The Research for Development Impact Network
Program Report: 2015-2018

In October 2015, the Research for Development Impact (RDI) Network embarked upon an ambitious three-year program (the Program) to build capacity in ethical research practice, improve cross-sector engagement between academics and practitioners, and to strengthen evidence-based policy and practice in the Australian development sector. The Program was funded by the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (DFAT) through the Australian Council for International Development (ACFID).

This report seeks to provide an overview of what has been achieved in that three-year period, to highlight the expanding influence and recognition of the Network and its outputs.

The Program design is defined by four key outcomes which the Network was commissioned to achieve. In practice, these were operationalised as three core areas of work supported by the foundation of a fourth, enabling outcome.

This report is structured to reflect the Network's actor-centred theory of change, and is framed to demonstrate changes at two levels:

> 'The fact that the network exists and enables a research-policy debate in the Australian development community is highly valuable. If you think of the network as a 'knowledge system', it has strong legitimacy through diversity of members, credibility through the quality outputs they produce, and salience given the critical need for evidence-based development practice.'
> *Network member, University of Technology Sydney*

- the RDI Network community (outcomes); and
- the Program (deliverables and activities)

Illustrations of impact-level change within the Australian development sector are identified and noted against the relevant program outcomes.

The report draws upon a combination of qualitative and quantitative evidence, seeking to demonstrate both the scale and nature of influence achieved for different target actors. Brief testimonials are featured throughout to give voice to the Network membership. The report also identifies selected key learnings for improving the operation of the Network in the future.

Spotlight: The Program in numbers

This document provides an overview of the RDI Network's achievements against the outcomes of the three-year DFAT grant (2015-2018). Some key indicators are highlighted here:

The Network has hosted or co-hosted **30 events** with over **2,000 participants.**

The Network has produced **11 publications** across the course of the grant, including two conference bulletins, six process guides and three research reports (see page 10).

The Network has convened **14 steering groups**, constituting over **55 Network members** to provide strategic guidance to Network activities.

The Network has leveraged an estimated **$730,000 worth of voluntary contributions**.

OUTCOMES

RDI Network (ACFID members, university researchers, experts)	RESEARCHING AND SHARING *The RDI Network community is collaborating in ethical research for development, and effectively communicating findings and knowledge*

The Network's theory of change positions the intended influence at the outcome level to be: "The RDI Network community is collaborating in ethical research for development, and effectively communicating findings and knowledge". The four Program outcomes were:

1. Improved sector capacity in effective, ethical development research and education
2. Strengthened cross-sector partnerships
3. Improved practice in commissioning and using research evidence and more informed development discourse
4. A professional, sustainable and evolving Network championing, shaping and providing leadership in effective development research, evidence and practice, and cross-sectoral partnerships

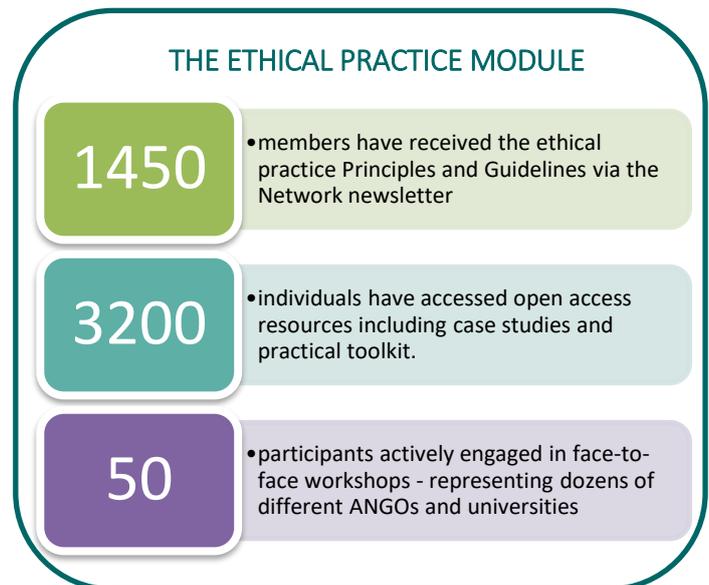**Outcome 1: Improved sector capacity in effective, ethical development research and education**

Ethical development practice
In this Program, the RDI Network built upon earlier work conducted between 2011-2015 which developed an accepted standard in ethical research practice for application by practitioners and academics of development (*Principles and Guidelines for Ethical Research and Evaluation in International Development[1]*). A primary means of strengthening the recognition of the Principles and Guidelines was through the development of a complementary training module and associated online resources[2], which were piloted and then rolled out widely in the sector across the course of the 2015-18 grant.

The Fred Hollows Foundation is one example of an Australian NGO who has invested in the module content as a means of strengthening their own internal processes and capacity amongst their staff:

THE ETHICAL PRACTICE MODULE

1450 • members have received the ethical practice Principles and Guidelines via the Network newsletter

3200 • individuals have accessed open access resources including case studies and practical toolkit.

50 • participants actively engaged in face-to-face workshops - representing dozens of different ANGOs and universities

> 'Being tapped into the RDI network like this is a huge leg up, we don't have to reinvent the wheel and they are really good quality resources as well. I think because you always have a mixture of academics and practitioners shaping them, [and] … they are always grounded in the practical, which is needed.'
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> *Network member, Fred Hollows Foundation*

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[1] https://rdinetwork.org.au/effective-ethical-research-evaluation/principles-guidelines-ethical-research-evaluation/
[2] https://rdinetwork.org.au/effective-ethical-research-evaluation/

The combined resource of a practical handbook and accompanying training module in ethical research practice has created a platform and resource base for organisations and institutions across the sector to access, adapt and adopt good practice. The tools reduced duplication by removing the need for organisations to develop their own procedures around ethical practice in isolation. Through the support of DFAT, RDI Network was able to subsidise participation by small and medium-sized NGOs in the ethical practice workshops held in 2018.

INFORMING FORMAL UNIVERSITY ETHICS REVIEW PROCESSES

- Direct and indirect engagement with formal ethics review processes within academic institutions has led to improvements in the procedures of the University of Sydney, Swinburne University of Technology and the University of Technology Sydney when assessing research with development consequences.

APPLICATION BY ORGANISATIONS IN PRACTICE

- Ethics training with Oxfam Australia field staff and partners draws heavily from the content of the Principles and Guidelines and has informed field-based practice.
- The Principles and Guidelines are taught as standards of practice in development courses, including at Monash University, Sydney University and the National University of Samoa.

Quality Development Education

Responding to an identified demand to create a space for dialogue on the pedagogy of development studies in universities, as well as advocate for a specific Field of Research (FOR) code for development, the RDI Network was a key partner in hosting two *Pedagogy in*

> 'It is great to have this forum for discussing how we teach and exchange ideas, among academics but also in exchange with the industry'.
> *Pedagogy in Practice Symposium participant*

Practice symposia in 2017 and 2018. These fora convened representatives from 15 universities to critically interrogate how development studies is taught - with a view to inform better student outcomes for the future generation of development practitioners. Current plans to formalise a professional Development Studies Association in Australia are a direct result of these RDI Network activities and member advocacy.

Outcome 2: Strengthened cross-sector partnerships

Creating spaces for emerging cross-sector partnerships

Fostering opportunities for collaborations between universities, Australian NGOS and other development actors is core business for the RDI Network, grounded in the understanding that by maximising the interface between various forms of knowledge and expertise, we increase the opportunities to test, interrogate and refine development practice.

The RDI Network has hosted / co-hosted over 30 events from 2015-2018, including its flagship cross-sector conference[3], city-based networking events, seminars for DFAT staff, topic-based forums and skills-based workshops. Over 2,000 individuals have attended these events which create space for Network members to share ideas and build locality-based development communities. Our events receive overwhelmingly positive feedback and the cross-sector interface is highly valued by our members:

> 'Our relationship with WaterAid, Plan and Fred Hollows has benefited from coming together at RDI events – we have quite healthy relationships now. The RDI [Network] event hosted by Burnet… has definitely helped our relationship with WaterAid'
> *Network member, Burnet Institute*

> 'I think there are two primary roles for RDI Network; one is bringing people together, the other one is bringing discussions together - particularly bringing together those discussions which take place in academia and those in policy and practice. Those two groups don't always speak together… We have different work deadlines, it is two different worlds.'
> *Network member, James Cook University*

Network events aim to catalyse connections as well as offer practical resources which individuals and organisations can take away and apply in their work. The Network has anecdotally received dozens of examples of collaborations which have with been initiated through or benefited from RDI Network events. For example, the below testimonial describes the experience of the University of New South Wales (UNSW):

> 'One [key partnership] was made with Peacifica [NGO] through an RDI Network-sponsored Sydney event. I am on their board now and I closely collaborate with them… Peacifica co-sponsored our Global Development Week @ UNSW last year and we are organising an event together for the ACFID conference. We also facilitated a Submission to the Australian Foreign Policy White Paper process. Peacifica has also provided volunteer opportunities for UNSW students and we are also looking into a research collaboration on peacebuilding in the pacific.

> With ChildFund I also started our first overseas internship programme in 2016 with two students. We have grown this to six last year (Vietnam, Cambodia and Laos) and will send ten students this year. These overseas experiences are invaluable for our students and has been described by them as a life changing experience. Students can see what a workplace in international development will be like. And ChildFund also receives feedback from my students about their field offices.

> We have started smaller engagements with local organisations in Fiji, India and Indonesia, but are looking to develop a similar close partnership with Caritas.'
> *Network member, UNSW Sydney*

The Network has played a catalysing role in the building of collaborative mechanisms in both geographic and topic-based areas. The Network has been a founding and continuing member of the Diaspora Learning Network, a cross-sector dialogue seeking to understand and leverage the unique roles diaspora communities

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[3] https://rdinetwork.org.au/rdi-conferences/partnering-impact-sustainable-development-collaboration-coordination-solidarity/

play in development and humanitarian fields. It has also helped to establish strong working relationships between academics at three Sydney-based universities, with regular meetings to discuss shared objectives and collaborate around events.

Resourcing collaboration in action

In 2018, the Network trialled a new collaboration mechanism leveraging the topic-based expertise of the ACFID Communities of Practice (CoPs). A competitive grant proposal process attracted the submission of seven potential cross-sectoral projects, demonstrating live interest from the sector in working collaboratively to build the evidence base for development. The Network was able to grant funding to three of these projects, which are close to finalisation at the time of writing.

The RDI Network has interrogated, modelled and supported cross-sector partnerships as a core aspect of its work since its inception in 2009. Drawing from this extensive experience, the Network now has a bank of case study examples and guiding resources[4] to support individuals and organisations across the sector who are exploring the potential of academic-practice collaboration.

SHARING EXPERTISE THROUGH PUBLICATIONS:
PARTNERSHIPS IN PRACTICE

How to Partner for Development Researh
- Published in November 2017
- Referenced and applied by: the Partnerships Brokers Association, Research2Action, the Rethinking Research Collaborative

How to collaborate with Pacific Churches
- Published in November 2018
- Featuring case studies and learnings from ANGOs, local NGOS, Pacific Churches and universities.

The Network continues to improve the mechanisms it has at its disposal to facilitate targeted meetings within the sector, and to be able to respond to requests for expertise in a timely and productive way.

Outcome 3: Improved practice in commissioning and using research evidence and more informed development discourse

Research uptake and impact

The study of the Australian Development Research Awards Scheme (ADRAS) undertaken by the RDI Network in 2016-17 created a unique space for tracking the long-term outcomes from Australian Government investment in development research from 2007-12. The study produced a practical framework for the identification of research impact typologies and a wealth of case studies illustrating the diversity of pathways to impact which research investments may follow.

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[4] https://rdinetwork.org.au/resources/partnerships-in-practice/

From Evidence to Impact: Development contributions of Australian aid funded research[5] was the key output report of this piece of work and has been widely disseminated within DFAT as well as across academic and implementing organisations. It has been accessed on the RDI Network website over 500 times since publication in late 2017.

The report has been attributed for maturing how individual Network members think about good research program design and for contributing to the broader case for evidence-informed practice. For example:

> 'The design for the Water for Women DFAT Fund research component drew directly on the thinking from the ADRAS study in terms of the way the selection criteria worked and what they valued. For instance. the ADRAS report said researchers need to be embedded in the local relationships and stakeholders in the countries where they are doing the research for the research to have impact, so this was included in the selection criteria. The design also adopted an approach to funding efforts to take research findings through to impact once the research is completed, since this step is often under-funded and therefore much research is not fully capitalised upon.'
> *Network member interviewee, 2018*

The findings of the study were used by the DFAT Development Policy section when reporting on the ADRAS Aid Quality Check and other sections within DFAT have been receptive to the recommendations for application in future research commissions and evidence use.

The RDI Network has convened an expert steering group representing NGOs and universities to progress the broader thematic focus from the ADRAS study in the area of research communications and uptake. To date, this group has identified the need for a baseline understanding of where current skills, values and practice in this area sit across the scope of the research production-use spectrum. An initial study has been commissioned and a report is expected for publication in January 2019.

Building capacity in the region

Intending to expand connections and build capacity of researchers and practitioners from the Asia-Pacific region, the RDI Network was able to support 14 regional scholarships for participation in sector events hosted in Australia during the course of the Program. These included the RDI Conference, the Women's Economic Empowerment Asia Pacific Forum and the Pacific Health Governance Network workshop. These scholarships have facilitated both skills development and professional networking opportunities between individuals and institutions in the region.

> 'Through this opportunity, I have gained confidence to interact with experienced practitioners and researchers; previously I was more tentative and hesitant as I work at a smaller institution in a developing country. The connections formed through these meetings will continue to support my own personal development as well as support opportunities for my organization. There are opportunities for research, collaboration and funding, and the meetings facilitated by RDI have been invaluable in widening my knowledge about these resources and to find practitioners for collaborative work in the future.'
> *Network scholarship recipient, National University of Samoa*

Evidence informed discourse

The RDI Network has continuously prompted the sector to reflect on its use of evidence in the formation of

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[5] https://rdinetwork.org.au/resources/policy-and-practice-impact/
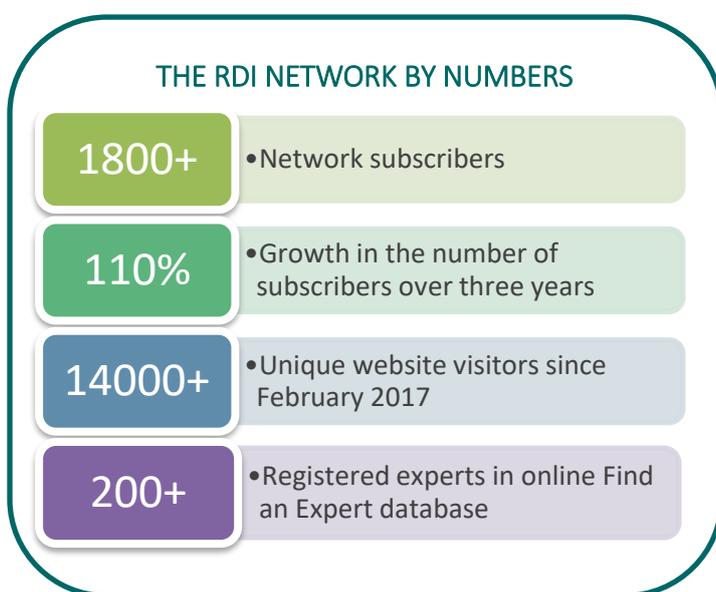
policy and the development of programs. It has sought to influence decision-making and commissioning processes, and to ensure that current development practice reflects the latest rigorous research.

An example of this is illustrated by the Network's ability to directly inform the policy dialogue in relation to the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) through two forums building to inform Australia's Voluntary National Review in 2018. Academics and practitioners who participated in these events valued the opportunity to share evidence, learn from peers, engage directly with DFAT staff and apply new learnings to organisational and institutional submissions made to the Senate inquiry into Australian implementation of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).

Outcome 4: A professional, sustainable and evolving Network championing, shaping and providing leadership in effective development research, evidence and practice, and cross-sectoral partnerships

Growing the Network identity

As the basis for a strong support mechanism to the three operational outcomes, the Network invested significantly in confirming and expanding its profile and recognition in the sector - particularly through proactive communications and engagement strategies. The Network's membership has grown by over 110% in three years and spans all Australian States and Territories - as well as reaching international audiences. The Network now enjoys the ability to draw from its network of over 1,800 individuals to convene required and requested expertise.

THE RDI NETWORK BY NUMBERS

1800+ • Network subscribers

110% • Growth in the number of subscribers over three years

14000+ • Unique website visitors since February 2017

200+ • Registered experts in online Find an Expert database

Growth in terms of size and reputation enables the Network to offer thought leadership through both high-quality outputs and directly into live development discourse. The RDI Network has enjoyed increasing levels of access to strategic-level discussions with development policy-makers, academics and NGO executives.

In 2017, the Network launched its own website which has since had over 14,000 users and offers a valued reference point for members to stay up to date with events, news and resources from the sector. The value of the information transferred through the Network has been repeatedly noticed by those actively involved:

> 'I do think [the RDI network] plays a critically important role that was desperately needed. It acts as an umbrella organisation representing the needs of scholars and practitioners and it is an important facilitator in bringing us together.'
> *Network member, Murdoch University*

'The Network provides a platform for conversations that the sector desperately needs. Even more importantly, it provides a vision of collaboration, of partnership, of engagement between actors.'
Network member [Anonymous]

'We gain information of new funding calls, early intelligence – we have been able to be involved in parliamentary inquiries, this last year we submitted several.'
Network member, University of Sydney

Expanding our core community

The Network benefits from the leadership of a highly active governance committee, consisting of 13 volunteers representing academia and practice. Meeting quarterly and having active input to the strategic planning of the Network's Program, the institutional and personal commitment represented by the involvement in the RDI Committee highlights the value placed in the sector-wide offerings of the Network. Turnover within the Committee - as well as of key DFAT personnel managing the Program - has presented both challenges and opportunities to the Network, offering fresh perspectives to advance both Network processes and discussions.

During the course of the Program, the Committee identified the significant potential to increase effectiveness by bringing in a larger number of core members to contribute actively. 14 active steering groups made up of Network and Committee members have been convened to contribute to the delivery against a range of the Network's activities. Through strategic guidance of project design and implementation, steering groups offer sector-wide representation and expertise, ensuring that activity outputs are relevant and useful to the Network constituency.

The estimated value of voluntary inputs leveraged through the time and contributions made to the Network and its activities across the course of the Program is $730,000, inclusive of time given by Committee members, interns and steering groups. This voluntary input is essential in catalysing the Network's financial and human resources provided through core DFAT funding. The diversification of the Network's funding base and future sustainability of its function is an ongoing strategic conversation within the RDI Committee.

Deliverables and Activities

Program
(RDI Network Secretariat and Committee, funded by DFAT)

CONVENING
The RDI Network Secretariat and Committee are facilitating and convening network processes

The Network's theory of change positions the intended influence at the deliverables level to be: "The RDI Secretariat and Committee are facilitating and convening network processes".

The RDI Network Committee:
- 13 members serving three-year, voluntary terms; sourced from ACFID NGO and university membership nation-wide
- Meeting at least quarterly throughout 2015-2018
- Leading and convening project-based steering groups

The RDI Network Secretariat:
- 2 staff engaged; hosted by ACFID
- 3 interns engaged
- Core support and facilitation for Network Committee and activity-based steering groups

The Network by nature operates to maximise the interface and cross-fertilisation of people, ideas, knowledge and resources between different development actors. It plays a critical and unique convening role, serving the needs of the sector with expertise and experience through the production of events and resources.

Core facilitators of this networking function over the course of 2015-18 have been operational and material:

♦ Operational: The high-value contribution of the RDI Committee and steering groups, supported by robust governance systems and close collaboration with ACFID.
♦ Material: The creation and effective utilisation of the RDI Network website and associated digital communications channels, including Find an Expert[6].

The Program has seen the delivery of numerous events and resources which are summarised in the table below. More information about these can be found on the RDI Network website: www.rdinetwork.org.au.

Key RDI Network Events 2015-2018
Addressing the SDGs in Asia-Pacific: A shared agenda for action* (2016)
Building stronger connections between research and international health programming* (2016)
How Change Happens: Seminars with Duncan Green* (Syd, Cbr, Mlb) (2017)
Ethical Fitness for Development Researchers and Practitioners – Workshops x4 (Syd, Mlb) (2017 & 2018)
RDI Networking events x6 (2017 & 2018) (Mlb, Syd, Bne)

Key RDI Network Publications 2015-2018
RDI Network / ACFID Principles and Guidelines for Ethical Research and Evaluation in Development* (2016)
Development Bulletin Vol. 77* (2016)
Demonstrating Outcomes and Impact across Different Scales* (2017)
Ethics approval processes in Asia (2017) Ethics approval processes in the Pacific (2017)
How to Partner for Development Impact (2017)

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[6] https://rdinetwork.org.au/find-an-expert/

Women's Economic Empowerment Asia Pacific Forum* (2017)	From Evidence to Impact: Development contributions of Australian aid funded research (2017)
Partnering for Impact on Sustainable Development: RDI Conference* (2017)	Development Bulletin Vol. 79* (2018)
Workshop: Feminist Participatory Action Research (2018)	Development Studies in Australia: Review and Recommendations (2018)
Pedagogy in Practice Symposia* (2017 & 2018) (Cairns & Perth)	Ethics Requirements for Research Publication (2018)
Workshop: Demonstrating Outcomes and Impact across Scales* (2018)	How to collaborate with Pacific Church for development research (2018)

* Denotes events and publications that were produced in collaboration with one or more other organisation.

Learning and Reflection

Through the course of the 2015-18 program, the RDI Network has identified from its experience several areas of learning from which it will seek to better serve the sector into the future.

- **Being clear on our role and value add within the sector**
  Communicating up front and with clarity to stakeholders, Network members and funders is crucial to delivering efficiently. Articulating our remit and scope – including in relation to other actors - can assist with avoiding confusion and managing expectations.

- **Collaboration takes time…**
  The Network strives to operate collaboratively in everything it does. These approaches demand flexibility and adequate time for the seeking and applying of input from a range of actors e.g. through the use of steering groups. Throughout its planning, the Network will benefit from building in time to identify appropriate collaborators and allow for their contributions throughout the course of an activity.

- **… and is worth it**
  Through the ongoing development of relationships between the Network and DFAT, we have learned that operating out of a partnership approach rather than simply adhering to a contractual agreement has far greater potential for impact. The activities of the Network have benefited significantly when the buy-in of relevant DFAT teams has been facilitated.

- **Voluntary contributions are essential – and must be valued**
  The Network relies heavily on leveraging the voluntary contributions from its Committee, steering group members, organisational support and more. The Network could take a more creative approach to acknowledging and rewarding the voluntary contributions it receives in-kind.

- **Strategic planning and resource allocation**
  The Network is constantly balancing the demands of the Program with the arising needs of the sector. The value of a flexible and adaptive work plan has enabled the crafting of activities throughout the Program to align with shifting demands and capacities of the sector. The Network must seek to work closely with DFAT to maintain that degree of adaptability in the new work program, and strategically plan and allocate resources accordingly.

- **Impact doesn't happen instantly**
  The Network's monitoring and evaluation of the Program has evolved over time as it was required to conform to unique nature of both the means and types of influence which a network utilises to achieve its purposes. It has been demonstrated that impact-level change takes time – and often doesn't happen in a linear way. Expectations around sector-wide change as per the Network theory of change must be realistic.