortia. This should include engaging with local actors as early in the process as possible, including during early market engagements.

b. Build long-term capacity through training, mentorship, and investment in local research infrastructure.

c. Incorporate inclusive processes in priority setting and governance to avoid reinforcing existing power imbalances.

d. Use existing trusted partnerships to identify new collaborators and expand networks.

5. Maintain flexibility throughout programme implementation.

a. Encourage adaptiveness at the level of individual initiatives whilst ensuring alignment with core strategic goals.

b. Establish mechanisms for adaptive management – including flexible funding mechanisms – and regular review of portfolio coherence.

c. Plan for and mitigate operational risks—security, access, funding delays—through contingency planning and flexible contracting.