

Reflections on the ReCAP Inter-Regional Implementation Meeting, 25–27 February 2019, Kathmandu, Nepal

Introduction

In 2050, a third of the global population will still be living in rural communities. Yet currently an estimated 1 billion people live more than 2 kilometres away from an all-season road. In line with the pledge of the United Nations' Agenda 2030 for Sustainable Development to “leave no one behind” and Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) Target 9.1 to develop regional and trans-border infrastructure, the provision of accessible rural transport has emerged as a key element of poverty reduction strategies. Innovative applied research is crucial to improving the effectiveness and sustainability of transport infrastructure. However, it is not enough to carry out research and report on outcomes. A lack of focus on the uptake and embedment of research findings hinders effective application of the insights derived from research.

The Research for Community Access Partnership (ReCAP) is a six-year, UK aid-funded research programme that supports rural road infrastructure and transport services research in 12 countries in Africa (AFCAP) and five countries in Asia (ASCAP). Through research, demonstration, advisory and training projects, including the setting up of research centres, ReCAP aims to strengthen the evidence base on more cost-effective and reliable low volume road and transport services approaches, and influence policy and practice in its partner countries.

The Inter-Regional Implementation Meeting (IRIM 2019), which took place in Kathmandu, Nepal (25–27 February 2019), brought together the ReCAP community to advance the three pillars of its *Way Forward Strategy*: (1) access provision, (2) access preservation, and (3) sustainable access services. With a theme of “*Effective uptake and embedment of transport research benefitting rural communities*”, IRIM 2019 provided an opportunity to take stock of the current status of ReCAP research projects. The focus of the sessions was on the dissemination of findings, their uptake into guidelines, standards and manuals, and embedment into national regulations across partner countries leading up to programme completion in 2020.

Key Messages

- ReCAP has championed a unique emphasis on research to inform policy that is appreciated by partner countries. The second edition of IRIM proved invaluable as a forum to take stock, disseminate findings and network with the community of practice.
- Despite the volume of research that has already been undertaken by ReCAP projects, researchers and research centres need sustained support. Incentives should be provided to individuals motivated to pursue a career in research.

- ReCAP projects have carried out research and dissemination activities, and uptake through guidelines and manuals is underway in many partner countries; however, embedment into national standards and regulations is a challenge. This can best be achieved by proactive engagement with decision makers and advocacy through simple, evidence-backed messages and interaction.
- Despite substantive support from ReCAP for research on sustainable access services, there is a perception among some advocates for sustainable transport that there has been a disproportionate focus on research on access provision and access preservation.
- The Rural Access Index (RAI; SDG indicator 9.1.1) is a useful tool for partner countries planning rural road strategies (though it is less relevant to wetland communities, e.g. in Bangladesh and South Sudan).

Problems of definition threaten to undermine RAI's credibility; it could be supplemented by indices on community access to markets, social services and sustainable transport options.

- Gender mainstreaming has been the focus of several ReCAP research projects and is part of the political discourse in partner countries. But it has not been institutionalised, due to lack of political will, capacity and data on the differing transport needs of women and men.
- Funding is a longstanding challenge for research. It is crucial to use research outcomes to persuade those making policy and taking decisions in the transport sector that it makes economic sense to use technologies, materials and designs that have been tested for low volume rural roads, and to invest in timely asset management.
- With a few notable exceptions, political will is lacking to allocate resources for research. Active engagement with decision makers in road agencies, ministries and other public and private stakeholders is critical.
- Most partner countries have expressed a need for additional ReCAP support to complete ongoing projects by the end of the programme in 2020. They also anticipate looking for alternative funding sources to sustain their work beyond this date.

“A stronger collective voice for rural transport and access is needed, since most poor people live in rural areas. ReCAP is an excellent way to provide that voice, and DFID is happy to take the lead in supporting it.”

Liz Jones, Senior Transport Advisor, UK Department for International Development

Background

This brief provides key messages and lessons emerging from IRIM 2019 that relate to uptake and embedment of research outcomes leading up to ReCAP programme completion in 2020. It identifies opportunities for ReCAP stakeholders to ensure the sustainability of the work that they have been engaged in beyond 2020, under the overarching objective of providing sustainable mobility for all. What follows is a summary of the viewpoints expressed by participants in plenary sessions, surveys and interviews conducted during IRIM 2019.

IRIM 2019: an invaluable resource and networking forum

- Apart from providing an opportunity to take stock of achievements in the 17 ReCAP partner countries, fora such as IRIM 2019 are useful to disseminate research findings and exchange ideas, aiding uptake and embedment of research. Participants felt this avoided having to constantly “reinvent the wheel”: findings and technologies from projects from other countries, where appropriate, can be incorporated into their own country guidelines and projects.
- The evidence presented at IRIM 2019 can be used to convince decision makers of the utility of research, specific technologies or lessons from other countries.
- IRIM 2019 provided valuable networking opportunities to exchange information and identify future collaborators, engage with government stakeholders to disseminate key research messages, and develop linkages with donors.
- The community of practice is strengthened, but more cross-fertilisation of ideas and learning could be encouraged by continuing to reach out to stakeholders such as policy makers and representatives from other multilateral and non-governmental organisations working in the sector.



*Deliberations at the second ReCAP Inter-Regional Implementation Meeting,
25-27 February 2019, Kathmandu, Nepal*

The research chain

ReCAP has been successful in initiating projects in partner countries that have resulted in research outputs related to the three pillars of rural road infrastructure provision, asset management and sustainable transport. Reporting for many projects has been completed and disseminated in the form of journal papers, guidelines and handbooks. Examples include the design manuals for Low Volume (Rural) Roads, the Climate Change Handbook and the Gender Mainstreaming Guidelines. Projects have also incorporated demonstrations of road technology, and the establishment of monitoring and evaluation systems. Workshops as well as training programmes have taken place. But the sustainability of ReCAP research can only be ensured to the degree that findings are taken up and embedded into institutions and national standards and regulations. The research chain – research, reporting, dissemination, demonstration, training, uptake and embedment – interacts with the three pillars of infrastructure provision, preservation and sustainable transport. Unless infrastructure is maintained and accessible to communities, road access cannot really be said to have been provided. Research plays a key role in conceptualising, measuring and guiding the progress made along the rural road access continuum.

At the same time, it cannot be assumed that as we approach the conclusion of the programme in 2020, ReCAP need only focus on uptake and embedment for projects that have completed research activities and reported and disseminated outcomes. Projects in “late joiners” such as Afghanistan and South Sudan, as well as in DRC, remain in inception phase, and much work remains to be done in nascent research centres in partner countries. Stakeholders should carry on implementing these research projects but adopt a holistic approach towards uptake and embedment from the very outset.

Research projects: the funding issue

The importance of research may be clear to transport sector practitioners, but it is often challenging to secure buy-in from decision makers reluctant to allocate the funds required. Here, research outcomes from pilot projects from across the world – particularly those indicating savings in the long term – represent a powerful tool. ReCAP has facilitated the exchange of findings through networks built up through fora such as IRIM 2019.

ReCAP should actively continue to build close relationships with state organisations, facilitating MoUs between relevant bodies such as ministries and those orientated towards research - such as universities, laboratories and the private sector. Partner country governments should reach out to bilateral and multilateral organisations for technical and financial support, including for new programmes. The private sector and local communities could be engaged through Public–Private Partnerships and/or other models of financing.

Champions for gender and research in Sierra Leone

Liz Jones, Senior Transport Advisor at the UK Department for International Development, notes that it is a good investment to mainstream cross-cutting issues such as gender into road infrastructure and transport provision. She also emphasises the importance of key individuals within key institutions in championing such issues. An excellent example of such a champion is Melrose Kargbo, Deputy Minister of the Ministry of Works and Public Assets in Sierra Leone. Well-known for her advocacy of women's issues, Deputy Minister Kargbo completely rejects the notion that gender mainstreaming is a donor-driven issue with little traction in ReCAP partner countries.

Furthermore, with the support of Amara H. J. Kanneh, the Director General of the Sierra Leone Roads Authority, the Deputy Minister has taken a strong position on uptake and embedment of research on roads. She considers that research informs policy and expressed a strong appreciation of the demonstration of dust equipment that was organised during the IRIM 2019 field trip to Gokarna, Kathmandu.

Research centres and research careers

ReCAP has been involved in setting up research centres in partner countries by providing technical and financial support. Due to the variable capacity of partner countries and the different time periods in which they were set up, these centres range from the nascent to the mature. They will require continued support if they are to be sustainable (and produce useful research outcomes) beyond 2020. Throughout IRIM 2019, participants suggested that incentives were necessary to ensure that these research centres are staffed by motivated, qualified researchers who have a genuine, long-term interest in building careers in research. Incentives could take the form of opportunities for career advancement and/or monetary remuneration for the roles and responsibilities undertaken.

Participants working within research were generally upbeat about the long-term prospects for their institutions provided funding could be secured beyond 2020. A more sobering assessment was provided by a participant who questioned whether the research institutions created or supported by ReCAP would develop into full-fledged facilities able to carry out meaningful research (i.e. developing new knowledge) rather than being limited to testing (e.g. proprietary products for soil stabilisation). It was recommended that future programmes consider whether the placement of research institutions within road agencies in partner countries was more convenient than appropriate. Research institutions need a supportive institutional structure to be sustainable, including a financing mechanism, political support, and people who want to do the research.

With partner countries developing capacity for baseline research and testing, there should be a shift towards finding innovative solutions and implementing systems-based approaches to the problem of providing sustainable mobility for all.

“Rural roads are not as ‘visible’, but if you’re talking about large projects, then at that scale you can have an impact on cross-cutting issues like road safety and gender. You have different discussions with different key players, and you have more leverage.”

Jamie Leather, Chief, Transport Sector Group, Asian Development Bank

Dissemination and capacity building

Participants called for active and managed dissemination of research outcomes, indicating that information should be easily accessible, understandable and adaptable across national contexts. The presentation of findings, including through online forums, should use non-technical language, and ideally provide guidance on how they should be applied.

ReCAP projects in partner countries have incorporated dissemination and capacity-building activities such as workshops and Training of Trainers (ToT) programmes. ToT programmes are crucial to establishing a core cohort of trainers who will form the basis for uptake and embedment. In order to target decision makers at the higher level, several participants suggested exposure programmes tailored to individuals at senior levels and consisting of short-duration workshops.

Linking research to curricula and policy in Tanzania

According to Vincent Lwanda, Laboratory Manager at the Tanzania Rural and Urban Roads Agency (TARURA), a lack of political will and the perception that high costs are involved often hinder decision makers from taking up research outcomes. Making connections between people, programmes and organisations is crucial. Uptake of TARURA’s research, for instance its Low Volume Road Design Manual, has taken place through its inclusion in the curriculum of the Master of Roads programme at Mbeya University of Science and Technology. As there is a high probability that the engineering graduates from this programme will work directly or indirectly with TARURA, familiarity with the organisation’s research will play a key role in its uptake and embedment.

Fikiri Fredrick Magafu, Assistant Director at the President’s Office, Regional Administration and Local Government of Tanzania, acknowledges the difficulty in convincing decision makers to move beyond limited trial sections for rural roads. But as a former leader of the District Road Research Centre who worked directly with Vincent Lwanda, he emphasises the value of the knowledge he has of the organisation and its research outputs. He feels that he is in a good position to advocate for uptake and embedment of research with the Prime Minister’s Office.

Uptake and embedment

Active lobbying and engagement with policy makers should take place at different levels – “speak the right words to the right people” or “speak their language”, according to participants – to ensure that guidelines such as the Low Volume Roads Design Manual are made mandatory in partner countries. Participants recommended that simple, compelling messages backed with research findings be used to appeal to decision makers at the highest level.

The availability of easily transferable messages would also facilitate high-level discussions within government, e.g. when a minister responsible for road development needs to lobby for resource allocation. Participants, through an online polling app, agreed that “research outputs should be more accessible and understandable to non-technical decision makers”.

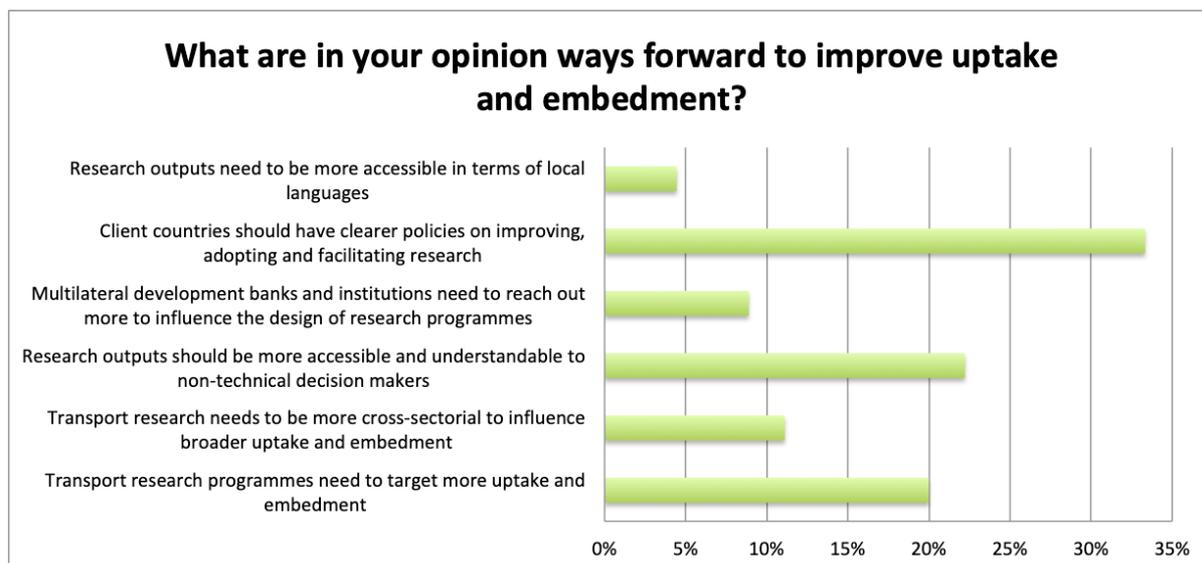


Figure 1. Results from the live polling application used during one of the IRIM sessions on the question of ways forward for enhanced uptake and embedment.

Research for policy should be a long-term initiative with guaranteed support. But research should be guided by political priorities and, as a participant suggested, should ideally develop a relevant “reserve” of outcomes that can be applied when appropriate.

“We all have knowledge about what works or not, so we should all be advocates.”
Peter O’Neill, Independent Consultant for infrastructure development

Way forward: completing ReCAP and moving beyond 2020

As ReCAP enters the final phase of its operations leading up to mid-2020, it is important to acknowledge that though many partner countries face similar issues in the rural transport sector, research development is at differing levels of maturity. Therefore, efforts in the final phase, and with the budget allocations that remain, must be focused on short, demand-led activities. Most partner countries made specific requests for projects or more generally for the research centres that had been set up. A survey of participants indicated that, up to the end of the programme, ReCAP should focus on capacity building and strengthening of research units. Participants also wanted the accessibility of research outputs to be improved, including through online learning modules. A focus on the consolidation and packaging of the research outcomes that have been produced so far, along with country-specific assessments and roadmaps, will help ReCAP ensure it has a documented, accessible legacy.

“The responsibility of those involved in this programme is to share the knowledge and look for other resources to continue the programme because the knowledge is there, and the network is there.”

Isabel Cossa, Head of Department of Policies and Programs, Ministry of Land, Environment and Rural Development, Mozambique

Partner countries must also be proactive in ensuring that research and networks that have been built up during the last six years (some of the networks stretch back to predecessor programmes like AFCAP I and SEACAP) are sustained beyond 2020. As several participants noted, ReCAP’s partner countries will need to identify other resources to sustain the outputs of the programme.



An important means of ensuring sustainability will be the mentorship and leadership development initiatives that have been included in many partner countries. Scoping studies have been conducted for structured mentorship projects, and pilots will be rolled out across partner countries. Knowledge retention initiatives include mapping expertise from a pool of very senior experts, and thematic videos of semi-structured interviews are being produced to this end. Similarly, the Transport Sector Leadership Development Programme is currently in inception phase and is seeking a host institution. Synergies are being sought between these twin initiatives, which are expected to result in the development of a cohort of capable, confident and professional transport leaders in Africa. Participants agreed that such initiatives would be very useful in transferring explicit as well as tacit knowledge and developing the home-grown capacity to envision and operationalise relevant research projects along the rural access continuum.

As ReCAP and its partners approach the conclusion of the programme in mid-2020, the focus must be on maximising the impact of research by translating outcomes into compelling messages targeting key figures in governments across the region. The success of IRIM 2019 has depended in part on actively engaging a broader spectrum of stakeholders, and this approach should be incorporated into the planning of future meetings. Where it is anticipated that partner countries will need support to complete or sustain projects undertaken under ReCAP, the programme should seek to provide countries with clear guidance, advice and linkages to help them move towards the vision of transforming their transport sectors to provide sustainable rural mobility for all.