

# Focus on respectful, human-centered research practices in global development

April 30 2015, by Lauren Mckown

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Participants engage in discussion at a Lean Research initiative convening held at MIT D-Lab. Credit: Emily Kate Moon

When a student now at the Tufts University Fletcher School of Law and Diplomacy traveled a few years ago to rural India on a research trip to

interview farmers, she brought some serious baggage with her: a nearly 200-question survey that took up to five hours to conduct and complete.

"We were wasting hours of the farmers' time," she shared at last week's Lean Research Lab, an event organized by MIT and Tufts. "It was fundamentally intrusive and disrespectful research."

What this student described is exactly the kind of research that advocates at MIT, Tufts, and beyond would like the global development community to rethink and move away from. It's why they founded the Lean Research initiative last spring.

Championed by faculty and researchers at MIT D-Lab, the Tufts Fletcher School, and the Feinstein International Center, also at Tufts, lean research is defined by the group as respectful, relevant, rigorous, and right-sized; taking a new approach to research conducted for international development.

Nearly 40 researchers from academia, donor agencies, and prominent non-governmental organizations have now signed onto the Lean Research Declaration, showing their support for the call to improve research practice and intent to incorporate lean principles in their own research work.

After a few days of surveying, the researcher who shared her example from India became frustrated and uncomfortable asking farmers so many questions. She took the survey back to her research team with a request to cut the survey down.

And she didn't stop at having a question cut here and there. Together, the research team brought the survey completion time down from five hours to just two.

"The type of data we ended up collecting was probably just as good as what we were seeking in the first place," she said.

This example was one of dozens shared by nearly 50 academics, researchers, practitioners, and donors from leading institutions in international development who came together for last week's Lean Research Lab, the second convening organized by the MIT and Tufts Lean Research initiative.

At the daylong, invite-only event, organizers introduced the lean research framework and engaged participants in a series of sharing and learning exercises. They also released a draft working paper on lean research for public comment and provided opportunities for further engagement after the event.

One of the most compelling moments of the day unfolded when participants openly shared their own "not-so-lean research" stories, sharing examples of research they had witnessed or been a part of that was duplicative, disrespectful, or irrelevant, affirming an urgent need for the lean research approach.

## **Developing a team committed to lean research**

At the first Lean Research initiative convening last summer, Tufts Fletcher School lecturer Kim Wilson, one of the organizers of the event, recalled her earliest lean research "aha" moment.

When working in Haiti following the 2010 earthquake, Wilson proposed a 100-question interview with survivors as part of a study she was conducting to learn about access to financial services. She was told by people working with survivors that they would not allow her to ask 100 questions of people who were in many cases traumatized, newly homeless, and in need of time to attend to their very survival.

As a result, Wilson began to wonder if those 100 questions were all necessary, and if there was a leaner way to design the study that would be less time-consuming for the participants and equally, if not more, productive.

These were the roots of the Lean Research initiative.

As Wilson began to develop the proposal for leaner research, she encountered others—both academics and practitioners—who were equally convinced of the need to develop new standards of excellence and ethics that went beyond the minimum requirements for treatment of human subjects that researchers follow as part of standard academic protocol.

In spring 2014, looking to transform this shared interest into an initiative, Wilson approached two researchers at MIT D-Lab—D-Lab evaluation manager Kendra Leith and Elizabeth Hoffecker Moreno, research coordinator for the International Development Innovation Network (headquartered at D-Lab)—who had been working together for several months on similar issues related to improving the experience of research participants in field interviews.

"Lean Research follows many of the same principles as D-Lab's human-centered design approach," Leith explains. "Including active engagement of the users in the design process, respect, and dignity of the participants, relevance of the product for the users, and making sure that the product is affordable and does not include any unnecessary components."

While originally planning a workshop with a small handful of colleagues, the organizers were pleasantly surprised by the strong interest in the subject after they began circulating the invitation. Within days, the attendance list had quickly grown to over 40 and organizers eventually

had to turn some eager participants away after capping participation at 50 due to space constraints.

## **Building Lean Research together**

MIT and Tufts have provided a spark and organizational backbone for the Lean Research initiative to take off, but its organizers have also ensured that its development is entirely participatory, incorporating voices from many parts of the global development community.

Participants in Lean Research-run events have shaped the initiative, lending their vast experience and expertise to activities such as refining the initiative framework, contributing to its working paper, forming working groups, and providing suggestions for making the Lean Research initiative's principles actionable.

At Lean Research events in the summer, and again this spring, participants were diverse, including representatives from MIT, Tufts University, the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, the Grameen Foundation, the World Bank, the Inter-American Development Bank, the U.S. Global Development Lab, the SEEP Network, Oxfam America, Root Capital, Acumen, and the MasterCard Foundation.

"I'm excited about the community we are convening and building," Hoffecker Moreno shared. "We keep finding that lean research resonates with people in very diverse spaces, from researchers working for international development agencies to professors with years of field research experience to monitoring and evaluation professionals gathering data for NGOs and social enterprises, to graduate students preparing to conduct their first major study for a thesis or final project."

Recognizing that students are the next generation of researchers, donors, and policymakers in global development, the organizers of last week's

event made a conscious effort to get more students involved in Lean Research initiatives.

Many graduate students, such as the Fletcher School's Michael Mori and Trevor Zimmer, are already conducting their own research and looking for better, leaner ways to design survey instruments up front and once in the field.

Mori and Zimmer attended last week's Lean Research Lab and shared insights from their research on mobile banking as a driver of financial inclusion in Indonesia. They're exploring how to better design products and services so they deliver value to unbanked consumers.

Seeking to deeply understand the communities they studied, Mori and Zimmer incorporated elements of human-centered design as well as some of the yet-to-be-defined lean research principles in their approach.

"We started off as 'research entrepreneurs' to find gaps in the existing research, and that quickly led us to focusing not on why folks are not using financial services, but instead looking at how financial services could add value," Zimmer says. "A lot of the existing research had huge data sets, big sample sizes, and static surveys. We thought the surveys were biasing the answers, and missing some important details on how people save and spend money, what their pain points are, and more."

Instead of long, exhaustive surveys, Mori and Zimmer incorporated focus groups and participatory design labs into their research. They see the Lean Research initiative as human-centered design for researchers.

## **Making Lean Research actionable**

It's clear that momentum around the Lean Research initiative is growing, but there's open acknowledgement by participants and organizers that

although these principles are important, they're not always easy to incorporate.

Given this, much of the work behind the initiative has been devoted to making the four guiding principles—respectful, relevant, rigorous, and right-sized—actionable and achievable in global development research.

In addition to the Lean Research framework developed in the fall, organizers have also encouraged the formation of working groups and have circulated a working paper for input from the greater lean research community.

Organizers are also embarking on the developing of a Lean Research Field Guide, a practical toolkit for researchers wishing to implement Lean Research principles in their work.

"The field guide will help researchers understand what specific steps we might take to do a study in a 'lean' way," Hoeffcker Moreno explains. "It's a product that will have broad reach and applicability throughout the [global development](#) community."

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