



Research for Development Impact Network

Mid-term Review of Research for Development Impact (RDI) Network Program – Executive Summary and Management Response

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Executive Summary

The purpose of the mid-term review of the Research for Development Impact (RDI) Network, is to reflect on how the RDI Network is evolving, its current state and future potential. The review has assessed the effectiveness of the Network's operating model, progress against the workplan activities and outcomes and lessons learned from the work so far that will enable the Network to increasingly deliver on purpose. This has included an assessment of Network strengths and gaps and how effectively it is engaging with its participants. Recommendations have been developed to suggest ways in which the Network can be strengthened. The timeframe for the review is October 2015-April 2017.

This review has been undertaken largely from an organisational strengthening and learning perspective, utilising an appreciative inquiry approach which aims to build on organisational strengths and identify opportunities and possibilities for growth and development. More detail on this approach is provided in the methodology section of the full report.

The RDI Network's purpose is to foster collaboration between Australian universities and NGOs to promote high quality and ethical development research and evidence, translated and applied to effective policy and practice. The RDI Network theory of change identifies three broad outcome areas expected to contribute to this purpose.

1.1 How is the RDI Network Doing?

While much of what the RDI Network does is well regarded by focus group participants they didn't appear to have a clear understanding of the RDI Network purpose, structures or processes, or how they could proactively engage. Some felt that the RDI Network did not yet have a strong profile in the wider development sector. When asked about purpose participants referred to activities.

The activities identified by participants related to the following functions identified by the Network Function framework¹:

Community building and convening - including brokering and boundary spanning; Participants talked about bringing NGOs and researchers together, the importance of crossing boundaries, bringing different disciplines together, facilitating connections and Networking opportunities.

Resource mobilisation - participants identified services such as providing frameworks that can be used in country, reducing duplication, providing an overview of who is doing what in the sector, summarizing and synthesizing information, providing a space to look for resources, increasing evidence and sharing information.

Knowledge management - participants particularly highlighted the value of the knowledge identified and shared by the Network via the conference, forums, events and the newsletter.

A re-occurring theme was that many people are working on a great many things, and that the RDI Network was seen as a coordinating body to provide an overview of what others are working on and to share information.

1.2 Perceived Network Value

The information provided in the newsletter was highly valued by many participants as well as the ability to access resources on the website.

¹ Hearn S and Mendizabal E, Not everything that connects is a Network, ODI May 2011; Monitor Institute and Grantmakers for Effective Organizations, Catalyzing Networks for Social Change, Oct 2011

Events, particularly when face-to-face, were valued for the opportunity to Network and exchange knowledge and ideas with those facing the same issues for example, monitoring and evaluation challenges, but also opportunities to learn from people in different disciplines both researchers and practitioners “to discuss real world issues, compare methodologies, technologies and contexts outside our own” (focus group participant).

Ongoing interaction with active colleagues who can assist with brokering relationships and navigating how to undertake multidisciplinary research across NGOs and universities was highly valued.

The Network conferences were considered unique in bridging the divide between academics and practitioners, bringing the sector together and a good opportunity to hear about theory practice links, build ideas, and expand Networks. However, some noted that limitations of the conferences were the packed program, that it was consequently spread too thin and needed more structured opportunities for engagement, particularly for those less established in their careers. This was identified as an opportunity to strengthen this valued event.

The ‘find an expert’ portal was mentioned by a number of participants; however, some were not clear how it was to be used, others felt it might need to be facilitated in some way to encourage it as a dynamic space and it was suggested that a more differentiated classification of the expertise on offer would help Network participants align their interests and undertake more productive searches.

The examples of value creation focussed on immediate and potential value - Networking, learning, and information. This was consistent with participants’ recent and more limited involvement.

Organisational benefits from involvement with RDI Network initiatives were identified by several members of the RDI Committee. Examples included demonstrating outcomes and impact across the different scales project, looking at ethics processes and a review of effective partnerships. Some noted that where there was a clear alignment with organisational interests, that enabled this work to be adopted and adapted within their organisations.

Many of the Committee also noted personal benefits such as expanding their Networks, reputation and profile, being able to re-affirm their own practice and the use of good science and maintenance of connection with the international development field when unable to engage in overseas postings. All in some way referred to valuing the respectful relationships that have developed within the central hub of the RDI Network.

1.3 Key Messages

The RDI Network is regarded as a valued and needed resource for the international development sector. It has established a reputation for bridging the academic/practitioner divide and bringing together diverse participants from across the international development sector to share information, Network and collaborate.

The RDI Network has established a strong foundation to build upon based around the key function of information provision and knowledge management, bridging and connecting sector groups to support learning and collaboration, resource development and capacity building. These functions fulfil an acknowledged need, are highly valued within the international development sector and should be maintained.

There is also potential for the Network to extend its reach and impact beyond the central hub which drives most of the activity and create a larger pool of diverse expertise, skill and ideas that can bring and create greater value for the Network to serve its purpose. This includes creating institutional links with both universities and NGOs and broadening strategically targeted engagements with DFAT.

To grow and evolve in a sustainable way the RDI Network needs to exercise strategic choice to direct Network efforts further along the value creation chain by focussing on activities that enable individuals and organisations to apply and realise value from the RDI Network.

1.4 Recommendations

To support growth and maturing of the RDI Network the recommendations, developed as a result of the mid-term review, focus on three key areas.

1. Thinking and acting strategically

- *Clarify Network purpose and role* - develop a clear and compelling purpose, vision and rationale, the means of achieving it and principles to guide this. This should address participant and stakeholder expectations and perceptions of Network value, potential and impact.
- *Develop a strategic plan* - with a limited number of priorities embodying a more targeted, bolder, integrated and doable program of work. The workplan would then be developed to operationalise the strategic plan.
- *Review and update the stakeholder engagement and communications strategy* - to reflect the strategic plan and priorities. Ensure the partnership plan is aligned with the strategy and selectively identifies strategic partnerships that will create value over time, enable the Network to wisely use its resources and support the Network's purpose and role.^{2 3}

2 Proactively engaging stakeholders

- *Investigate Network make up* - undertake work to better understand who makes up the Network, how they want to engage and what specific value they are looking for. Determine and clearly articulate where value can be created, for whom and how this contributes to purpose.
- *Establish a formal engagement process at the institutional level* - with universities and NGO's consistent with the value creation they are looking for from the RDI Network, driven by the strategic priorities.
- *Organise around central themes* - that will draw a multidisciplinary group together to add value to each other's work. This could be approached by, for example, taking a geographical frame which could support work with DFAT structured around regional desks.

3. Capitalising on existing strengths

- *Develop mechanisms to support more sustained engagement* - with different groups of Network participants through projects or other activities that serve their interests. This can include follow up and implementation activities and events and can be modelled on the ways that those within the Committee have realised value from the work that the RDI Network has undertaken to date.
- *Strengthen future conference formats* - consider a less packed program that counteracts the risk of spreading coverage across too many content areas and provide more structured opportunities for active engagement of participants to support the networking and sharing that is so valued.

² Jeffrey, N (2009) Stakeholder Engagement: A Road map to meaningful Engagement, No 2 in the Doughty Centre 'How to do Corporate Responsibility Series, Cranfield University School of Management, USA. <http://www.som.cranfield.ac.uk/som/dinamic-content/media/CR%20Stakeholder.pdf>

³ Hoying, A, Samborsky, N & Sanders, B, A structured Approach to Strategic partnering: lessons learned from Public and Private Sector Leaders, Centres for Disease Control and prevention Office of Public Health Preparedness and Response, USA

- *Support participants to utilise resources* - in their organisations. This requires sustained effort to facilitate greater uptake and value creation from existing work and resources. This would need to be selective and focussed on priority areas identified as part of the strategic planning process.

4. Strengthen the Network's supporting and agency roles

Supporting Role

- *Clarify the learning and capacity building roles* - between RDI Network and ACFID
- *Increase the visibility and accessibility of the Network structure and activities* -with mechanisms for both reaching out to participants to be involved in projects and activities and opportunities for participants to bring ideas beyond events.
- *Partner with post graduate International Development Program coordinators* - to engage with emerging researchers and practitioners early in their careers and identify opportunities for research and practice placements and involvement in activities.
- *Strengthen the RDI Network website interactivity* - to provide information about how the Network does its work and the structures and mechanisms available for contributing so users are able to make better use of it to meet their needs.
- *Actively broker the controlled transfer of specialised knowledge between groups* - through strategic projects that address the process gap to better facilitate more sustained connection and action beyond a single event. For example, define an area of research of interest/relevant to current issues and develop a methodology for mapping, application and amplification of the research.

Agency Role

This work requires institutional as well as individual engagement. It needs to be strategic and targeted to key audiences and stakeholders to engage their interest and provide value.

- *Provide a strong voice* - by bridging the NGO and university sectors through engagement with institutions and their senior staff, to enable the RDI Network to advocate on key issues with greater authority from a more integrated or combined perspective. Such an approach is more likely to get the attention and interest of key stakeholders such as DFAT.
- *Stronger advocacy* – adopt a stronger voice in the international development space to enable the RDI Network to step up more visibly in areas that distinguish what it offers, particularly its ability to speak from a cross-sector perspective. This will enable it to amplify its contribution to policy and ultimately practice, better enable it to have greater influence and impact and realise it's purpose more fully. It will also improve its capacity to build the case to secure support and resourcing for projects and ongoing sustainability.
- *Partner with DFAT* - to identify 3-4 key areas of research of current strategic interest to policy makers, researchers and practitioners. The Network can facilitate and broker the investigation of the chosen areas over a 3-4 year period. This will enable the Network to provide relevant input into to identified policy development priorities as they are being developed.
- *Convene for the ongoing exchange* - of valued information, ideas and policy discussion/formulation in ways that support the priority research interests identified.

Management Response

Management Response to the Mid Term Review of the RDI Network Program

October 2017

This response has been drafted in consultation with the members of the RDI Committee, and actions will be pursued in the 3rd grant year of the current RDI Network program, or taken forward through planning for the next program.

<p>1 Think and Act Strategically</p>	<p><i>Accepted</i></p>	<p>As a Network of 1,500 individuals and growing, we recognise continual socialisation of the RDI Network's purpose and role to be crucial to the ongoing buy-in and support we enjoy from our members.</p> <p>The work-plan of the RDI Network is underpinned by an agreed theory of change and clearly articulated objectives, however, to ensure these remain clear, understood and supported amongst an evolving Network leadership and constituents, we agree on the need to address this area.</p> <p>The RDI Network Committee will therefore undertake a review, refresh and socialisation process to enable us to best articulate who we are, what we do, and the value to our different constituents, in a meaningful and ongoing way.</p> <p>Before the end of 2017, the communications and engagement strategies will be reviewed. RDI Network will then publish on the website a public statement of identity, objectives, strategic priorities for the coming 3-5-year period, and value propositions for members, as well as FAQs for clarification.</p>
<p>2 Proactively engage stakeholders</p>	<p><i>Accepted</i></p>	<p>The RDI Committee has undertaken periodic analysis of the make-up of the Network, and will continue to develop our approach and use of this data as the network grows and evolves.</p> <p>The RDI Network comprises participation on an individual basis as well as institutional engagement between some universities and ACFID member organisations. The RDI Network Committee agree on the need to more systematically encourage institutional connections, particularly through engagement of senior staff in NGOs and universities.</p> <p>The RDI Network Committee agreed to continue to organise around central themes, maintaining a focus on themes that are process-based (e.g. ethical practice, partnering), rather than content-based, such that they are relevant to a large cross-section of the membership.</p>

		<p>In addition, we will consider how to add value to existing mechanisms (such as ACFID Communities of Practice) to facilitate engagement on research and evidence on specific content areas, and we may consider how geographic frames could help build and consolidate connections within the network.</p>
3 Capitalising on existing strengths	<i>Accepted</i>	<p>This recommendation was broadly accepted by the RDI Committee and we will act on it at the activity level. Addressing this recommendation will be part of the review of the engagement and communications strategies mentioned under the first recommendation.</p>
4a Strengthen the Supporting Role	<i>Partially accepted</i>	<p>The respective roles of the RDI Network and ACFID will be facilitated through further socialisation actions developed in response to the first recommendation.</p> <p>Accessibility to Network activities will continue to be encouraged through calls in the newsletter and online with the website, Twitter and LinkedIn. Individual members are also now able to be part of activity steering groups, opening up the structure of the Network operations.</p> <p>Addressing the recommendations of increasing visibility and accessibility, engaging further with post graduate International Development Program coordinators, and to strengthen the website - to better support members - will also be part of the review of the engagement and communications strategies mentioned under the first recommendation.</p> <p>These recommendations will also feed into a planned website review, and the RDI Network will look at how to strengthen engagement of RDI Network members with ACFID Communities of Practice (CoPs).</p>
4b Strengthen Agency Role	<i>Partially accepted</i>	<p>The RDI Network supports engagement and collaborations in the sector to enable people to strengthen their voice on evidence in relation to particular development issues - therefore playing an advisory, rather than advocacy, role.</p> <p>The Network will continue to focus on the explicit topics of the role of research in the aid program, ethical and quality research, and evaluation. On other issues, the RDI Network can seek to inform ACFID's existing advocacy.</p> <p>The RDI Network will continue to engage and facilitate input from the sector at DFAT's request, and will work with organisations to ensure uptake of research, but will not</p>

		<p>take a lead function for key areas of research content itself.</p> <p>The RDI Committee agreed that the convening function is our core business and must continue through activities including conference, networking events etc. Specific actions will be discussed as part of the operational planning.</p>
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