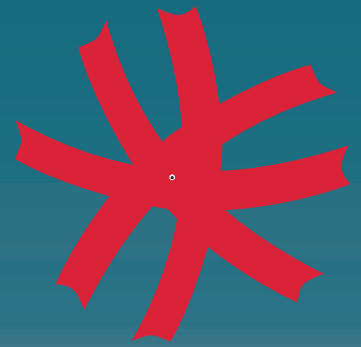


# locus



the point of international development

## **A Prioritized Research Agenda for Integrated Development**

**June 2016**

Locus is a coalition of organizations dedicated to advancing evidence-based solutions to global development challenges that are integrated, driven by local communities, and based on shared measures.

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## background

Most discussions on emerging trends in global development end with a call for more research. Thus far, dialogues around integrated development have not been an exception. Indeed, building an evidence base to demonstrate the value and impact of integrated approaches is a core priority of the Locus Initiative. Locus is a coalition of organizations focused on advancing evidence-based solutions to global development challenges that are integrated, driven by local communities, and based on shared measures. For Locus, **integrated development** intentionally links disciplines and sectors through partnerships that design and deliver inclusive programming to amplify impact and achieve sustainability.

A core aim of Locus is to expand the evidence base in ways that help strengthen design and implementation of effective integration policies and practices. Yet, given the broad, diverse, heterogeneous nature of integrated development, the precise and most critical research questions that would help build this evidence are not immediately evident. Moreover, different types of decision-makers will prioritize certain questions over others and may not necessarily agree on which research questions or knowledge gaps are the most pressing. Locus recognized that getting topic experts, researchers, funders, implementers, and other key stakeholders to provide input on their respective priorities for current questions of interest would be an effective way to establish a global research agenda that can be used to advocate for the most appropriate research questions, to guide future decisions by key decision-makers, and ultimately to build the most relevant and usable body of evidence.

This research agenda aims to enable the field to strengthen the evidence base for integrated development approaches by presenting key areas of inquiry for consideration by decision-makers who seek to explore and better understand integrated development policies and programs.

Importantly, four points influenced the creation of this research agenda and are critical considerations in its use.

1. Integration is one possible means to an end (better impact) and is neither a goal in itself nor necessarily the most appropriate approach in all cases. Therefore, we should examine integrated approaches for potential effectiveness alongside other options to address development challenges.
2. The rationale for advancing integrated development varies based on decision-maker perspectives, priorities, and ultimate aims. Different goals for integration include improving user satisfaction, reach, equity, sustainability, operations, value for money, and impact. Funders may emphasize cost efficiencies or enhanced sustainability, whereas program implementers may prioritize time savings, improving user satisfaction, or achieving greater equity. In practice, single-sector models and integrated approaches each will have certain advantages and disadvantages in a particular setting.
3. Universally applicable evidence for the effectiveness of integration is very rare because integrated development is an umbrella term that describes many different program combinations, from health and microfinance, to nutrition and education, to conservation and livelihoods. Given this diversity, no single study on an integrated approach will suffice as an answer to any one question. A research agenda on this topic only can provide questions that serve as starting points, meant to be tailored to the actual sectors that are being combined and to their specific contexts.
4. Research agendas generally are developed to influence the type of knowledge being sought and produced in a certain field. In this case, Locus is not making recommendations on the methods that should be used in the pursuit of answers to those questions. In some instances, a desk review of existing information will suffice. In others, qualitative research through in-depth interviews may be needed. And in others, rigorous impact evaluations will be required.

## methodology

Fortunately, absolute consensus is not required to develop a prioritized research agenda; it can be facilitated using ranking exercises and participatory discussions that ensure that the vast majority of opinions are expressed and represented in the final list. One of the most common methodologies used in research agenda development is the Delphi method. Developed by the RAND Corporation in the 1950s, this method<sup>1</sup> solicits subject experts' opinions on a specific real-world issue through a series of carefully designed questionnaires to establish an eventual convergence of opinion. The goal is to iteratively reduce the range of responses and arrive at something close to expert consensus.

Locus used a modified<sup>2</sup> Delphi method to develop the prioritized research agenda. We:

- Collaboratively created a list of research questions with input from Locus members.
- Synthesized suggested questions into one cohesive list.
- Engaged Locus members and additional external experts in a survey-based ranking and prioritization exercise: 26 respondents from 15 institutions working in research, policy, funding, or implementation ranked the questions as either high, medium, or low priority.
- Refined and finalized the questions based on the survey findings and through in-depth discussions, dialogue, and debate among Locus research working group members.

## results

**Priority Questions** (rated by respondents as the highest priority overall)

- What key criteria should determine when integration is the most appropriate approach in different contexts and scenarios?
- What are the costs of integration versus vertical programming (e.g., in the short and long terms, cost efficiencies vs. increased costs, financial costs associated with negative outcomes or missed opportunities in the absence of integration)?
- How is integration viewed by local communities and stakeholders?
- Do the effects of integrated development outcomes tend to last longer than the effects of vertical programming outcomes?

## questions by type

### formative

The following questions relate to research that describes current scenarios, environments, and attitudes around to integrated development.

- What key criteria will determine when integration is the most appropriate approach in different contexts and scenarios?
- How is integration viewed by:
  - Local communities and stakeholders?
  - Bilateral and multilateral funders?
  - Policymakers, governments, and partner governments?
  - Implementing organizations?
- How conducive to integrated development are current funder policies, priorities, and practices?
- What do funders and other key decision-makers need to support integrated development approaches?

<sup>1</sup> See more on the Delphi method at <http://www.rand.org/topics/delphi-method.html>.

<sup>2</sup> The second round of discussion was facilitated with Locus members versus all of the first respondents.

*process &  
implementation*

These questions relate to research that assesses how integrated approaches are being designed and delivered.

- Does integration have unanticipated adverse effects on program quality, especially for the original service that is now being integrated with other programs or services?
- What can be integrated that will add value but that will not simultaneously overload platforms, systems, or people?
- What inputs and processes different than those needed to implement vertical programs are necessary to successfully manage, coordinate, and deliver an integrated program?<sup>3</sup>

*impact*

The following questions relate to research that determines the outcomes, impact, and effectiveness of integrated efforts.

- Do the effects of integrated development outcomes tend to last longer than the effects of vertical programming outcomes?
- Does integration reach more absolute numbers of people than a targeted, vertical approach?
- Does integration enhance equity by enabling programs to reach more marginalized or underserved groups or sub-populations?
- Which specific combinations of sectors most contribute to integrated development impact?
- Is household-level economic strengthening (aimed at generating jobs, wealth, and assets) a necessary component for the success of any integrated program, regardless of which sector(s) the program is working in primarily?

*cost*

The following question relates to research on the cost of integrated programming.

- What are the costs of integration versus vertical programming (e.g., in the short and long terms, cost efficiencies vs. increased costs, financial costs associated with negative outcomes or missed opportunities in the absence of integration)?

*cross cutting*

The following are not research questions, but were noted by survey respondents as important for generating and applying evidence on integrated development.

- How can we effectively evaluate synergies created by integration? Which methods are best suited for the different types of inquiries?
- Because “integrated development” is so broad (from health and microfinance, to nutrition with education, to conservation and livelihoods), how do we assess the external validity, adaptability, or scalability of research findings produced in specific settings (i.e., what information from research on integration is universally applicable versus context specific)? How can different fields of integration exchange and aggregate their evidence?

<sup>3</sup>This question was not included in the survey priority questions. It emerged in subsequent Locus discussions.

## using the agenda

This research agenda aims to enable the field to strengthen the evidence base for integrated development approaches by presenting key areas of inquiry for consideration by decision-makers who seek to explore and better understand integrated development policies and programs. The questions presented are meant to be tailored and thoughtfully adapted to specific circumstances, based on the rationale for pursuing integration, what specifically is being integrated, where integration is occurring/will occur, and who will integrate programs and be on the receiving end of integrated programs. Moreover, a research agenda is much broader than any one coalition or institution can address alone. Therefore, we offer the following recommendations to various stakeholder groups on using this research agenda.

### **Locus will:**

- Ensure key global and local decision-makers are aware of the research agenda.
- Engage the development community in identifying strategies and scenarios for using the research agenda.
- Advocate to funders for their investment in research efforts that would answer one or more questions.
- When possible, conduct collaborative research efforts to address one or more questions.
- Encourage the development community to conduct research on these questions, particularly in the course of project-related research.

### **Funders can:**

- Consider the research questions when designing new or supporting existing efforts related to integrated development approaches.
- Share the agenda as appropriate with grantees and other partners to inform monitoring and evaluation and other research and evaluation activities.
- Support mechanisms for knowledge sharing and exchange to disseminate the research findings and new evidence as they emerge and to support their application to ongoing policy and practice.

### **Researchers can:**

- Prioritize and (when possible) apply the agenda's questions to the design of new research and evaluation efforts on integrated development.

### **Policymakers can:**

- Help advocate and mobilize funding for research topics outlined in the agenda.
- Communicate their respective knowledge gaps, research priorities, and interests to funders and researchers.

### **Program implementers can:**

- Prioritize and (when possible) embed the agenda's questions within the design of monitoring and evaluation plans and of program or impact evaluations.
- Communicate their respective knowledge gaps, research priorities, and interests to funders and researchers.

### **Everyone can:**

- Disseminate the knowledge eventually gained by answering these questions to stakeholders in all of the groups above to ensure a research-to-practice feedback loop where emerging best practices for integrated development are translated into future investments, policies, and programs.



