

The Lean Research Declaration

A Call for Rigorous, Respectful, Relevant, and Right-sized Research in International Development

On August 1, 2014, fifty practitioners, institutional researchers, and donors gathered to discuss research in the international development context, a context in which the research subjects often face poverty or vulnerability, and may be disadvantaged compared to those conducting the research.

This group had seen, or been involved with, studies in which researchers were not attentive to the experience of subjects (i.e. were not sufficiently respectful), where samples and protocols were either too large or too small to efficiently answer the research question (i.e. were not right-sized), and where results were not actionable by policy makers or practitioners (i.e. were not sufficiently relevant).

We agreed that as a global community, we could do better research. We could do research that is beneficial to communities, actionable by many stakeholders, and efficient in terms of benefits to costs.

A New Approach

Lean Research is an approach to field research in the contexts of development work that seeks to maximize benefit and minimize burden and waste for all stakeholders in the research process.

Building on human-centered development and design, Lean Research places the experience of the research subject at the center of the research activity. By creating a respectful and enjoyable experience for human subjects in the context of research questions that are relevant to key stakeholders, including participants, Lean Research seeks to:

- Increase the quality of information gathered through research;
- Improve the usefulness of research findings for stakeholders; and
- Enable both the research process and outputs to benefit study subjects and their communities.

As a broad framework and approach to social science research, Lean Research can be applied regardless of whether the methods are quantitative, qualitative, or mixed. Lean Research is research that adheres to the highest standards established in various fields of practice; it is therefore rigorous research. In the contexts of development research however, this is not enough. *Good research should also be relevant, respectful and right-sized.*

How We Conduct Research Matters

Research is a development activity.

Primary data collection often involves intervention in the lives of research subjects. Participation in research can generate outcomes for participants and their communities that can be positive, harmful, or both. There is a need to ensure that the act of conducting research contributes to the overall development objectives, rather than undermining them.

Power and social dynamics influence research results.

Research that creates a positive impact for all involved takes into account the differences in power between the researcher and those being researched, and creates a research experience that is respectful and meaningful for all. Failure to acknowledge or address power differences can create negative experiences for research subjects, reduce data quality, and undermine good data-driven decision-making.

Disrespectful, irrelevant, and inefficient research is too common.

There are too many cases of research studies that have not been respectful or enjoyable for the human subjects. Even when respectful, research can be meaningless to subjects, repetitious, or ignorant of their priorities and thus irrelevant. It may also lack relevance to other stakeholders such as decision-makers, practitioners, and policy makers or be too narrow in scope to inform action. Too often, research participants never receive study findings. Finally, even well executed research studies can be too costly relative to the benefits they produce for communities and key stakeholders.

The time is right to re-imagine our approach to development fieldwork, and together create better, leaner research.

LEAN RESEARCH DECLARATION

For Rigorous, Respectful, Relevant and Right-Sized Research in International Development

Whereas:

- » Lean Research is a human-centered approach to conducting field research in international development that seeks to improve the research experience for all involved;
- » In the context of research on poverty and development, research is more likely to produce positive impacts when it is:

Rigorous, following best practices for research developed by the discipline or methodology that is most appropriate for the study;

Respectful, maximizing the value of the research experience and outputs to the research subjects, participants, and key stakeholders;

Relevant, addressing priority issues for the research subjects, their communities, and other key stakeholders, while producing results that are understandable, accessible, and can inform action and decision-making; and

Right-sized, using only the processes, protocols, human subjects, and resources that are necessary to inform the decisions and actions that will be taken based on the research.

I agree that:

1. Researchers, practitioners, donors and others conducting and supporting field research in the contexts of poverty and development can produce greater benefit and higher-impact research by incorporating the principles of Lean Research into their work.
2. I am committed to implementing the Lean Research approach and principles in my work and I will encourage and support its implementation and adoption by my colleagues, collaborators, and the broader research community I engage with.
3. Lean Research consists of an evolving set of standards and practices that will be created, tested, and refined over time. As an advocate of Lean Research, I will actively contribute to the development of the approach and ongoing improvement of the standards and practices associated with it.

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Name

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Date

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Affiliation

Submit your signature online to endorse the Lean Research Declaration: d-lab.mit.edu/lean-research

Lean Research is a framework for conducting research in international development and a community of practice committed to implementing this framework, jointly organized by faculty and researchers at MIT D-Lab and The Fletcher School, Tufts University.

Learn more at: d-lab.mit.edu/lean-research
