ORANGE CORNERS

AN INITIATIVE OF THE KINGDOM OF THE NETHERLANDS

A guide for those wanting to engage in entrepreneurship research: How to build a research approach that changes how you work

by Orange Corners

INTRODUCTION

Entrepreneurship support organizations and the development programmes that fund them collect a great deal of data. From surveys, to baseline and follow-up measurements, and more: over the life of a programme, this adds up to a substantial amount of information about how entrepreneurs in low- and middle-income countries actually develop and grow, and what helps or hinders them. Some organizations already put this data to good use, drawing on it to report to their funders but also to improve their programmes and to share insights internally. Sometimes much of this data is analysed in relatively standardized ways and discussed mainly within the boundaries of the programme itself, and there is often far more that could be learned from it with deeper analysis, more time, and additional expertise.

Orange Corners, an initiative of the Netherlands Ministry of Foreign Affairs implemented by the Netherlands Enterprise Agency (RVO) that supports young entrepreneurs across twenty regions in Africa, Asia, and the Middle East, has worked with a data-driven approach for years. The programme collects extensive pre- and post-survey and interview data on over 600 entrepreneurs per year, alongside extensive entrepreneurial ecosystem mappings, interviews with entrepreneurs and implementing partners, quarterly and annual reports and more, and it uses this data not only to report to its funder but also to improve its interventions and processes, to hold conversations with implementing partners on themes such as gender equality and job creation, and to learn from what works and what does not. Over ten years, this has produced a wealth of insight. What became clear, however, is that these insights were shared primarily within the programme, and that the monitoring and evaluation indicators were not primarily designed to answer some of the deeper research questions about how to improve the programme and about entrepreneurship support more broadly. As Orange Corners we came to feel that, with extra knowledge, experience, and resources, using our rich data, we could both answer those questions and make a meaningful contribution to the wider academic and practitioner debate. Answering these deeper questions, however, required research.

This guide explains how Orange Corners built a research approach from that starting point, and it is written so that other organizations in a similar position can follow a similar path. It explains what research adds, why a partnership model with universities turned out to be both affordable and effective, and what the practical steps are for moving from M&E data to a structured research agenda that increases programme effectiveness. The approach does not require a large budget or an in-house research department. It requires a clear set of research questions, a good overview of existing and potentially collected data, and a willingness to collaborate and a passion to learn.

> ***Most entrepreneurship support organizations already hold rich data and put it to good use. With a structured research approach, they can draw even more from it and contribute to the wider debate on entrepreneurship.***

STARTUPS AND INNOVATIVE SMES: UNDERSTANDING THE DISTINCTION

The first point to be clear about is that research is a different activity from monitoring, evaluation, and learning (MEL), and that an organization needs both. Monitoring and evaluation is built around a set of indicators agreed with the funder, and one of its purposes is to establish whether the programme delivered what it promised: how many entrepreneurs were trained, how many businesses were registered, how revenue and employment changed. Good monitoring and evaluation does far more than report upward. The data it generates can be analysed to improve interventions, to open conversations with implementing partners, and to learn continuously from programme results. This work is essential and valuable. What it is not designed to do, however, is to explain in depth why outcomes occur, why expected outcomes did not occur, and what to do about it, or to test whether the assumptions underlying the programme actually hold, and this is precisely where a more extensive research approach adds value.

Research begins where monitoring and evaluation stops. It asks open questions that M&E might find difficult to answer: why a particular intervention works in one ecosystem but not another, how the growth of a business affects its social or environmental mission, whether entrepreneurship support might unintentionally worsen fragility in a conflict-affected country. These are not questions of delivery. They are questions of design, mechanism and context. The table below sets out the distinction.

Monitoring, evaluation and learning

- Tracks fixed indicators agreed with the funder
- Answers whether the programme delivered what it promised
- Tracks what is happening and supports steady improvement
- Serves accountability and continuous programme improvement
- Standardized across the programme

Research

- Asks open questions the indicators cannot answer
- Answers why outcomes happen and under what conditions
- Looks at mechanisms, context, and underlying causes
- Serves learning, programme redesign, and contribution to knowledge
- Tailored to the specific question being investigated

The reason this distinction matters in practice is that monitoring and evaluation, however well it is used, has limits. It can reveal what is happening and support steady improvement, but it is less suited to interrogating why something happens or whether the underlying design is right for the context. Deeper research is what allows an organization to ask those harder questions, and to change direction when necessary.

It is also worth stressing that monitoring and evaluation and research are not separate tracks but a two-way street. Just as monitoring and evaluation data feeds research, insights from research feed back into how the programme collects and structures its data. When a research question required information that was not yet being captured, the monitoring and evaluation framework was adjusted to capture it. For example: to understand how climate change is already affecting entrepreneurs, for example, two questions were added to the standard survey, and a year later this had produced around 600 data points on the topic that could be used for analysis. Insights from the literature have also improved how individual survey questions are phrased, and they have reshaped how the entrepreneurial ecosystem mappings are conducted. For example: our ecosystem mappings now follow a standard structure built around the ecosystem elements identified in the literature, drawing in particular on the work of Stam (2015) and Stam and van de Ven (2021), as well as Isenberg (2011) and Spigel (2017).

THE MODEL: IN-KIND PARTNERSHIPS WITH UNIVERSITIES

The central strategic choice in the Orange Corners approach was about who carries out the research. The intuitive option for many organizations is to commission a research project to an implementer such as a consultancy. Orange Corners tried this once and learned several lessons from the experience. When research is outsourced to an implementer, the organization that commissioned it is rarely thoroughly involved in the work itself, and the result is that the findings are not always trusted or acted upon by the staff who would need to change their practice on the basis of them. Consultants also did not always fully understand what the programme wanted from the research or what it intended to do with the results. And there was a more straightforward problem: commissioning research at any meaningful scale is expensive, and the budget for it simply was not there.

The alternative that Orange Corners adopted was to work with universities on an in-kind basis, and the logic behind this is that most professors and PhD researchers, both on the African continent and in Europe, have their time funded already. One of their core objectives is to publish academic papers, but they frequently lack access to good data. We (and many programs like us) have the opposite: we all collect lots of data but we lack funded research time. The two needs are complementary. By bringing data to a researcher who brings funded time and academic expertise, both sides gain.

Working in-kind has a second advantage: because Orange Corners staff carry out the research alongside the academic partners, conducting interviews, analyzing data, and shaping the questions together, the findings are understood and owned internally. This matters because the people who eventually need to change how they work are the programme managers at OC and local implementing partners themselves. When they have been part of producing a finding, they believe it and they act on it. When a finding arrives as a finished report from an outside party, it is far more easily set aside. Stepping alongside the researcher rather than outsourcing to them is therefore not only more affordable; it is what makes the research actually change the organization.

> ***Universities have funded time and need data. Support organisations have data but limited time. The in-kind partnership turns this complementarity into research that is affordable and changes practice.***

THE BLUEPRINT: SEVEN STEPS

The following seven steps describe how Orange Corners moved from data to an active research programme. They are presented in sequence, although in practice the earlier steps are revisited as the agenda evolves.

#	Step	What it involves
1	**Map the data you already collect**	Take stock of every type of data your organization already generates: surveys, mappings, interviews, partner reports. You might be surprised by how much you already have!
2	**Gather the real questions**	Collect the research questions that you and your implementing partners want answered. Keep only those that the monitoring and evaluation data and analysis you already do, cannot answer.
3	**Check against the literature**	Establish which questions the academic and grey literature has already answered. Apply those lessons immediately; reserve the unanswered questions for research.
4	**Cluster, prioritize, and publish**	Group the open questions into a small number of research lines, prioritize them, and publish the resulting research agenda so potential research partners can find it easily.
5	**Find the match**	Share the research agenda with universities and knowledge institutes in your regions and in partner countries. Look for a true overlap between your research questions and researchers' interests.
6	**Put it in writing**	Ask matched researchers to set out their idea in two pages: how answering the question helps the organization, what data is needed, and whether existing data is enough.
7	**Stay involved throughout**	Do the potential additional data collection and analysis alongside the researchers. Keep hubs and headquarters engaged so that findings are shared and acted upon, not filed away.

Step 1: Map the data you already collect

The starting point is a clear overview of what data your organization already generates. For Orange Corners this included pre, post, and one-year follow-up surveys of incubation and acceleration participants, extensive entrepreneurial ecosystem mappings conducted before entering a country and updated roughly every three years, in-depth interviews with entrepreneurs and with the implementing partners who deliver the programme, interviews with wider ecosystem actors, and quarterly and annual partner reports. Setting this out plainly is valuable in itself, because most organizations discover that they hold far more usable data than they realised.

Step 2: Gather the real questions

The next step is to collect the questions that people across your organization really want answered, and to keep only those that go beyond what monitoring and evaluation data can provide. Orange Corners involved its local implementing partners across all twenty programme countries as well as headquarters staff in this exercise. The questions that emerged were plenty. Which ecosystem interventions have the most effect in nascent ecosystems? How does the growth of a business affect the social or environmental mission of an entrepreneur? How can entrepreneurship support avoid making fragility worse in fragile countries? These are the type of question that go beyond MEL, but can still be answered by thoroughly analyzing existing data and collection some minimal extra data.

Step 3: Check against literature

Before treating a question as a research project, it is worth establishing whether the academic and grey literature has already answered it. In several cases Orange Corners found that lessons existed in the literature that the programme had simply not yet incorporated. Acting on these produced immediate improvements without any new research at all. One example was the importance of training on topics such as supply chain management, a lesson well established in the literature that led to a direct change in programme content and a guideline for all hubs on what a good training program might include. The open questions that remain after this filtering are the ones that can make up your research agenda.

Step 4: Cluster, prioritize and publish

With the data mapped and the open questions identified, the questions can be grouped into a manageable number of research lines and prioritized. Orange Corners clustered its questions into four lines: entrepreneurial ecosystem development, scaling businesses in low and middle-income countries, entrepreneurship in fragile contexts, and agri-entrepreneurship, with gender and digitalisation running through all four as cross-cutting themes. The resulting research agenda was published online. Publishing matters, because it allows potential partners to see what the organization is interested in and to approach it, rather than relying entirely on the organization to find them.

Step 5: Find the match

The published research agenda is then shared with universities and knowledge institutes, both in the organization's home country and in the partner countries where the research will take place. This is one of the harder parts of the process. Because the partnership is in-kind, there has to be a true overlap between a research question your organization wants answered and a question a researcher is independently interested in pursuing. Personal and academic networks matter here. Orange Corners benefited from having a research coordinator with a strong academic background, who was able to set up introductory meetings with professors, explain what the programme was doing and why, and identify where a real match existed.

Step 6: Put it in writing

Once a match looks promising, it helps to pin it down in writing before committing. Orange Corners asked prospective academic partners, after a few meetings, to set out their research idea in about two pages. This short document clarifies how answering the question would improve the programme, what data would be required, and whether existing data is sufficient or new data collection is needed. Producing it ensures that both sides are working toward the same goal. It also surfaces translation problems early, because the language academics use is not the language that programme managers and implementing partners use, and a written proposal is where those differences become visible and can be resolved.

Step 7: Stay involved throughout

The final step runs through the whole process: keep the local hubs and headquarters staff actively involved rather than waiting to receive results at the end. When the people who deliver the programme feel responsible for the research and are engaged in producing it, they are far more likely to change their practice in response to the findings. This is the same logic that makes the in-kind model preferable to consultancy. Staying involved also kept the research useful for practice. Research almost always shifts course a little along the way, which is completely fine and part of how it works, but because we were involved throughout, we were able to adjust, learn, and adapt together as it developed. This meant we avoided the situation where the research arrives at the end and turns out to be valuable in itself but not really useful for us.

LIGHTER WAYS TO START

Building a full research agenda is the most complete version of this approach, but it is not the only way, and you do not need to do everything described above before you can begin. There are several lighter routes that allow an organization to start small, learn how research collaboration works in practice, see if and how it beneifts you before committing to a larger research agenda.

Start with a single question

The simplest way to begin is to pick one question that has been on your mind, something just outside the scope of your normal monitoring and evaluation that you suspect could be answered by thoroulghy analyzing the data you already hold, and to set up a small project around it with a university or research institute you already have a connection with. There is no need to wait for a complete research agenda. Treating a first project as a trial, seeing how the collaboration works, and learning from it before committing further is a sensible way to test the model with very little at stake. If this works for you, you could even decide to continue like this, rather than setting up a whole research agenda.

Collaborate with students to test where to dig deeper

A master's thesis student offers a low-cost way to find out whether a hunch is worth pursuing at greater scale. For example, a student can analyze existing survey data spanning several years and multiple countries, and apply proper statistical analysis to test whether an apparent pattern reflects a statistical relationship rather than a coincidental correlation, before you invest in a larger research study. Working with a student has two further advantages. It is a meaningful way to give something back, since students value being involved in projects that lead to real change in practice, and they often bring lots of energy and fresh thinking to the data. It is also a good way to get to know a university and its professors. A thesis student always has a university supervisor, and supervisors are continually looking for good organizations in which to place their students. Hosting a student is therefore a low-stakes way to test the waters with a university or a particular professor before considering a larger research collaboration.

Example: testing a hunch about informality

Orange Corners wanted to understand why some entrepreneurs consciously choose to stay informal even though formalization would give them access to finance and other resources. A master thesis student analyzed the survey data and found that, while many entrepreneurs did move from informal to formal and then grow, a substantial number kept growing while deliberately remaining informal. Follow-up interviews with these entrepreneurs began to explain why. The student's work confirmed that the original hunch was sound and worth investigating properly, and a larger research project on informality is now being set up on that basis.

Collaborate with a student to facilitate the research agenda process itself

A student can also assist in setting up the research agenda itself rather than on a single research question. In this version, the student takes on the facilitating work: mapping all the data the organization collects, gathering research questions from across the organization through focus groups, a Mentimeter session, emails, or short surveys, and carrying out a first literature review to see which questions are already answered. This effectively hands the early, time-consuming steps of the blueprint to a capable student and leaves the organization with a structured starting point to build on. It is a practical option for an organization that is convinced of the value but short on the time to get the process moving internally. It is essential, however, to stay closely involved with the student throughout this process. A student can only facilitate the work; they cannot replace the organization's own thinking. If you do not invest your own time in guiding them, sharing context, and engaging with what they find, even the most capable student will have little to work with. The quality of what comes out depends directly on how much you are willing to put in.

WHAT MAKES IT WORK, AND WHAT TO WATCH FOR

For us, several conditions made the difference between a research agenda that stayed on paper and one that actually changed how we worked. The first is a research coordinator who understands both worlds. The vocabulary of academia and the vocabulary of programme delivery are not the same, and things get lost in translation between them. Having someone who can move between the two, explain each side to the other, and keep a research project aligned with what the programme actually needs was central to making the model work.

The second concerns when and how people are brought into the research. The whole approach rests on a simple observation: people act on findings they helped to produce, and might sometimes quietly set aside findings that are handed to them that they do not agree with. This is why it matters that staff are involved in the research while it is happening, taking part in the interviews, the analysis, and the framing of the questions, rather than simply receiving a presentation of the results at the end. Involvement during the work is what builds the trust and the sense of ownership that later turn a finding into a change in practice. This holds for everyone who will eventually need to act on the research, whether they sit in a central office or in a local team in a programme country. And it also had a side effect: it made us more critical thinkers in our daily work, it made us think deeper, and more reflective, improving our work even beyond the research projects.

The third is about the partnership itself, which is where most of the practical challenges sit. Because the collaboration is in-kind, it depends on a real alignment of interests, and finding that alignment takes effort and patience. The match is not made at the level of a university but at the level of an individual professor: what matters is finding someone who understands practitioners, wants to engage with them, and is interested in the same question you are. Not every academic, and not every institution, is open to practitioner collaboration, and it can take time before the right match appears. Timelines also differ between the two worlds, and academic work often moves more slowly than programme work, so it helps to agree expectations on this from the start.

Making the partnership work is much easier once you understand what is in it for the academic partner. Most professors and researchers carry publication obligations and want to publish, and they value the chance to present their findings at conferences. Working with an organization that holds rich data offers them exactly this: access to data they would otherwise struggle to obtain, a partner who can share the burden of analysis, and the prospect of an academic publication and conference presentations from the collaboration. On top of this, universities increasingly set targets for the societal value of research, and this kind of work scores well on that measure precisely because it is carried out directly with the people who will act on the results. Many academic partners find the collaboration rewarding for exactly this reason: they can see that their research has a real effect in practice, which is not always the case in conventional academic work. Understanding and respecting these incentives, and the timelines that come with them, is what keeps both sides committed over the life of a project.

DISSEMINATING WHAT YOU LEARN

A research agenda and the findings it produces serve little purpose if they are not shared well. Dissemination is therefore not an afterthought but a core part of the approach, and it is worth thinking about it at several levels. Orange Corners disseminates its research across three widening circles of influence.

The first circle: within the programme

The most immediate circle is the programme itself. Because all research is conducted together with the local hubs and the Orange Corners programme advisors, the people who actually need to act on the insights are involved from the very start, which means there is far more willingness to change practice once the findings arrive. Beyond this built-in involvement, Orange Corners works with over forty entrepreneurship support organizations across twenty countries and already has a learning structure in place through its community of practice sessions. Research results can be plugged directly into these sessions, allowing a broad internal audience to engage with the findings and discuss what they mean for their own work.

The second circle: the wider organization and the ministry

The second circle reaches beyond just the OC programme into the wider organization that implements it. Orange Corners is delivered by the Netherlands Enterprise Agency (RVO), the national government agency that carries outn (among other things) development cooperation on behalf of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and runs many other projects besides Orange Corners. Sharing insights across RVO means that the lessons from Orange Corners research inform other programs that engage with entrepreneurs or private sector as well. The insights are also presented to policymakers, in the hope of supporting better-informed policy decisions.

The third circle: the wider sector

The third and widest circle is the broader community of development partners, entrepreneurship support organizations, research institutions, finance institutions, and NGOs active with supporting entrepreneurs in low- and middle-income countries. Reaching this audience is the main purpose of the publications on the Orange Corners website, of open webinars, and of the first Orange Corners research conference, at which the findings from nine research projects were presented to over two hundred participants in person and another hundred online. Disseminating at this level is how the research contributes to entrepreneurship support practice well beyond Orange Corners itself, and also aimed to inspire others to start engaging in research.

THE PAYOFF

Building a research practice in this way has changed Orange Corners in three ways. It has changed the training programmes, as lessons from the literature and from the programme's own data have been incorporated into what entrepreneurs are taught. It has changed how new projects are set up, as evidence about what works in which context informs design from the start. And it has changed how we as Orange Corners think, evaluate, communicate, and work, embedding a habit of asking open questions, critical reflection and looking to the data and the literature for answers rather than relying on assumption.

None of this required a large research budget or a dedicated research department. It required recognising that the data was already there, that universities were natural partners with complementary needs, and that our local hubs and programme advisors at Orange Corners HQ had to stay involved for the findings to take hold. Any development partner financing entrepreneurship or any entrepreneurship support organization that collects data on the entrepreneurs it serves is in a position to do the same. The questions are waiting to be asked, and the partners to answer them are closer than they appear.

The Orange Corners Research Agenda and a selection of published research are available online at https://www.orangecorners.com/more-than-incubation/research/. Organizations interested in exploring collaboration can contact milou.derks@rvo.nl.