

From Field Practice to Peer-Reviewed Publication: Using the IMRaD Framework to Bridge the Practice–Publication Gap in Development Research in Sub-Saharan Africa

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Abstract

Researchers working in applied development contexts frequently generate extensive project documentation through program implementation, monitoring, and evaluation activities. However, a persistent challenge remains in transforming this practice-oriented material into publishable scientific research that meets the methodological and structural standards of peer-reviewed journals. This paper examines how the IMRaD (Introduction, Methods, Results, and Discussion) framework can be systematically applied to convert field-based development interventions into rigorous academic manuscripts. Using a methodological case analysis of an agricultural development project implemented in Eastern Zambia, the study illustrates how the application of IMRaD principles strengthens research quality by clarifying problem statements, improving methodological transparency, structuring data analysis, and anchoring findings within relevant theoretical frameworks. The analysis identifies common limitations in development project documentation, including the absence of explicit research questions, insufficient methodological detail, and the conflation of results with interpretation, all of which hinder scholarly dissemination. By demonstrating practical strategies for reorganizing existing project records into an IMRaD-compliant structure, the paper offers a replicable model for enhancing the academic credibility of applied research. The study contributes to the literature on scientific writing and development research by providing a structured approach for bridging the gap between field practice and peer-reviewed publication. Its implications are particularly relevant for researchers working in non-governmental and faith-based organizations, where valuable empirical insights are often underrepresented in global academic discourse.

Keywords: *scientific writing, IMRaD, development research, methodology, publication.*

I. INTRODUCTION

Scientific writing is the main way academic knowledge is validated, preserved, and shared across disciplines and geographic regions (Gastel & Day, 2016; Hofmann, 2014). Through peer review and formal publication, research findings are subjected to critical scrutiny, refined through scholarly dialogue, and integrated into cumulative bodies of knowledge that inform theory, policy, and practice (Greenhalgh, 2019). In this sense, scientific writing does not merely transmit results; it actively shapes how knowledge is constructed, legitimized, and utilized within academic and professional communities.

Many researchers in applied development, particularly in NGOs and faith-based institutions, receive little formal training in scientific writing and publication processes, despite their importance (Derntl, 2014; Silvia, 2015). Their professional responsibilities often prioritize program implementation, donor accountability, and rapid reporting of outputs over the slow and methodologically demanding process of academic publication (Banks et al., 2018). As a result, valuable empirical insights derived from development practice frequently remain confined to internal reports, monitoring documents, or donor evaluations, with minimal contributions to peer-reviewed scholarship (Bradley, 2020).

Recent scholarship highlights a persistent “practice–publication gap” in development research, particularly in Sub-Saharan Africa, where locally generated evidence remains underrepresented in global academic literature (Franzen et al., 2017; Mkandawire, 2021). One contributing factor is the lack of standardized research structures that translate practice-based knowledge into analytically rigorous manuscripts. This paper addresses this challenge by demonstrating how the IMRaD framework can provide analytical structure, methodological rigor, and narrative coherence to applied development research. By illustrating how field-based documentation can be systematically reorganized into an IMRaD-compliant manuscript, the study offers a practical pathway for transforming development practice into publishable scientific research.

➤ *Statement of the Problem*

Applied development projects routinely generate substantial qualitative and quantitative data through program implementation, monitoring, and evaluation activities. However, much of this material does not meet the methodological, analytical, and structural standards required for publication in peer-reviewed journals. Development project reports often emphasize descriptive accounts of activities and immediate outcomes while giving limited attention to explicit research questions, theoretical grounding, and transparent methodological documentation. As a result, such reports frequently lack the analytical rigor necessary for scholarly evaluation and replication.

This shortfall contributes to the persistent perception of development research as context-specific or insufficiently rigorous in academic communities. The problem is especially pronounced in applied settings, where institutional pressures prioritize donor accountability and rapid reporting over systematic scientific inquiry. Consequently, valuable empirical insights from development practice remain largely excluded from formal academic discourse. This study addresses the structural and methodological disconnect between development practice and scholarly publication. This limitation reduces the visibility of locally grounded knowledge, particularly from Sub-Saharan Africa, and weakens the evidence base for theory, policy, and practice.

➤ *Research Objectives*

The study is guided by the following objectives:

- To examine the common structural and methodological limitations that prevent development project documentation from being published as scientific research.
- To demonstrate how the IMRaD framework can be applied to reorganize field-based development records into a publishable academic manuscript.
- Identify key analytical criteria: problem articulation, methodological transparency, data presentation, and theoretical integration to enhance the scholarly quality of applied research.

- To propose a practical and replicable model for development researchers seeking to bridge the gap between practice-oriented work and peer-reviewed publication.

➤ *Significance of the Study*

This study is significant in several respects. Methodologically, it contributes to the literature on research practice by offering a concrete, applied model for improving scientific writing among development practitioners. Rather than treating IMRaD as a purely formal structure, the study demonstrates its epistemological value in shaping analytical thinking and research design.

Empirically, the paper addresses the underrepresentation of development research from Sub-Saharan Africa in high-impact journals by equipping practitioners with tools to disseminate locally generated knowledge more effectively. Practically, the findings are relevant to NGOs, faith-based organizations, and development agencies seeking to enhance the academic credibility and broader impact of their work.

Finally, the study contributes to capacity-building efforts by empowering applied researchers to engage more fully with scholarly communities, thereby strengthening the evidence base for development policy and practice.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

➤ *Scientific Writing and Knowledge Production*

Scientific writing is widely recognized as a central mechanism through which knowledge is produced, validated, and legitimized within academic communities. It is distinguished by clarity, precision, objectivity, and evidence-based argumentation, which together enable the transparent evaluation of research claims (Hofmann, 2014; Gastel & Day, 2016). Unlike narrative or advocacy-oriented writing, scientific communication prioritizes methodological transparency, logical coherence, and explicit connections between data, analysis, and interpretation. These features allow readers not only to assess the credibility of findings but also to evaluate their reproducibility and relevance across contexts (Greenhalgh, 2019).

Recent scholarship emphasizes that scientific writing is not a neutral reporting tool but an epistemic practice that shapes how knowledge is constructed and accepted (Hyland, 2019). Writing conventions determine what counts as valid evidence, how arguments are framed, and whose knowledge is recognized within global scholarly discourse (Sword, 2017). In this sense, mastery of scientific writing structures is inseparable from participation in knowledge production itself.

The IMRaD (Introduction, Methods, Results, and Discussion) structure has emerged as the dominant organizational framework for empirical research because it closely reflects the logic of scientific inquiry (Wu, 2011; Day & Gastel, 2022). By separating problem formulation,

methodological execution, empirical findings, and interpretive discussion, IMRaD enhances analytical clarity and guards against common threats to rigor, such as selective reporting and interpretive bias. Studies show that manuscripts adhering to IMRaD conventions are more likely to progress successfully through peer review due to their transparency and evaluability (Hartley, 2020).

Moreover, standardized research structures such as IMRaD facilitate cumulative knowledge building by enabling replication, comparison across studies, and systematic evidence synthesis (Gopen & Swan, 2018). For researchers working in applied and interdisciplinary fields, adherence to these conventions enhances accessibility, allowing findings to circulate beyond local or disciplinary boundaries (Wallwork, 2016; Hyland, 2019). Scientific writing, particularly the IMRaD framework, is a crucial link between local research practices and global scholarly engagement.

➤ *Challenges in Development Research Publishing*

Despite generating rich contextual, experiential, and practice-based data, applied development researchers frequently present their findings in descriptive rather than analytical forms. Project reports often focus on documenting activities, outputs, and immediate outcomes while giving limited attention to explicit research questions, theoretical positioning, and systematic methodological explanation (Silvia, 2015; Bradley, 2020). As a result, development research outputs commonly lack the analytical rigor, transparency, and replicability expected in peer-reviewed academic journals.

Recent studies highlight that this challenge is not primarily a deficit of data but a deficit of *research framing and structure* (Hyland, 2019; Hartley, 2020). Applied researchers frequently conflate results with interpretation, provide insufficient detail on sampling and analysis, and omit engagement with relevant scholarly literature. These practices make it difficult for reviewers to assess validity, situate findings within existing debates, or compare results across contexts (Greenhalgh, 2019).

Institutional constraints further exacerbate these challenges. Development practitioners typically operate within organizational environments shaped by donor-driven timelines, standardized reporting templates, and performance indicators that prioritize accountability, scalability, and rapid reporting over theoretical contributions (Banks et al., 2018; Eyben et al., 2020). In such contexts, writing is oriented toward compliance rather than knowledge production, limiting opportunities for reflective and methodologically rigorous analysis.

Scholars note a persistent imbalance in global knowledge production. Research from low- and middle-income countries, especially Sub-Saharan Africa, faces structural barriers to publication in high-impact journals, including limited access to mentoring, publishing networks, and editorial support (Franzen et al., 2017; Mkandawire, 2021). The absence of standardized scientific structures, such as the IMRaD framework,

further compounds these barriers by rendering applied research less legible to academic audiences.

Consequently, the challenges of development research publishing are both methodological and structural. To address these issues, one must not only enhance writing skills but also purposefully adopt scientific frameworks, such as IMRaD. This enables applied research to meet scholarly standards while retaining contextual richness and practical relevance.

III. METHODOLOGICAL CASE ANALYSIS

➤ *Analytical Approach*

This study adopts a qualitative document analysis approach to examine how project documentation from an agricultural development intervention in Eastern Zambia can be systematically transformed into an IMRaD-compliant scientific manuscript. Qualitative document analysis is a rigorous and flexible research method that involves the systematic examination and interpretation of textual materials in order to elicit meaning, identify patterns, and generate analytical insights relevant to a research problem (Bowen, 2009; O’Cathain, 2019). In recent methodological literature, document analysis has been increasingly recognized as a legitimate standalone method, particularly for examining organizational practices, policy processes, and knowledge production systems (Rapley & Rees, 2018).

Rather than generating new primary data, this study focuses on the analytical reconfiguration of existing project materials, including project proposals, monitoring and evaluation reports, implementation summaries, and donor-facing documentation. Such materials are commonly produced in development practice but are rarely analyzed as objects of methodological inquiry. Treating these documents as empirical data enables a systematic examination of how knowledge is framed, structured, and communicated within applied development contexts (Prior, 2018).

This approach is particularly appropriate for the present study because the research objective is not to evaluate program effectiveness but to analyze research practices and methodological structures embedded within development documentation. Recent scholarship emphasizes that methodological case analysis is well-suited for interrogating how research norms, such as problem formulation, methodological transparency, and analytical sequencing, are enacted or omitted in practice-based research environments (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Saldaña & Omasta, 2018). By focusing on document transformation rather than outcome measurement, the study aligns with contemporary calls to strengthen research rigor and publication readiness among applied researchers working in development and humanitarian settings (Bradley, 2020; Eyben et al., 2020).

Furthermore, qualitative document analysis allows for reflexive engagement with texts, enabling the researcher to assess not only what is reported but also how

and why information is structured in particular ways (Rapley, 2020). This reflexive dimension is critical for understanding the epistemic gap between development practice and scholarly publication and for demonstrating how standardized scientific frameworks such as IMRaD can bridge that divide.

➤ *Analytical Criteria*

The project documents were evaluated using four interrelated analytical criteria derived from established best practices in scientific writing, qualitative research methodology, and scholarly publishing standards. These criteria reflect core dimensions commonly used by journal reviewers to assess the rigor, credibility, and contribution of empirical manuscripts (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Hartley, 2020; Hyland, 2019).

First, problem articulation was assessed by examining whether the documents clearly formulated a research problem grounded in existing scholarly literature, rather than merely describing an operational or programmatic challenge. Effective research problems are theoretically informed, analytically framed, and explicitly linked to identifiable gaps in prior knowledge (Alvesson & Sandberg, 2013; Maxwell, 2013). Recent scholarship emphasizes that poorly articulated problem statements are a primary reason for manuscript rejection, as they limit the study's relevance and contribution to ongoing academic debates (Hartley, 2020).

Second, methodological transparency was evaluated by reviewing the extent to which data sources, sampling strategies, data collection procedures, and analytical techniques were explicitly documented. Transparency in methodology is central to research credibility, as it enables readers and reviewers to assess validity, reliability, and replicability (Greenhalgh, 2019; O'Cathain, 2019). Studies in applied research contexts show that insufficient methodological detail is a recurring weakness in development-focused manuscripts, particularly those derived from project reports (Bradley, 2020).

Third, data presentation was examined to assess whether empirical findings were clearly distinguished from interpretation and systematically summarized in structured narrative form, even in the absence of tabular or graphical displays. Clear separation between results and discussion is a foundational principle of the IMRaD framework and is essential for analytical clarity and reviewer evaluation (Day & Gastel, 2022; Wu, 2011).

Where tables or figures are not employed, best practices in scientific writing emphasize the use of explicit result statements, ordered summaries, and logically sequenced subsections to present evidence transparently and reduce cognitive load for readers (Tuft, 2020; Gopen & Swan, 2018). Effective narrative data presentation, when clearly structured, can therefore serve the same evidentiary function as visual displays by strengthening interpretability and supporting research claims.

Finally, theoretical integration was assessed by identifying whether empirical findings were meaningfully connected to established conceptual frameworks or broader scholarly debates. Theoretical grounding elevates applied research beyond descriptive reporting by situating findings within cumulative knowledge systems and demonstrating scholarly contributions (Hyland, 2019; Creswell & Poth, 2018). Recent literature stresses that the absence of explicit theoretical engagement is a key factor limiting the publication of development research in high-impact journals (Mkandawire, 2021).

Together, these four criteria provide a systematic and replicable framework for evaluating the publication readiness of development project documentation and for guiding its transformation into scientifically credible research outputs.

IV. FINDINGS

➤ *Strengths of Project Documentation*

The analysis revealed several notable strengths commonly present in development project documentation. First, the documents articulated clear program objectives, often framed around practical development goals such as improved livelihoods, enhanced service delivery, or community welfare. These objectives were typically well-aligned with donor priorities and organizational mandates, providing a coherent rationale for project implementation.

Second, the documentation contained rich contextual descriptions of the intervention setting, including socio-economic conditions, geographic characteristics, stakeholder profiles, and implementation constraints. Such contextual depth is a valuable asset in development research, as it provides essential background for interpreting outcomes and assessing transferability across settings. From a scholarly perspective, this level of contextualization offers strong potential for theoretically informed analysis when appropriately framed.

Third, many documents included preliminary quantitative estimates, such as projected yields, beneficiary participation figures, timelines, and budget allocations. Although often presented descriptively, these numerical elements indicate the presence of underlying data that could support empirical analysis if systematically collected, analyzed, and reported. Taken together, these strengths demonstrate that development projects routinely generate data and insights of substantial academic value, even when they are not initially presented in forms suitable for peer-reviewed publication.

➤ *Identified Gaps*

Despite these strengths, the analysis identified several significant gaps that limited the publishability of the project documentation. Most notably, explicit research questions or hypotheses were largely absent, making it difficult to frame the material analytically or situate it within existing scholarly debates. Without clearly articulated research questions, the documents remained

oriented toward reporting rather than knowledge generation.

In addition, methodological detail was insufficiently documented. Descriptions of data sources, sampling strategies, data collection procedures, and analytical techniques were often vague or entirely omitted. This lack of methodological transparency undermines the credibility of findings, limits replicability, and poses a major barrier to scholarly evaluation.

Furthermore, results were frequently merged with interpretation and recommendations, rather than being presented as distinct empirical findings. This conflation violates core principles of the IMRaD framework and weakens analytical clarity by obscuring the boundary between evidence and inference. As a result, readers and reviewers are unable to independently assess the validity of the conclusions drawn.

These gaps reveal that development project documentation, despite its abundance, frequently does not meet academic publication standards. This deficiency stems not from a lack of data, but from an inadequate analytical structure, insufficient methodological articulation, and a failure to adhere to established scientific writing conventions.

V. DISCUSSION

The findings indicate that the IMRaD framework does more than tidy prose: it materially improves a manuscript's capacity to function as scientific knowledge. By strictly separating problems, methods, results, and interpretations, IMRaD increases methodological transparency and reduces common reviewer concerns like unclear sampling, conflated results and discussions, and unstated assumptions (Day & Gastel, 2022; Hartley, 2020). This structural clarity is associated with greater evaluability during peer review and a higher likelihood of favorable editorial decisions (Wu, 2011; Greenhalgh, 2019).

Beyond editorial expedience, IMRaD operates as an epistemic instrument. The framework requires scholars to make explicit how data were generated and analyzed, which in turn exposes inferential steps to scrutiny and encourages robust analytical choices (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Hyland, 2019). In applied development, where documentation emphasizes activities and outputs, this epistemic demand shifts attention from reporting actions to interpreting data. This enables theoretical contribution rather than mere description (Bradley, 2020; Eyben et al., 2020).

The study's results also resonate with literature on research capacity and publication inequities. Standardizing documentation through IMRaD can help level the playing field by producing manuscripts that are legible to global peer-review audiences, mitigating one obstacle faced by researchers from low- and middle-income settings (Franzen et al., 2017; Mkandawire, 2021).

However, structural adoption alone is insufficient: capacity building (writing mentorship, methodological training) and institutional incentives (time allocation, recognition for publication) are necessary complements to achieve sustained change (Banks et al., 2018; Bradley, 2020).

Effective application of IMRaD in practice-based research also depends on careful data presentation. Visual and tabular displays that follow best practices increase transparency and reduce misinterpretation (Tufté, 2020; Gopen & Swan, 2018). Similarly, explicitly linking empirical findings to conceptual frameworks strengthens claims about generalizability and theoretical relevance (Alvesson & Sandberg, 2013; Creswell & Poth, 2018).

Finally, while IMRaD is valuable, the framework must be applied thoughtfully to preserve the contextual richness central to development research. Rigid, formulaic writing risks stripping nuance; therefore, researchers should combine IMRaD's structure with reflexive narration in the methods and discussion sections, explaining contextual contingencies and limitations (Rapley, 2020; Saldaña & Omasta, 2018). Adopting IMRaD, alongside methodological transparency, analytic rigor, and capacity support, provides a practical way to transform field practice into credible and contextually insightful peer-reviewed scholarship.

VI. IMPLICATIONS FOR RESEARCHERS

The findings of this study yield several important implications for researchers working in applied development contexts, particularly those embedded within non-governmental organizations, faith-based institutions, and practice-oriented research environments. First, researchers should explicitly define research questions at the earliest stages of project documentation. Clearly articulated research questions provide an analytical anchor that guides data collection, informs methodological choices, and shapes subsequent interpretation (Alvesson & Sandberg, 2013; Creswell & Poth, 2018). When research questions are absent or implicit, documentation tends to drift toward descriptive reporting rather than systematic inquiry, thereby limiting its scholarly contribution and publishability (Hartley, 2020).

Second, methodological transparency must be treated as a core research practice rather than an optional add-on. Data sources, sampling strategies, data collection instruments, and analytical procedures should be documented in sufficient detail to allow critical evaluation and, where possible, replication. Recent scholarship emphasizes that transparency is central to research credibility and a key criterion in peer-review assessment, particularly for applied and interdisciplinary studies (Greenhalgh, 2019; O'Cathain, 2019). Transparent methodology also enables readers to assess the robustness, transferability, and contextual relevance of findings across development settings (Bradley, 2020).

Third, researchers should maintain a clear separation between empirical findings and interpretation. Distinguishing results from discussion preserves analytical integrity, allows readers to independently assess evidence, and aligns applied research with established scientific conventions such as the IMRaD framework (Day & Gastel, 2022; Wu, 2011). Studies on manuscript review processes consistently identify the conflation of results and interpretation as a frequent cause of rejection in peer-reviewed journals (Hyland, 2019; Hartley, 2020).

More broadly, adopting these practices encourages a shift from compliance-oriented reporting toward knowledge production. By embedding analytical rigor, methodological transparency, and structural discipline into routine documentation, applied researchers can significantly increase the likelihood that their work meets peer-reviewed publication standards and contributes meaningfully to theoretical development, policy formulation, and evidence-based practice in development studies (Banks et al., 2018; Mkandawire, 2021).

VII. CONCLUSION

This study has demonstrated that the IMRaD (Introduction, Methods, Results, and Discussion) framework provides a practical, systematic, and accessible pathway for transforming applied development practice into publishable scholarly research. As emphasized in the abstract, IMRaD enables the analytical reconfiguration of field-based documentation by enforcing clarity in problem articulation, methodological transparency, structured data presentation, and theoretically informed interpretation. These elements are widely recognized as core criteria in peer-reviewed publishing and are essential for research credibility and evaluability (Day & Gastel, 2022; Hartley, 2020).

Consistent with the implications outlined for researchers, adopting standardized scientific writing conventions enhances not only the technical quality of manuscripts but also their epistemic legitimacy. When research questions are clearly articulated, methods are transparently documented, results are analytically separated from interpretation, and findings are situated within relevant scholarly debates, applied research becomes more legible to academic audiences and more amenable to critical appraisal and replication (Greenhalgh, 2019; Hyland, 2019). In this sense, IMRaD supports a critical shift from compliance-oriented reporting toward intentional knowledge production, a transition increasingly advocated in development research literature (Bradley, 2020; Eyben et al., 2020).

This transformation is particularly significant in Sub-Saharan Africa, where development research activity is substantial but remains underrepresented in global academic literature. Structural barriers, such as limited access to publishing networks, mentoring, and methodological support, have constrained the visibility of local scholarship and its contribution to theory building and cross-contextual learning (Franzen et al., 2017;

Mkandawire, 2021). By providing a clear and transferable framework for publication, IMRaD offers a means of amplifying Southern scholarship without erasing contextual specificity or practical relevance.

Ultimately, the intentional application of IMRaD principles empowers development practitioners to contribute meaningfully to scientific advancement, policy formulation, and evidence-based practice. When field-based insights are systematically documented and analytically framed, they can inform broader scholarly debates, strengthen cumulative knowledge building, and enhance the global evidence base upon which sustainable development depends (Banks et al., 2018; Creswell & Poth, 2018).

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