Report

A 'light touch' review of the evidence based policy in development network

Ajoy Datta and Clara Richards

Key messages

- The ebpdn platform has increasingly enabled members to engage in interactive email-based conversations about a range of evidence informed policy-making issues

- This has enabled knowledge from a variety of sources to be mobilised and shared amongst a diverse membership

- Membership which has grown in recent years is made up mainly of people from Latin America, South Asia, Southeast Asia and sub-Saharan Africa

- Securing resources to fund networks exclusively (both online and offline) is becoming increasingly difficult now that the funding environment is more competitive

- If ODI-RAPID is to continue to facilitate the network it should do so in the 'public good' to sustain the interest and motivation of its members

Acknowledgements

Overseas Development Institute
111 Westminster Bridge Road
London SE1 7JD, UK

Tel: +44 (0)20 7922 0300
Fax: +44 (0)20 7922 0399
www.odi.org.uk

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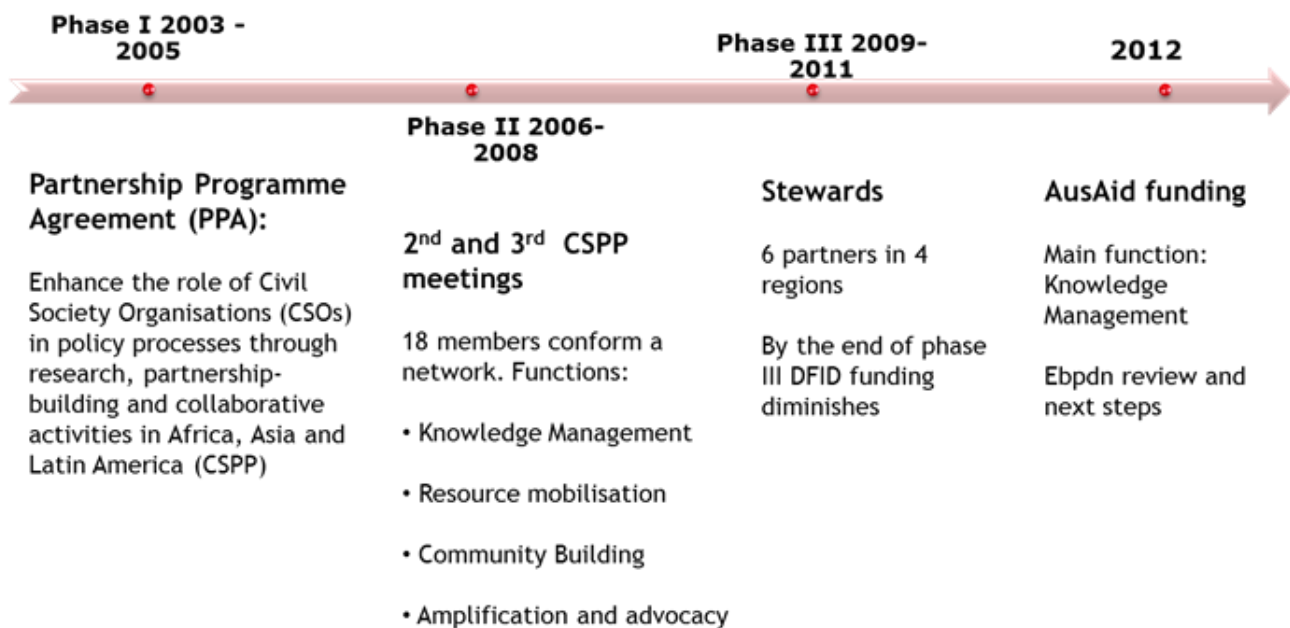|	
ALNAP	Active Learning Network for Accountability and Performance
CAF	Centre for Analysis and Forecast
CIPPEC	Centro de Implementatión de Políticas Públicas para la Equidad y el Crecimiento
CSO	Civil Society Organisation
CSPP	Civil Society Partnerships Programme
DFID	Overseas Development Institute
EBP	Evidence Based Policy
EIP	Evidence Informed Policy
ECS	Exchange, Communicate, Share (a web-based platform)
EVIPNET	Evidence-Informed Health Policy Making Network
HPG	Humanitarian Policy Group
HPN	Humanitarian Policy Network
GDN	Global Development Network
IDRC	International Development Research Centre
IDS	Institute of Development Studies
INASP	International Network for the Availability of Scientific Publications
KM4Dev	Knowledge Management for Development
NFA	Networks Functions Approach
ODI	Overseas Development Institute
PPA	Partnership Programme Agreement
RAPID	Research and Policy in Development
REDDnet	Reducing Emissions from Degradation and Deforestation Network

1 Introduction

This paper reviews the evidence based policy in development network (ebpdn) - a network of individuals from research institutes, think tanks, non-governmental organizations, government agencies, donor agencies and other organisations interested in promoting evidence-based (or, rather, evidence-informed) policies in the 'developing' world.

1.1 Background and objectives

The ebpdn has its roots in a six year Partnership Programme Agreement (PPA) that ODI was awarded by DFID in 2004 which provided funding to enhance the role of Civil Society Organisations (CSOs) in policy processes through research, partnership-building and collaborative activities in Africa, Asia and Latin America. This was led by the RAPID programme and called the ODI Civil Society Partnership Programme (CSPP). In November 2005, at a time when networks had become, in some cases, a 'one-size-fits-all' solution for the delivery of aid and the promotion of civil society and funders were increasingly demanding that development and poverty reduction goals be informed by research evidence, the representatives of 18 civil society organisations who were recipients of the CSPP programme at an annual meeting in London agreed to form a network.

The ebpdn was subsequently formed and managed by RAPID. The network was envisaged as cross-cutting and was to include many organisations working with other programmes in ODI on a range of policy issues, with the aim of exchanging ideas and building capacity for evidence-based policy influencing. The ebpdn superseded the CSPP, which was formally dissolved, with a community website (www.ebpdn.org) launched at a 2006 RAPID 'partners' meeting. Over five years later in 2011, the DFID PPA ended without renewal, which left little funding for further ebpdn activity. The uncertainty of the ebpdn's future presented the RAPID programme with an opportunity in 2012 to step back and reflect (with AusAID funding) on how the ebpdn had functioned, and what it had achieved, to help inform the network's future, if indeed it had one.

Figure 1: The evolution of the ebpdn

Phase I 2003 – 2005

Phase III 2009- 2011

2012

Phase II 2006- 2008

Partnership Programme Agreement (PPA):

Enhance the role of Civil Society Organisations (CSOs) in policy processes through research, partnership- building and collaborative activities in Africa, Asia and Latin America (CSPP)

2nd and 3rd CSPP meetings

18 members conform a network. Functions:

- Knowledge Management

- Resource mobilisation

- Community Building

- Amplification and advocacy

Stewards

6 partners in 4 regions

By the end of phase III DFID funding diminishes

AusAid funding

Main function: Knowledge Management

Ebpdn review and next steps

The specific objectives of this study are to:

- Identify the value created by the ebpdn
- Consider how the network's structure has supported the creation of this value
- Make recommendations that major stakeholders of the ebpdn could consider regarding the ebpdn's future.

1.2 Analytical framework

In reviewing the network, we take the Network Functions Approach (NFA) to assess its purpose, role, functions and form. The purpose of the network is essentially its objective and helps to explain its existence. It is independent of the approach taken to achieve it. Identifying the purpose helps answer the question: why are we supporting or working as a network? The role of the network describes how it intends to promote value to its members in the pursuit of the network's purpose. Two main roles can be suggested – support and agency. In agency networks, members join in order to coordinate their efforts with other members and act together under a single banner as an agent of change. In support networks, members act independently as agents of change but join the network in order to receive support that will make them more effective in their work. In practice, most networks pursue both roles but to differing extents. But there are trade-offs that exist between them which have organisational implications

The functions describe, more specifically, what it is that the network actually does (and by implication the value that is created). Hearn and Mendizabal (2011) suggest five sets of functions:

- **Knowledge management functions** stimulate learning, prevents information overload, identifies and shares details of important people, events as well as facts and stories.
- **Amplification and advocacy functions** extend the reach and influence of its constituent parts in terms of members, ideas, initiatives.

- **Community building functions** build social capital through bonding, build relationships of trust, consensus and coherence, and promote collective learning and action among homogeneous actors.
- **Convening functions** bring together heterogeneous groups and build social capital amongst them through bridging, stimulating discourse and collective learning and action and.
- **Resource mobilisation functions** boost capacity and effectiveness of members and stimulate knowledge creation and innovation.

Functions are carried out by the network as a whole, not by individual members. Naturally, the individual organisations or people can carry out these functions and if it is more efficient and effective for a single entity to carry out these functions on behalf of everyone else, then there is no need for a network; what you have then is a programme or service organisation.

The premise of this approach is that the form a network takes should follow its functions. The organisational arrangement of the network can have significant effects on its capability to deliver them. But what do we mean by form? ODI's work has focussed on five elements:

- **members:** the different depths of membership from leaders at the core to those at the margins with little connection
- **governance:** rules and norms and their degree of formality
- **organisational arrangements:** the level of centralisation or decentralisation
- **stewardship:** the role of a facilitator, secretariat and/or board
- **resources:** the transactions costs and risks for the members as a result of working collaboratively and the administrative work for the secretariat and facilitators.

1.3 Methods and organisation of paper

This report constitutes an internal review and not an independent evaluation. Although we (Ajoy Datta and Clara Richards) are leading RAPID's support to the ebpdn and facilitating ebpdn's online platform respectively, we have done our utmost to be objective and have involved the 'stewards' of the ebpdn as much as we can throughout the research process. The review drew on three components. The research took place between March and August 2012. First, we conducted a documentary analysis that included funding proposals, project documentation and meeting minutes amongst other sources.

Second, we administered a survey to the 2048 members of the ebpdn online platform to i) ascertain members' country of residence and profession ii) understand the value they received from being part of the network, and iii) identify the usefulness of the ebpdn website. As with many online surveys we struggled to encourage members to respond. As a result, only 100 out of the 2048 members filled it out. Most participants were from the 'global South' as table one below indicates. However, not all respondents answered all questions.

Table 1: Where the survey respondents were based

Region	Percentage
Europe	25
South Asia	20
Latin America	19

Sub-Saharan Africa	13
Southeast and East Asia	12
North America	9
Australia	2

Third, we carried out 19 semi-structured interviews with: the ebpdn 'stewards'; past and present members of the RAPID programme; representatives of donor organisations such as DFID and IDRC; coordinators/facilitators of other networks run out of ODI (such as the Humanitarian Policy Network); and networks/forums run by other organisations within the same sector (such as Research2Action, run by CommsConsult). The resulting paper is organized in four sections. After the introduction, the next section provides an overview of the ebpdn's functions. The third section describes the ebpdn's form. The fourth and final section makes some suggestions about the future of the ebpdn for the RAPID programme and the ebpdn stewards to consider.

2 The ebpdn's functions

The ebpdn's role or supra-function has focussed on supporting its members to be better equipped to use research (and other types of evidence) to inform and influence policy, focusing mainly on national policy arenas, rather than unifying its members in support of one or more specific global policy goals. That is, the network has a mainly 'support' rather than 'agency' function. Our survey suggested that few respondents appreciated the network for its ability to influence broader policy debates in national contexts.

Nevertheless, key informant interviews together with documentary evidence seem to suggest that different stakeholders initially put subtly different emphases on what the network would primarily do (i.e. its functions). DFID emphasised capacity development (which suggests a resource mobilisation function) through sharing of lessons and good practices across different parts of the world (knowledge management). RAPID's objectives were to build partnerships (emphasising the network's community building function) and develop capacities of civil society organisations to use research-evidence to inform policies and practices (resource mobilisation). And regional stewards (whom we discuss later) emphasised the network's role in enabling members to do joint research (resource mobilisation) and share information and advice on promoting evidence-informed policy (knowledge management).

In practice, of the five key network functions, ebpdn's work has centred mainly on:

- facilitating online discussions and posting links to useful resources (knowledge management) – which has become the only function since DFID funding ceased
- producing new knowledge through publications and boosting capacities through training/awareness raising (resource mobilisation).

To a lesser extent the network has:

- built social capital through annual meetings (community building).

We describe how these (often overlapping) functions were carried out in practice (they are also summarised in table 1) below. The ebpdn's advocacy and amplification function are not explicitly mentioned in the table as experience has shown that this happened indirectly through the delivery of the other functions, while the ebpdn did little to convene people external to the network during its lifetime.

Table 2: Ebpdn's functions

Function	Purpose	How has ebpdn carried this out	How has RAPID supported this
Knowledge management	Stimulate learning, prevent information overload, identify and share details of important people, events as well as facts and stories	posts and discussions on online platform Posting news of events and funding opportunities as well as resources such as toolkits and research papers Periodic e-newsletters	Setting up of steward group and email list Setting up of online platform (global and regional) Facilitating global online community Posting resources on global community Moderation of postings on global community Summarising of online discussions Production of quarterly newsletters Facilitate communication between regional stewards
Resource mobilisation	Boosting capacity and effectiveness of members, stimulation of knowledge creation and innovation	Latin America Training workshops (2009, 2010, 2011) Mentoring amongst members Online courses 11 research papers 2 handbooks/toolkits Southeast Asia Training and ToT workshops (2009, 2010, 2011) 5 research papers and a contribution to a book chapter South Asia 8 research papers 5 policy maps Sub-Saharan Africa 10 research papers	Providing funds for network activity Review of publications
Community building	Building of social capital through bonding, building relationships of trust, consensus and coherence, collective learning and action among homogeneous actors	Annual steward meetings (2006-2010) in places such as Dar es Salaam, Dubai and Colombo Regional meetings and conferences in South Asia (Sri Lanka) and Latin America	Funding and event organisation Periodic telephone conversations between global facilitator and regional stewards

1.1 Knowledge management

2.1.1 Access to material

The majority of ebpdn members who responded to our survey in early 2012 suggested that they valued the ebpdn for having the chance to connect to different people from around the world working in the sector, and for the up-to-date information made available via the online platform especially the funding notices and the practical resources. For instance, 80%

of those who responded to the online survey suggested they received up-to-date knowledge related to evidence informed policymaking. 74% suggested they could access a range of resources, 84% thought ebpdn helped to keep them informed of relevant news and events and 53% suggested that the ebpdn helped them to learn about the experiences of others. With regards to the quality of resources, 26% thought that the resources were excellent, 44% thought they were very good and 19% thought they were adequate - see figure 2 and 3 below (elements of figure 3 not discussed here are discussed in the following sub-sections).

Figure 2: Aspects of the network
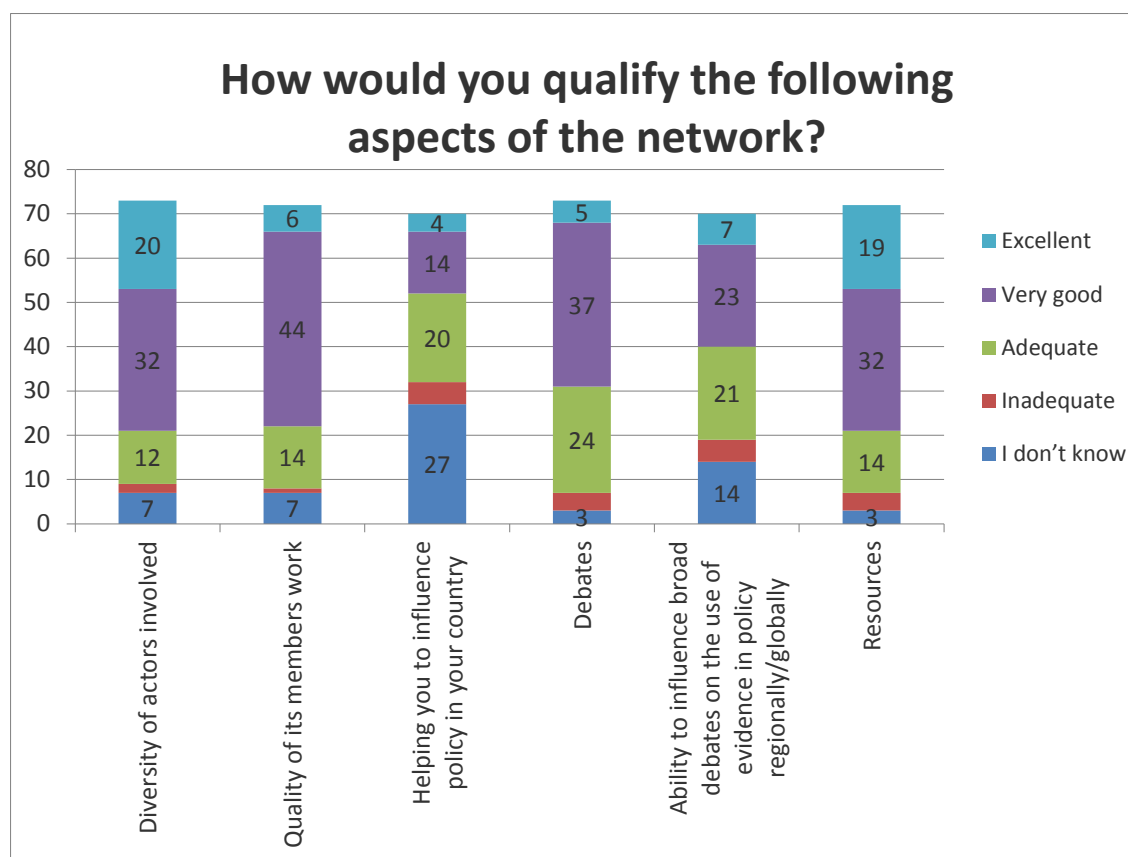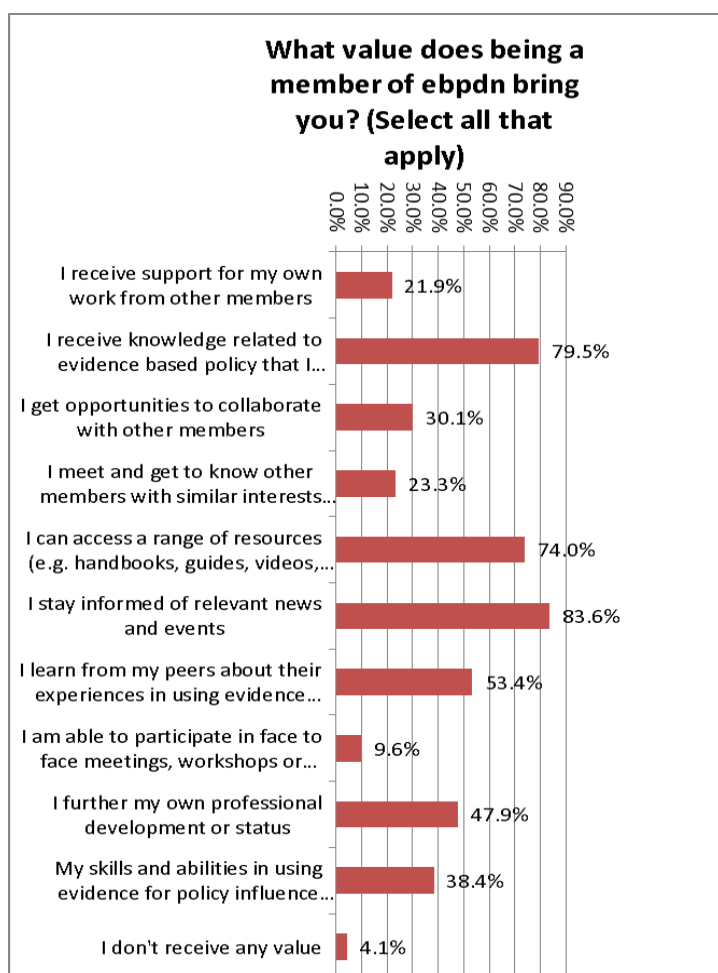

Source: online survey, March, 2012

Posting such resources was one of the main roles played by the 'global' facilitator/coordinator - first Cecilia Oppenheim, and then Clara Richards. Resources were sought/shared/forwarded in a number of ways: the facilitator would manually scan a number of key websites for useful resources; subscriptions were made to particular email lists, emails received from individuals with attachments and links would be forwarded, and people would upload resources directly to the ebpdn community site. Resources were often shared through monthly e-bulletins which included announcements, forum posts, resources, projects (being undertaken by core ebpdn members) and events.[1] Automated feeds using, say, Delicious, were not utilised as it was felt that this would lead to a huge number of posts on the ebpdn site, leading to information overload. Of the regional communities, similar activity seemed to be more prevalent in Latin America than in any other.

With regards to access to resources, ebpdn members surveyed suggested that other key sources of information for evidence informed policy included ODI-RAPID, Research for Action, KM4Dev, Knowledge Brokers Forum, the World Bank and Eldis. But our own research suggests that other online sites that feature work on evidence informed

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[1] http://ebpdn.org/newsletter/en/newsletter_2007-10-15.html

policymaking exist including onthinktanks, the Outcome Mapping Learning Community, the Global Development Network, the Impact of Social Sciences and Evidence Based Soup, amongst others. However, despite an increasing number of fora emerging on these issues, 80% of the 100 or so ebpdn members who filled out the survey stated that ebpdn was their main source of information in relation to evidence-based policy. However, the extent of overlap between membership of different sites (given the small sample size), and the added value of ebpdn over other sources in this respect are both unclear.

Figure 3: Value of being a member of the network

Source: Online survey, March 2012

2.1.2 Online discussion

In the early years, the online communities functioned primarily to enable members to access resources and the number of posts made annually were fairly constant. Comment and opinion on both the global and regional online communities was limited. However, in 2011, the number of posts made to the global community increased three fold from 194 in 2010 to 612 in 2011, while by June 2012, a further 226 posts had been published. Most contributions have come from the United Kingdom (394 posts or 29% of the total) and Ireland (122 posts accounting for 9% of the total). France has made the third most number of contributions (45), followed by India (29), Indonesia (25), Argentina (24), Colombia (23), Kenya (22), Iran (21) and Nigeria (21). Members from other countries made 20 or less contributions between December 2010 and June 2012.

The increase in number of posts, especially from the UK (and Ireland), are probably due to the increase in three kinds of emails. The first are sent by (mainly UK and often RAPID

based) individuals working (primarily) on evidence-informed policy who: post (research) questions to help inform their work; disseminate research products they have produced; or republish postings from other web or blog sites (to take advantage of the ebpdn's reach and membership). These kinds of emails are probably posted to a variety of platforms by the so-called 'spammers' – perhaps reflecting the increased prominence of 'evidence informed policymaking' issues.

The second (perhaps more interesting) type of email has been comments in response to ad hoc opinions, questions and/or resources posted by individuals (which are usually unique to the platform). The most popular topics/questions have included how change happens, the difference between ex-ante and ex-post impact assessments, the implications of goal-free evaluations, the merits and drawbacks of indigenous forms of knowledge, the ways in which policy can be influenced, the role of research in influencing policy, 'policy entrepreneurship versus development entrepreneurship' and the use of RCTs in measuring the impact of policy briefs on policymaking. Respondents to our survey rated the quality of comment and debate on ebpdn fairly highly. 51% thought that the "debates" were very good, whilst 61% of members (44 out of 72 respondents) thought that the "quality of the members work" was very good.

And the third type of email are those sent by the 'global' ebpdn facilitator (who has either been located in the UK or more recently in Ireland) and has over the last 18 months or so, has more frequently sent emails to the ebpdn community to stimulate discussion, synthesise/summarise key points made and provide information on the latest resources.

Figure 4: Engagement with the network
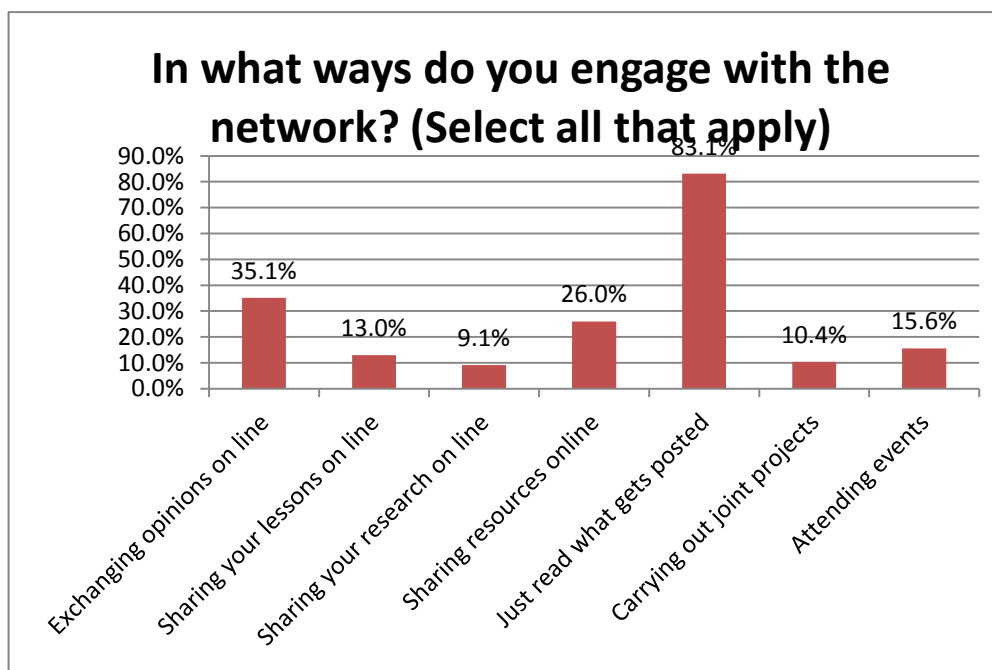
Source: On line survey, March 2012

As the figures above suggest, emails from ebpdn members are relatively concentrated – only a handful of the membership contribute, and most who do are from the UK – although other prominent contributors include those from Latin America. As such, most ebpdn members are considered 'free riders' – receiving information posted by the global facilitator and other members – with relatively little two way interaction, possibly due to perceptions they have little to offer, high transaction costs and/or limited benefits. These findings were confirmed by the survey: 83% of respondents said they only read what is posted. Only 35%

of respondents said they exchanged opinions on line and only 26% said they shared resources on line. The other options that expressed interaction of some kind totalled less than 15% – see figure 4 above.

There are certain individuals who are fairly prominent on the ebpdn. Enrique Mendizabal is one such member. He stepped down as the head of the RAPID programme at the end of 2010 to become a RAPID research associate, and has since then initiated 52 out of the 393 discussion threads between September 2010 and July 2012 – often republishing (in a shorter format) posts from his www.onthinktanks.org site but also initiating and contributing to discussion (unique to ebpdn and often republished on other platforms such as KBF and Onthinktanks) on a variety of themes. His posts have accounted for 13% of the total, which for one member alone (in an online community of 2048) is considerable.

Other prominent members include Kirsty Newman (formerly the head of INASP's evidence informed policy programme and now with DFID's research uptake programme in the UK), Jeff Knezovich (an IDS research uptake manager), Nick Scott (ODI's online communications manager), Luz Helena Sanchez Gomez (executive director of the Asociacion Colombiana de la Salud-Assalud or Colombian Health Association), George Rajdou (a consultant in the water & sanitation sector), Vanesa Weyrauch (principal researcher of CIPPEC's Influence, Monitoring and Evaluation Programme based in Argentina), Luis Ordóñez (Professor at the Universidad Simón Bolívar, Venezuela), Francis Aywa (Deputy Director at SUNY Parliamentary Strengthening Program) and Eoin Young (Programme Director & Trainer at International Centre for Policy Advocacy in Hungary).

While sites such as Research to Action and onthinktanks provide space to comment in response to blog posts - which members can subscribe to, they do not offer the same type of interactive engagement. Only the Knowledge Brokers Forum (KBF) seems to provide the space for people to engage in email based conversations (which are stored on an online platform). And KBF members have been more active than ebpdn members. With a membership of 545 from 73 countries, the forum was responsible for 816 contributions since September 2010. Ebpdn, with almost four times as many members (2048) has made less than twice as many contributions (1341) since December of the same year. However, the ebpdn is not alone with respect to the issue of concentration. The coordinator of the KBF suggests that only 10% of members have made at least one contribution, while the coordinator of the Humanitarian Policy Network (HPN) – a network run out of ODI's Humanitarian Policy Group (HPG) - suggests that although the network has several members from both the 'South' and the 'North' most contributors are from the UK, North America and 'well-trodden' parts of Africa.

2.2 Resource mobilisation

The network has mobilised resources in the form of new knowledge and information and boosted capacity in a variety of ways. Regional stewards have organised a number of training workshops on using evidence to influence policy in relation to specific policy areas. In Latin America, CIPPEC held three workshops, including a workshop in 2010 in Buenos Aires on monitoring and evaluating the role of knowledge in policy influencing work. CIPPEC also provided technical assistance to other organisations in the region that were eager to develop policy influencing plans. Seeing a growing interest in evidence informed policymaking, CIPPEC, with funding largely from GDN (but under the banner of ebpdn), delivered online courses on planning, monitoring and evaluating policy influence. In Southeast Asia, training workshops have included national level training workshops for local research organisations in Vietnam (hosted by Centre for Analysis and Forecast) on the use of evidence and another in Indonesia (hosted by SMERU Research Institute) on assessing policy engagement.

Although several people benefited from such face-to-face encounters, these activities were restricted to a relatively small group of people and were few and far between. And once funding came to an end, so did these activities. It is not surprising then that the few who responded to the survey recently suggested that the ebpdn was relatively weak in boosting their capacity and effectiveness in the field of evidence-informed policy (through activities like training workshops, technical advice and mentoring). For instance, only 22% suggested they received support for their work from other members. 48% felt that the ebpdn helped them to develop professionally, whilst 38% felt that the ebpdn helped to improve their skills and abilities in the field of evidence informed policymaking – see figure 3 earlier.

Regional stewards and other members have also produced several publications such as bibliographical reviews, comparative studies and research papers. These helped to highlight the complexities of the knowledge-policy interface in different contexts and record good practice in relation to influencing policy and promoting research use. The Latin American region has produced several publications including two bibliographical reviews which summarised and analysed information to support policy influencing processes. Ebpdn funding was also used to fund studies on the relationship between think tanks and political parties in Latin America. In Southeast Asia, members in Vietnam, Indonesia, Cambodia and Laos produced case studies on the knowledge-policy interface in specific policy areas. And in Africa, ebpdn undertook studies on the political economy of research uptake.[2]

In South Asia, eight case studies were produced to highlight how social research has been used to inform public policy in Nepal, India and Sri Lanka amongst others, while five policy 'maps' were produced on topics such as evidence-informed policy in India and national indoor air quality standards and implementation guidelines in Nepal. In sub-Saharan Africa, publications have included case studies on approaches to monitor and evaluate policy influence as well as networking and bridging the gap between research and policy. And more recently four case studies together with a synthesis were produced on the role of knowledge in policy debates in four African countries.

In addition to the production of resources at a regional level, RAPID re-launched the ebpdn newsletter (at the same time that the ECS platform went online) in May 2010 (produced from their London offices), which focused on the sharing of 'new' knowledge from regional facilitators (rather than summarising posts from the online platform). The preparation of the newsletter proved to be fairly labour intensive and required inputs from both the global facilitator and the RAPID communications officer with RAPID staff making a substantial contribution to content of the newsletter. The newsletter was intended to be published quarterly. However, since the first edition was published, only one further newsletter was produced (in December 2011).

Apart from the articles for the newsletter, the production of resources and outputs were contracted out to individuals to produce for a fee. Regional stewards were usually asked what kinds of resources and outputs they wanted to produce for the available budget. The coordinator, after a conversation with each steward, would then provide approval and draw up contracts. However, some ebpdn members (i.e. organisations and individuals within those organisations) were found to have limited capacity to do research, particularly in relation to the interface between research and policy. At the same time, the ebpdn coordinator (and RAPID staff) was only able to provide limited feedback and review. And once resources were produced, they were rarely posted on the online platform (at least not immediately) whilst the broader ebpdn membership were seldom engaged in any sort of discussion about the key findings.

This is in stark contrast to the HPN where the coordinator receives a steady stream of draft (roughly 2000 word) articles produced by HPN members (for outputs such as HPN's quarterly exchange and reflective discussion pieces) written 'at their own cost' who are

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[2] See http://onthinktanks.org/2012/06/08/a-new-political-economy-of-research-uptake-in-africa-overview/

keen to publish on the network due to the credibility of the network and its wide reach (although a stipend is occasionally paid for larger pieces). The HPN coordinator, Wendy Fenton, also provides substantial feedback, reflection and editing support – and has gone as far as rejecting papers if thought to be sub-standard. However, humanitarian issues are usually central to the work of HPN's members, whereas evidence informed policy issues often play a marginal role in the work of ebpdn members.

2.3 Community building

In building 'off-line' communities at the global level, RAPID convened annual 'stewards' meetings, lasting 2-3 days to coincide with annual Global Development Network (GDN) meetings (to which stewards were also invited) in places such as Dubai, Colombo and Dar-es-Salaam, to share experiences and lessons from facilitating their respective communities. The last of these was in 2010 (see below for the role of regional stewards). However, the infrequent nature of such meetings made building bonds and trust between stewards difficult, which resulted in little (follow up) online engagement between stewards.

Regional stewards in Latin America and South Asia have made attempts to build 'off-line' communities within their respective regions – by organising meetings for regional members. In December 2010, CEPA organised a meeting in Colombo, Sri Lanka with think tanks across South Asia to discuss how they could work together and promote more evidence informed policymaking in the region. In Latin America, CIPPEC organised a regional conference to discuss the link between research and policymaking in the region, where a sense of community appeared stronger – an issue we return to below.

In Southeast Asia, stewards from SMERU in Jakarta, Indonesia and the Centre for Analysis and Forecast (CAF) in Ha Noi, Vietnam, instead of facilitating a regional network, set up two national networks: the Indonesia bridging research and policy network and the Vietnamese Knowledge to Policy Network respectively (The former has now been merged with the SMERU facilitated Research and Evaluation network on Child Issues in Indonesia). This was a reaction to the realisation that change ultimately happens in national spaces and that people were more likely to interact if they were affected by the same (national) policy issues. Network activity featured mainly the establishment of further sub-communities on the ECS platform (which hosted ebpdn).

On the whole, there were few opportunities for face-to-face engagement, an issue illustrated by survey responses shown in figure 3 above. For instance only 30% felt of respondents felt they had opportunities to collaborate with other members; 23% felt they had the opportunity to get to know other members with similar interests; while only 10% felt they were able to participate in face to face forums.

2.4 Amplification and advocacy

At a broader level, there seems to be perception among interviewees that ebpdn may have at least made some sort of contribution to the increased prominence of evidence informed policy, particularly in Latin America in recent years. As one interviewee put it: "ebpdn had a modest impact [in promoting] evidence based policy […], it was a way to spread the knowledge that ODI and CIPPEC [in Argentina] had and it [provided] a space for dialogue, for sharing common experiences and strengthening a subject that in the region [Latin America] was still a little bit esoteric [… the topic] was not explored before and thanks to this, new paths were starting to open" (author interview, March 2012). Another interviewee stated that "the network helped the region to […enhance the role…] of evidence in policymaking". Although membership of the ebpdn cannot necessarily be taken as a proxy for wider interest in the sector, at the time of writing, had nonetheless increased by 36% in the last ten months and stood at just over 2000. However, we can only go as far as saying that the ebpdn, at least in Latin America, contributed to evidence informed policymaking rising up the agenda for funders and researchers.

3 The ebpdn's form

Here we discuss ebpdn's form – focusing on:

1. the nature of the membership
2. the governance of the network
3. organisational arrangements
4. stewardship
5. resources

3.1 Membership

Membership of ebpdn can be split into two categories. Firstly, those considered 'core' members who were able to participate in a number of funded activities (as described under the community building and resource mobilisation functions above) and secondly, those who are simply members of the online platform. Regarding the former, in 2006, RAPID approached and selected an initial group of 25 organisations who agreed to work together to support the development of the ebpdn, which was soon narrowed down to 18 organisations. Core members came from diverse contexts and had varying capacity levels, which presented difficulties in the creation of a strong network (Hearn and Mendizabal, 2011). Reasons for the selection of such a diversity of partners likely stemmed from conflicting visions for the programme (with some within RAPID of the opinion it should work with high-capacity research institutes whilst others felt it should work with those considered weaker) as well as personal relations linking organisations involved to RAPID staff. However, these differences in approach were never properly made explicit at the time and partly as a result, were never reconciled

Interest amongst some organisations waned for various reasons. Evidence informed policy was usually a marginal part of an organisation's programme which was primarily concerned with producing 'content'. Moreover, funding for ebpdn activities (from ODI) only made up a tiny proportion of their overall budget. Perhaps as a result, some organisations were not able to provide adequate support (such as staff time, professional help and recognition) to individuals who had been appointed 'facilitators'. With membership often tied to individuals, staff turnover in some organisations also further hampered the ebpdn's development. As a result, the original 18 core members were reduced to a total of six stewards featuring two from Latin America, one from Africa, one from South Asia and two from Southeast Asia from organisations that had displayed a desire for continued engagement with the ebpdn, and were all think tanks/policy research centres in many ways resembling ODI, albeit at a smaller scale.

Figure 5: Evolution of online membership
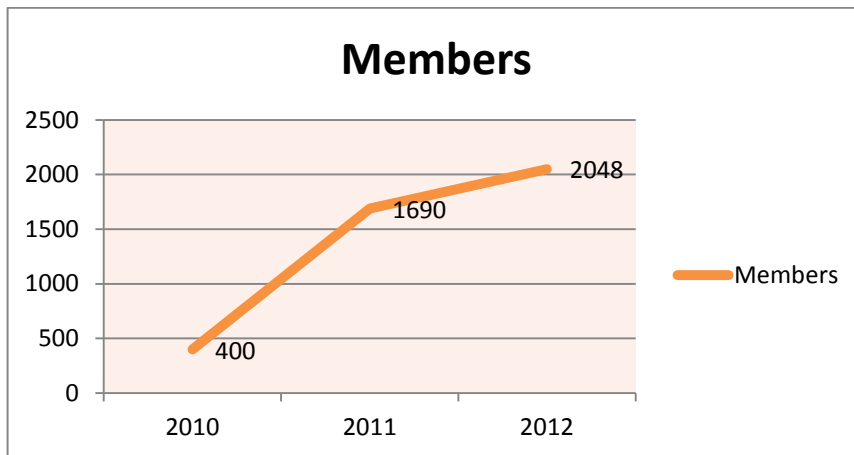
Source: Online platform data

Online membership (which is free) on the other hand has increased, as figure 2 above shows increasing fivefold between 2010 and 2012, and stood at 2048 at the time of writing. This compares favourably with other sites: the KBF has a membership of 545, Research to Action has just over 200 subscribers, whilst Onthinktanks had 220 subscribers and 305 Twitter followers by mid-2011.
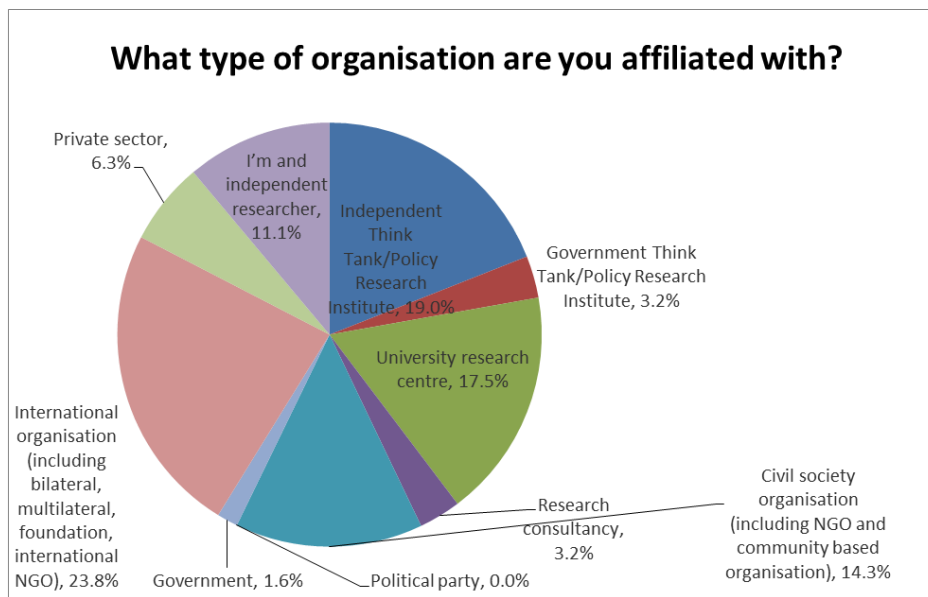
Figure 6: Members by region
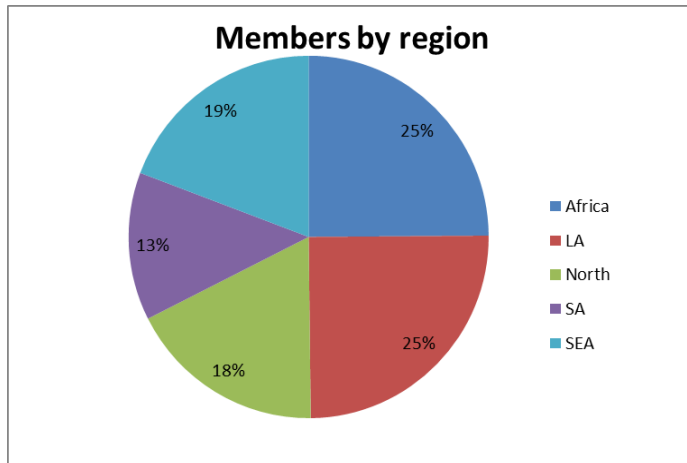
Source: Online Survey, March 2012

As figure 3 shows above, most online members are from the 'Global South'. Disaggregating by region, 478 members come from Latin America, 477 from Africa, 369 from Southeast Asia 340 from the North or developed countries and 253 from South Asia. In relation to the types of organisation that members work for, our survey administered to ebpdn members showed that respondents (who comprised only 100 out of 2048 members) are members of international organisations, university research centres and think tanks/research institutes, CSOs and independent researchers. This is backed up by other data from the survey: when asked to rate the diversity of the actors involved [in online discussions], 32 thought they were very good and 29 thought that they are excellent. Nevertheless, very few members said they came from either the public or private sector – see figure 4 below.

Figure 7: Types of members

What type of organisation are you affiliated with?

- Private sector, 6.3%
- I'm and independent researcher, 11.1%
- Independent Think Tank/Policy Research Institute, 19.0%
- Government Think Tank/Policy Research Institute, 3.2%
- University research centre, 17.5%
- Research consultancy, 3.2%
- Civil society organisation (including NGO and community based organisation), 14.3%
- Political party, 0.0%
- Government, 1.6%
- International organisation (including bilateral, multilateral, foundation, international NGO), 23.8%

Source: online survey, March, 2012

Membership has increased at the same time that the facilitator has done more work to stimulate discussion and the number of comments being posted to the forum has increased (mainly by a group of Northern 'thinkers and practitioners'). While we cannot be certain, this might suggest that the content and the potential to share comment/opinion with a wide range of people has inspired members to encourage others (such as friends and colleagues) to sign up to the online platform.

3.2 Governance

The ebpdn has operated largely on an informal basis with no structures such as a board or secretariat to make decisions or formal rules to determine, for example, its vision and mission. Arnaldo Pellini, shortly after his arrival in the RAPID programme, did draft a governance structure, which was not taken any further by the management. Although the lack of formal rules provided those involved with a fair degree of flexibility, enabling the network to grow organically, it also meant there was no agreed mechanism to, for example, select and determine the roles of members, decide on the main functions of the network, develop a strategy, produce a joint work plan and resolve tensions between members. As a result, it was never explicit whether the network was a collective initiative or one that was RAPID's – a point we return to later when we discuss the role of RAPID.

Instead of a board or secretariat, RAPID agreed to work together with the six regional stewards to make decisions. Nevertheless, although key ebpdn activities were in principle agreed amongst regional stewards and/or between regional stewards and RAPID, key informants suggested that decision-making was in effect centralised within the RAPID team, with regional stewards arguing they were not afforded the space to make genuine and substantive contributions. For instance, one interviewee argued that "there wasn't a lot of horizontal relation between us: [content was determined by…] what RAPID brought to the table" (author interview, March 2012). The lack of formal rules (as discussed above) meant that approaches were largely based on a range of factors including organisational pressures (to do with ODI's systems), academic pressures (to publish ODI products) and personality (whether someone was inclined to 'collaborate' or 'contract').

This is not too dissimilar to the governance arrangement of the HPN which has no secretariat. Wendy Fenton the coordinator, instead discusses any issues that come up with

her HPG colleagues and also consults the HPG advisory group when appropriate. Regarding day to day decisions and those around which issues they cover in their publications, she usually makes the decision herself after extensive consultation within HPG but also with many other external contacts most of whom are HPN members.

At the other end of the spectrum, the Active Learning Network for Accountability and Performance (ALNAP) in Humanitarian Action – a very different network from ebpdn, which responded to aftermath of the Rwandan genocide has members from donors, NGOs, the Red Cross/Crescent, the UN, independents and academia (many of which make a contribution in fees or in kind), has very formal rules to govern its work. For instance, a steering group made up of representatives from each of its constituent groups is responsible for providing inputs to and approving a strategy and work plan, which the ALNAP secretariat executes. In practice however, the development of the strategy and work plan are a lot more iterative.

3.3 Organisational arrangements

In 2008, core members agreed to develop regional communities facilitated by 'stewards' in order to generate more context specific activity, with RAPID continuing to support the global network.[3] Stewards comprised CIPPEC (Argentina) and CIES (Peru) in Latin America, CEPA (Sri Lanka) in South Asia, ESRF (Tanzania) in sub-Saharan Africa and SMERU (Indonesia) together with CAF (Vietnam) in Southeast Asia. Shared histories, similar political contexts and in some cases a shared language provided the rationale for the establishment of regional communities. The role of stewards was to, amongst other things, facilitate a regionally focussed online community and coordinate the delivery of the network's functions in their region. Such an arrangement was more likely, it was argued, to intensify interactions amongst members and stimulate more targeted discussion and dialogue. However, some key informants wondered why issue-specific communities had not been set up instead, focussing on evidence informed policy in areas such as child health, economic development and social protection. The stewards also combined to form a group (or informal 'secretariat') which would serve as a space to facilitate knowledge exchange and provide guidance on the direction of the network.

Despite the availability of at least some funding from ODI for all stewards (even if limited and declining in recent years), the level of activity amongst regional members was highly uneven. Of the four regional communities, Latin America appeared the most active both on and off-line. Representatives from CIPPEC and CIES for instance, stimulated discussion by making comment and asking questions through the online community, uploaded new resources, compiled and sent a bi-monthly newsletter, produced a number of research outputs, held events and ran courses (as above). For instance, online discussions included: the relationship between think tank funding models and their capacity to evaluate their influence; the role of think tanks in electoral processes and the monitoring and evaluation of the influence of social protection policies.

Factors contributing to such an active Latin American regional ebpdn platform included a common language (Spanish), strong infrastructure (especially IT), similarities in political systems and shared histories across the region, a competitive funding environment (placing emphasis on research impact and value for money), entrepreneurial leadership (CIPPEC leadership recognised the business value of developing policy influencing capacity across the region), strong personal ties to RAPID staff (Enrique Mendizabal, in particular, who is originally from Peru) and match funding, which for a time was provided by the Global Development Network (GDN), enabling CIPPEC (and CEPA in Sri Lanka) to do a lot more than it could with just DFID funding (channelled through ODI). Furthermore, CIPPEC has

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[3] In theory, such arrangements are made in response to weak ties and lack of activity between and amongst members

of late, with its own funding set up http://vippal.org/ - a community on 'linking research and public policy in Latin America'. Box 1 below provides more detail.

<div style="background-color:#d4e4df; padding:1em;">

Box 1: Good Practices in networking development from South Asia and Latin America

Since Latin America and South Asia have proven to have success in the development of the network, we have come up with a few good practices worth considering while managing networks.

- Dedicated people: Both CEPA and CIPPEC had people who dedicated time to develop and facilitate the network regionally (with the funding provided by ODI-RAPID). This was a key element as networks take dedication and time. While other regional facilitators received funding, some interviewees felt that the organisations were not able to use it effectively.
- Regular newsletter: CIPPEC in Latin America delivered a newsletter twice a month including relevant information and news about evidence based policy. The newsletter kept members engaged and through the resources published, led them continuously to the ebpdn platform, raising the number of people accessing it and using it.
- Constant posting: Although it is difficult to make people participate in on-line discussions it is important to post news or resources often. The role of the facilitator was therefore important. Whilst most members tended not to post resources, they appreciated receiving information.
- On-line courses: It is difficult to keep a network lively if there are no activities. CIPPEC has kept the community active by delivering free on line courses in topics like policy influencing and monitoring and evaluation of policy influence.
- Face-to-face meetings: A key element for members' engagement in Latin America was the regional meetings. Whether it was a conference or a workshop, they gave people the opportunity to develop trust and bonds with others, which improved interaction.
- Case studies: the production of case studies were an important a fundamental resource both to learn about the interface between research and policy in the regions and to raise awareness of its importance.
- The handbooks on policy influence and monitoring and evaluation developed in Latin America were successful resources which helped promote the network and encouraged people's engagement in on line activities.

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In other areas, an absence of some of these factors led to high transaction costs and unmitigated risks in members engaging in collaborative working. Some stewards were not necessarily equipped with the skills to facilitate communities. In some instances, as communicated by RAPID staff, stewards found it difficult to say 'no' to suggestions made by RAPID, with such sentiments on occasion instead communicated through more unconventional means such as non-compliance and delay – a situation RAPID tended to tolerate in a bid to highlight the value it placed on partnership and participation. With regards to inter-steward interaction, this tended to be weak with communication usually taking place bilaterally between the ebpdn coordinator and the stewards (either individually or collectively). Box 2 below, for instance, highlights some of the challenges encountered in developing the African sub-community of the ebpdn.

3.4 Resources

As we have alluded to above, networks are highly resource intensive, involving high transaction costs and risks for members as a result of working collaboratively, and much administrative work for the 'supporting entity' and facilitators (Hearn and Mendizabal, 2011). The ebpdn has been no exception. Online tools – such as the Drupal platform (initially) and more recently the ECS platform (used globally and regionally) – have helped. The ECS platform (being used by other ODI programmes) was purchased (at the cost of £6000 a year) for its advantages over the old site: It is more attractive, user friendly, email based with members not needing to visit the website unless accessing previous posts or existing resources; and has a better system for storing and tagging resources. However, a migration of all the resources from the Drupal to the ECS site has only recently taken place due to both technical problems and discontinuity in staffing at RAPID. As such ECS and Drupal platforms were both used at the same time (the former to manage discussions and the latter to store resources), which might have caused some confusion amongst users. And despite it being around for many years, Google analytics has still not been employed to generate user data for the site.

In any case, there is only so much an online tool can do on its own. The availability of financial resources has thus been crucial to pay for a global facilitator and regional stewards to help connect members, ideas and activities and overcome transaction costs to create new knowledge and stimulate learning. As we have discussed above, the global facilitator has done a lot of work including moderating posts, sending emails out to the membership, some of which have tried to stimulate discussion while others have summarised key points and themes made during discussions. For instance, eight discussions have been summarised and shared with members between August 2011 and May 2012.

In the early years, the DFID PPA enabled RAPID to use funds flexibly on the development of ebpdn. Regional stewards received funding for network facilitation and the production of outputs such as workshops and publications (as noted earlier). However, the monitoring framework DFID used to manage the PPA with ODI changed in 2009, resulting in less funding for RAPID to work with the ebpdn and ceased altogether by 2011.

Maintaining the level of member-to-member interaction necessary to ensure an exchange of capacity and approaches has been difficult (in the absence of significant funding).

Nevertheless, in some regions (such as South Asia and Latin America), significant match funding was provided by Global Development Network, to continue delivering functions. However, the GDN has, in a bid to improve its own visibility, pulled out of funding work under the banner of 'ebpdn' with a view to funding work directly – but it is unclear whether this impacts on the value created. In other regions, once DFID funding dried up, interest amongst stewards unsurprisingly waned (further). RAPID did however find funding to continue facilitating the global online platform.

Securing resources to fund networks and communities (both online and offline) in this sector is becoming increasingly difficult. IDS was said to have found it difficult to secure further funding for the KBF. CommsConsult maintains its Research to Action site for free, as DFID are reluctant to provide further funding. The evidence-informed policymaking field is much more competitive than it was a decade ago. A difficult economic environment in Europe and North America has seen donors rationalise their programmes and put more emphasis on impact and value for money, of their research funding. At the same time, issues such as policy dialogue, research communication, public engagement and knowledge brokering have gained significant prominence, with many more actors in addition to ODI active in the EBP sector. Moreover, a number of other arguably more active forums have been launched enabling a wide range of stakeholders to share resources and provide comment.

On the other hand, other ODI networks working in the humanitarian sector are doing much better. For instance, HPN receives a substantial share of HPG's integrated research programme budget (where funding from a number of donors is pooled together), whilst ALNAP (which as we have highlighted earlier is a very different sort of network, with just under half of its 75 members paying between £5,000 and £10,000) receives a significant proportion of its funding from USAID (as well as its own members). This might imply that:

- issue based networks are more likely to secure resources than 'process based' networks such as ebpdn
- HPN and ALNAP have been particularly adept at securing resources for network activities
- ODI's prominent role (HPG run HPN, while ODI hosts ALNAP) might give the networks added credibility
- they have been better able to illustrate the value of the network to its donors (and members).

3.5 The role of ODI and RAPID

RAPID and its staff have played an extensive role in the work of the ebpdn. As well as channelling DFID funds to ebpdn members for the production of specific outputs, RAPID also employed Cecilia Oppenheim to manage the network. She administered funds, organised annual meetings, facilitated the global online platform and interacted with stewards through email and telephone. While Cecilia Oppenheim's work focussed on management and administration, RAPID assigned different members of staff to work with regional stewards to help them with the more programmatic element.

So, Enrique Mendizabal, the head of the RAPID programme (and originally from Peru) allied with CIPPEC and CIES, Fletcher Tembo (from Malawi) was assigned to work with ESRF, while Arnaldo Pellini (who has spent a considerable part of his life in Southeast Asia) was tasked with working with CEPA in South Asia and both CAF and SMERU in Southeast Asia. Stewards thus had to 'answer to' Cecilia Oppenheim as well as their RAPID 'mentor' – creating additional transaction costs. However, when asked about this specifically during the review of the DFID PPA in 2010, none of the stewards had any problems with this; they thought it worked well and knew who to talk to about what.

Mendizabal et al (2011) suggests that the ebpdn was a place where all core members, including ODI, would be equal. Moreover, RAPID had hoped that its membership of the network would enable other ODI programmes to collaborate with ebpdn members through projects that would help members to learn more about each other. However, in practice both of these proved difficult. RAPID was both a member of the network and budget holder for most ebpdn activities, with broad decisions about funding usually signed off by programme heads - first John Young and then Enrique Mendizabal.

Furthermore, ODI's business model meant that it was generally forced to take a contractual approach in its interactions with members. RAPID was often lenient with ebpdn members in relation to deadlines and milestones for specific pieces of work and sought concessions internally to improve relations. For instance RAPID, for a while, tried to persuade ODI's Finance department to issue a much shorter contract than other programmes (for instance taking out clauses which obliged contractors to hand over their financial accounts to ODI on request), which was ultimately unsuccessful. But RAPID, like other ODI programmes, was often under pressure to deliver outputs to donors (in this case DFID) and to disburse allotted budgets before the end of successive financial years, all of which structured dialogue between members and RAPID staff.

With regards to enabling collaboration between other ODI programmes and ebpdn members, as Mendizabal et al. (2011) suggests, RAPID failed to recognise how difficult it is to work across an organisation like ODI (where each programme has different markets). This meant that the initial contacts made with ebpdn stewards rarely led to collaboration with other ODI programmes with whom they may have had more in common (exceptions include the Forum on the Future of Aid which was managed out of ODI's Centre for Aid and Public Expenditure). Or if they did, ebpdn members were sub-contracted to produce discreet pieces of work. The discourse of partnership promoted by RAPID was not necessarily prioritised by others (as understandably their priorities were to deliver project outputs, not to develop partnerships).

Hence, genuine collaboration (or partnership) failed to take place where RAPID was funding other members. RAPID has always known that, but they felt there were few alternatives in the absence of ebpdn members willing to invest their own funds or mobilise funds from their own funders – unless DFID (or other donors) granted money directly to ebpdn members. However, funding for 'evidence informed policymaking' research and engagement activities were not easily mobilised, especially by (smaller) ebpdn stewarding organisations – especially in a context where donors are rationalising their programmes and reducing transaction costs.

As Mendizabal et al. (2011) suggests the work of RAPID and that of the ebpdn has been closely intertwined with the charge made that RAPID used ebpdn for its own purposes. A number of trends/examples reflect this. First, although ebpdn has rarely been used to identify organisations that were previously unknown to RAPID staff, stewards and members, by working with members through research and engagement (under the banner of ebpdn and funded by the DFID PPA), RAPID was able to learn more about members, their strengths and weaknesses – intelligence which was often passed onto other ODI programmes as they sought to seek funding for and implement research projects.

Second, with networks a buzzword in the early to mid-2000s, RAPID often mentioned its management of the ebpdn in funding bids - to point out they already had an existing network and did not have to build one from scratch. Some interviewees went further to suggest that ebpdn was used by RAPID to, in the words of one, 'sweep up' funding from donors who emphasised the role of Southern organisations.

Third, RAPID wanted to develop interest and capacity among organisations in developing countries to undertake work similar to theirs - essentially wanting to develop stewarding organisations into 'regional capacity hubs' for promoting evidence informed policy.

However, in most cases, this was not an objective shared by stewards. Fourth, some outputs with significant contributions from ebpdn members (under the ebpdn 'banner') were packaged and presented as ODI research products rather than co-branded or under ebpdn's own branding (see Jones et al, 2009 and Pellini et al, 2012). And fifth, ODI and RAPID used the ebpdn online platform as a mechanism through which to disseminate its research and acquire feedback.

Although all members are welcome to use a network for their own purposes, Hearn and Mendizabal (2011) suggest that supporting entities/facilitators should attempt to ensure that priorities of individual members contribute towards the network's priorities as a whole (as opposed to the priorities of individual members). However, the enmeshed nature of RAPID and ebpdn created confusion within RAPID and significant tensions amongst some of the network's stewards from a relatively early stage. During the life of the ebpdn, stewards complained that they felt 'used' in working with ODI, especially in work with other ODI programmes, where they were asked to 'fill in text boxes' rather than collaborating in research. Mendizabal (2011) suggested that many (ebpdn members, RAPID staff, ODI programmes and donors) subsequently wondered whether ebpdn was RAPID's network. And as we have discussed above, the lack of formal rules did not help.

The relationship between RAPID and ebpdn is not far away from the relationship between HPG and HPN where boundaries between the programme and the network have been unclear partly because HPN is funded by HPG. However, HPN was never set up to be a collective entity, but as an initiative providing free goods for humanitarian practitioners that was owned by HPG. There are also some distinguishing features between the two. HPG is said to be more policy focused while HPN has to be more relevant to its members who are more concerned with the 'nuts and bolts' of humanitarian practice. Moreover, HPN tends to publish work and knowledge developed/mobilised by its members (some of whom are HPG staff) and is rarely used to disseminate HPG research products. Although there is some rivalry between HPG and HPN, HPN uses HPG expertise to support the network (in the development of outputs for instance) while HPG sees HPN as a connection to humanitarian practitioners enabling them to learn about what issues are of most relevance to them.

4 Summary and suggestions

Returning to the key research questions set out at the start, here we provide an overview of the network's functions (including the value produced), its form (i.e. how it is structured) and set out the implications for the ebpdn's future.

4.1 The value produced by ebpdn

4.1.1 Managing knowledge

The ebpdn has provided members with up-to-date knowledge and information in the field of evidence informed policy – including the latest articles, news, events and experiences of others, all of which were rated highly. However, there are several other sites such as Research to Action and Onthinktanks which are increasingly providing this function. Where ebpdn seems to add value is its platform which enables members to engage in interactive email based conversations. Although the KBF also has this function, ebpdn has a broader scope (as the role of knowledge brokers is only one component within the wider landscape of evidence informed policymaking) and has more members (2048 compared to 545). Partly due to the stimulus provided by certain members of the ebpdn (including the facilitator), the number of ad hoc online discussions on a range of topics has increased considerably over the last 18 months - albeit with participants mainly from the 'North'.

4.1.2 Mobilising knowledge and capacity

The initial core group of ebpdn members held workshops and other activities to develop capacities in the field of evidence-informed policy and produce a range of written resources which served to highlight the complexity of the knowledge-policy interface and record good practice in relation to promoting the use of knowledge and information. As a result, core members were able to add to their suite of approaches to influencing policy. Ebpdn activities were mostly contracted out by RAPID to individuals to produce for a fee. With regards to the research, some individuals were found to have limited capacity. At the same time, authors received limited feedback and review. And once resources were produced or workshops were undertaken, summaries were rarely posted on the online platform with the broader ebpdn membership seldom engaged in any sort of discussion about key findings or content. As such these activities were restricted to a relatively small group of people and were few and far between. And the activities ceased once funding from DFID ended.

4.1.3 Building communities

In building communities, at the global level RAPID convened a number of annual face-to-face meetings to enable regional stewards to share experiences and lessons from facilitating their respective communities and plan ahead. At the regional level, a few events were held to bring together other members. The infrequent nature of such meetings made building bonds and trust between members difficult which may have resulted initially in relatively little online engagement between members and amongst stewards.

4.1.4 Highlighting the importance of evidence informed policymaking and pushing it up the agenda

There are some perceptions that the ebpdn made a contribution to the increased prominence of evidence informed policy, particularly in Latin America in recent years. However, this did not take place through explicit advocacy related activities, but indirectly through the delivery of the other functions or activities (as above). Although membership of the ebpdn cannot necessarily be taken as a proxy for wider interest in the sector, at the time of writing, it had nonetheless increased by just under 40% during the last year alone and stood at just over 2000.

4.2 How ebpdn was structured

4.2.1 Reduction in core members but increasing online membership

It was difficult to maintain the interest of the initial core group of organisations approached by RAPID. As such this core group dwindled from 25 to 6 organisations over the course of the first few years of the ebpdn. It was these six organisations who were largely responsible for much of the resource mobilisation and community building functions above. However, in recent years, online membership of ebpdn has increased relatively quickly, perhaps due to the increased number of discussion related posts and work done by the facilitator to increase access to useful material. The ebpdn membership is more than that of the KBF, Research2Action and Onthinktanks. And rather surprisingly membership is fairly evenly split between different regions: the Forum on the Future of Aid – an online platform of Southern researchers and practitioners interested in using research to influence global aid policy – was made up predominantly of Northern based members.

4.2.2 Uneven effectiveness of regional stewards

Despite the availability of at least some funding from ODI for all stewards, the level of activity amongst regional members was highly uneven. Of the four regional communities, Latin America appeared the most active both on and off-line. Reasons for this included a common language, strong infrastructure, similarities in political systems and shared histories across the region, a competitive funding environment, entrepreneurial leadership (of certain organisations), strong personal ties to RAPID staff and match funding enabling stewards to do a lot more than it could with just DFID funding. In other areas, an absence of some of these factors led to high transaction costs and unmitigated risks in members engaging in collaborative working. Some stewards were not necessarily equipped with the skills to facilitate communities. In some instances, stewards found it difficult to say 'no' to perhaps unrealistic suggestions made by RAPID.

4.2.3 Informal governance arrangements

The ebpdn has operated largely on an informal basis. As a result, it was never made explicit whether the network was a collective initiative or one that was RAPID's. Instead of a board or secretariat, RAPID agreed to work together with the six regional stewards to make decisions. Nevertheless, although key ebpdn activities were in principle agreed amongst regional stewards and/or between regional stewards and RAPID, key informants suggested that decision-making was in effect centralised within the RAPID team. The lack of formal rules (as discussed above) meant that approaches were largely based on a range of factors including organisational pressures (to do with ODI's systems), academic pressures (to publish ODI products) and personality (whether someone was inclined to 'collaborate' or 'contract').

4.2.4 Difficult funding environment

ODI has agreed to invest in the ECS platform for at least the next two years. It is more attractive, user friendly, email based and has a better system for storing and tagging resources. Nevertheless, having money to pay for a global facilitator and regional stewards to help connect members, ideas and activities and overcome transaction costs to create new knowledge and stimulate learning has been crucial – something which has been clearly

reflected in the increased membership, traffic and postings in recent years. Once the current funding from AusAID ceases, it is difficult to identify where further funding can be sought from. Securing resources to fund networks and communities exclusively (both online and offline) in this sector is becoming increasingly difficult especially now that the funding environment is more competitive.

4.2.5 Ebpdn is effectively RAPID's network

RAPID's role as both funder and facilitator meant that ebpdn was in-effect RAPID's network, with value largely created through a contractual approach, which in turn created a number of problems frequently seen in donor-recipient relationships. In trying to promote collaboration between ebpdn members and other ODI programmes, RAPID failed to recognise how difficult it is to work across an organisation like ODI. This meant that the initial contacts made with ebpdn stewards rarely led to collaboration with other ODI programmes, and if they did it was often as a sub-contractor to produce text boxes in larger research studies. However, there were few alternatives unless ebpdn members invested their own funds or mobilised funds directly from DFID or other funders – something they were unlikely to do.

Ebpdn activity has enabled RAPID to learn more about some of the core members and steward organisations. Networks are usually seen as an asset and mention of the ebpdn has usually strengthened RAPID funding bids. RAPID team members have often used inputs from ebpdn members to enhance ODI research products, while the ebpdn online platform has often been used by RAPID staff as mechanism through which to disseminate its research and acquire feedback.

4.3 Suggestions for the future of ebpdn

Here we provide a number of suggestions (made by the authors) for ODI's RAPID programme and ebpdn stewards to consider further.

4.3.1 Consider RAPID formally remaining a major stakeholder in the ebpdn

RAPID could consider working with the stewards to transform the ebpdn as it is now, into something more of a formal network, by, for example, setting up a joint secretariat. It could avoid any future conflict of interest (whereby ODI is both funder and host) by having the network secretariat based in say CEPA or CIPPEC who both have capacity and interest in facilitating communities while they charge lower fee rates than do ODI staff. RAPID staff meanwhile could play a useful role in providing (free) advice to the secretariat as well as continuing to undertake its role as a member (albeit a powerful one) of the ebpdn. Inputs could include support to draw up formal rules to determine how it is governed.

However, this option would require considerable time and money. And as we have seen, seeking commitment from organisations on what is usually a peripheral topic in the absence of steady funding streams has been notoriously difficult. Moreover, if there was (substantial) money available for ebpdn activity, funders would likely want ODI to 'step up' to manage any funds secured given its perceived superior financial management systems. Given its experience in facilitating communities (such as the OMLC, HPN and REDDnet), ODI may be better placed to host the network, while it has made a commitment to invest in the ECS platform. The experiences of the last six years may suggest that a genuine collectively owned ebpdn really may never be possible. As a result, we suggest that this is undesirable and that instead RAPID should take explicit ownership of the network (something which many argue has been implicit over the years) and continue to host ebpdn in-house but ensure that it is a public good and not just a RAPID project to sustain the interest of its members.

4.3.2 Set out guidelines on how RAPID works with ebpdn

We suggest that RAPID engage in a conversation internally to set out how it engages with ebpdn. This would provide guidance on the extent to which ebpdn is used to advance RAPID interests (including knowledge production and dissemination) and how much it is used to further the interests of ebpdn members. HPN provides a useful model for an ODI owned network which focuses on publishing research and reflections from its members, limits the publishing of HPG resources and provides HPG with an understanding of the current state of affairs in relation to humanitarian practice.

4.3.3 Focus on delivering a knowledge management function

Given the limited resources available, the ebpdn should focus on delivering a knowledge management function that helps to stimulate learning, prevents information overload, identifies and shares details of important people, funding notices, events as well as facts and stories. Given that other platforms such as Research to Action and Onthinktanks are focussing on being the 'go to' website for useful resources in the area of research communication and use, and the added value of the ECS platform which enables members to engage in interactive online discussions, emphasis should be placed on sharing resources in relatively new areas such as the 'demand side', 'deliberative engagement' and 'transdisciplinarity' as well as stimulating, moderating and summarising discussions amongst members on a range of topics. In fact ebpdn discussions could play an important role in critiquing and commenting on major studies, reports and strategies that are published by different actors within the evidence informed policy sector. The discussion surrounding the IDS-3IE-NORAD study on the impact of policy briefs is a good example of this.

4.3.4 Consider subsidising a member of the RAPID team to facilitate the global platform

Ultimately a forum or community is what its members want it to be. With an effective platform, members have the tools to collaborate, discuss, raise questions, post resources, and more if they wish to. However, as we have discussed, facilitation can add value by helping to connect people, events, information and ideas that may not otherwise happen due to a variety of transaction costs. Discussions with stewards have highlighted their preference for continued facilitation of the global ebpdn platform (if not the regional ones). A part-time facilitator working 1-2 days a week could: seek new members; search for and share existing knowledge; send out regular (fortnightly) electronic bulletins; seek out comment and opinion from members of the community or from 'guest contributors' and; organise (i.e. by asking users), moderate, summarise and disseminate discussions on specific issues. However securing funding for a facilitator may prove difficult. In an event where funding cannot be secured, RAPID could either think about charging ODI programmes for use of the ECS platform, proceeds from which could be used to cover the costs of a part time facilitator, or it could subsidise one day a week of a mid-ranking staff member (or associate/contractor if suitable).

4.3.5 Find ways of keeping regional platforms alive without having to install a facilitator

To ensure regional platforms can continue to function in the absence of a facilitator (voluntary or not) RAPID should ensure that there are ways in which members can have their posts uploaded to the site without at the same time allowing spam to be posted.

4.3.6 Work closely with coordinators of other platforms to improve the generation of content

RAPID should initiate discussions with coordinators of other similar initiatives to ebpdn such as the KBF and Research to Action, as well as coordinators of other ODI owned/hosted networks working on other issues, perhaps meeting with them periodically to identify possible synergies. This might lead to better participation and more coordinated and pre-planned online discussions, posting stories or opinions on each other's' sites – in the way that Enrique Mendizabal from Onthinktanks regularly republishes posts, albeit in

summary on the ebpdn community. Since ebpdn has more members than other platforms working on the same issues from across different regions and across different institutions, the wide reach and diversity of membership should be used to encourage people to make a contribution to network activity.

4.3.7 Make linkages to specific policy areas and issue-based networks
Given that some ebpdn members may find it difficult to engage with 'evidence-informed policy' in the absence a specific policy area, RAPID could consider learning more about the specific areas that its members work in, which could improve the relevance of the content that it generates. Additionally this could help RAPID to identify specific issue-based networks that it could link up with. Networks could include those run out of or hosted by ODI such as HPN, ALNAP and REDD-net or others such as EVIPNET amongst others. This would help ensure more appropriate content including discussions that might be rooted in specific issues.

4.3.8 Understand and monitor users' perceptions of the ebpdn and the usage of the online platform
We suggest that periodic surveys take place, similar to the one undertaken during this review to understand and monitor the perceptions of users of the ebpdn. And finally, despite six years of experience with the site, we have little or no data on user activity (apart from the respondents to the recent online survey). Although the re-launched ECS platform is not able to support Google Analytics, it does have the ability to provide email statistics and download data. Such data should be used to demonstrate impact. And with RAPID explicitly responsible for the network, it will be in a better position to make use of such management information for learning purposes.

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Appendix 1: questions from on-line Survey

What year did you join the network?

In what ways do you engage with the network? (Select all that apply)

Exchanging opinions on line
Sharing your lessons on line
Sharing your research on line
Sharing resources online
Just read what gets posted
Carrying out joint projects
Attending events

What value does being a member of ebpdn bring you? (Select all that apply)

I receive support for my own work from other members
I receive knowledge related to evidence based policy that I could not get anywhere else
I get opportunities to collaborate with other members
I meet and get to know other members with similar interests outside my own organisation
I can access a range of resources (e.g. handbooks, guides, videos, presentations, papers on topics related to policy influence, M&E, research communications, etc.)
I stay informed of relevant news and events
I learn from my peers about their experiences in using evidence to influence policies
I am able to participate in face to face meetings, workshops or conferences
I further my own professional development or status
My skills and abilities in using evidence for policy influence have increased
I don't receive any value

How would you qualify the following aspects of the network?

Diversity of actors involved
Quality of its members work
Helping you to influence policy in your country
Debates
Ability to influence broad debates on the use of evidence in policy regionally/globally
Resources

How often do you access the ebpdn website?

Daily
Weekly
Every two weeks
Monthly
Every two months
Less than once every two months

Never

How would you qualify the following sections of the ebpdn website in terms of usefulness?
Library
Compilations of discussions
Calendar
Members
Announcements

What other sources do you visit regularly for information about evidence based policy?
Please name the main three.

Your country

What type of organisation are you affiliated with?
Independent Think Tank/Policy Research Institute
Government Think Tank/Policy Research Institute
University research centre
Research consultancy
Civil society organisation (including NGO and community based organisation)
Political party
Government
International organisation (including bilateral, multilateral, foundation, international NGO)
Private sector
I'm and independent researcher

Your name and e-mail if you don't mind us contacting you for follow up

Appendix 2: Interview guide

4.3.9 For Stewards:

Background, motivation and role

1. Why have you participated in the first CSPP meeting organised by ODI in London in 2005? What were your objectives for that meeting?

2. Can you tell me why and how was the network set up and what were its objectives?

3. What were your objectives and motivations to participate? Were your objectives aligned to the other partners involved? And to ODI's?

4. What was the role of the network when it was set up? Has it changed over the years?

   Functions of the network

5. What were the activities of the network? Have they changed over time?

   Setting up regional networks and form

6. What was the rationale behind establishing regional networks?

7. What was the main objective to set up a network in your region? Were these objectives met? Why?

8. What were the main obstacles that hindered the development of the network and what were the main factors that facilitated its development? (Both at global and regional level)

9. What was your responsibility as a steward?

10. Who has defined your role and that of the other members?

11. What kind of decisions have you had to make? How are decisions made within the network?

12. Was there a strong and clear horizon for the network? Has ODI helped you in complying with the objectives? Have you received the needed support to develop the regional network?

13. Did you have the necessary resources to implement the network activities and comply with its requirements?

14. Do you think the network is self-sustainable? Up to what point is it effectively a collection of projects, either done individually or collaboratively? In terms of creating value for its members, does it matter which it is and if so, why does it matter?

Regional-linkages

15. Since the network was set up, have you interacted with other regional networks? How? When?

Value creation and effects on wider environment

16. How has ebpdn interacted with the wider ebp community and environment? What factors have influenced it and what connections/contributions has the network made to wider debates on ebp?

17. Do you think the network helped the region in terms of acknowledging the importance of the use of evidence in policymaking? Has the network helped develop the region in any other way?

18. What value has the ebpdn created for your organisation?

19. What have been the benefits from involvement in the network? Has this affected the activities that the network has undertaken? And how it has been organised?

20. To what extent has this value been created through people from the network working together or was it just a matter of individual actions? Why does this matter?

Lessons and recommendations

21. Or how would you change the network to create more value?

22. What might a refreshed ebpdn do? (linked to the one above)

23. How could the network create more value for you in the next 5 years?

24. Would you continue to work with ODI/RAPID? In what capacity?

4.3.10 For RAPID staff
Background, motivation and role

1. Can you tell me why and how was the network set up and what were its objectives?

2. Why was stewardship the model adopted? Can you explain the process you followed to select the core members?

3. Was there a demand from potential users to set up a network? Was it a demand from the donor? Or was it part of RAPID corporate objective?

4. What was the role of the network when it was set up? Has it changed over the years?

5. To what extent was initial activity just collaborative project work rather than network activity?

6. To what extent was the term 'network' used basically as a trendy label to sell ODI's work with southern partners to donors and other supporters? i.e. to what extent was ebpdn a vehicle to sell RAPID's work to donors?

Functions of the network

7. What were the functions of the network? Have they changed over time?

8. What activities has ebpdn done to undertake these functions?

9. What's been RAPID's role in ebpdn's activities?

10. How (if at all) has ebpdn influenced RAPID's work ?

Setting up regional networks and form

11. What was the rationale behind establishing regional networks?

12. Was there a strong and clear horizon for the network? Was this shared among the core group of members?

13. What kind of decisions have you had to make in the development of regional platforms?

14. How are decisions made within the network? Were stewards part of the decision making process? how did they participate?

15. From your point of view, what were the main differences between the regions in terms of development of the network? Why? what worked and what didn't?

16. "RAPID tried to move away from providing ebpdn members with lessons and skills-building to a more realistic, critical and more productive 'sparring partner' relationship. This, however, has not developed evenly across the network" Please elaborate and explain how and why this happened?

17. What resources (financial, human, technical) were required to carry out network activities?Was this enough? How were these defined? Was there joint work between RAPID and the stewards to produce such resources?

18. Was there any opportunity to monitor the progress of the network? What was considered progress? (quantity of members, diversity, number of studies produced or shared online, etc)

19. Do you think the network is sustainable? Up to what point is it effectively a collection of projects, either done individually or collaboratively?

Value creation and effects on wider environment

20. How (if at all) has the network helped actors in the regions? If so, in what way (awareness raising, new connections, access to resources, etc)?

21. What have been the benefits for RAPID from developing the network and being a member of the network (new knowledge, provide legitimacy)?

22. How has ebpdn interacted with the wider ebp community and environment? What connections/contributions has the network made to wider debates on ebp?

23. What external factors have influenced ebpdn's activity and evolution (donor funding priorities, international financial crisis, pressure to show value for money etc)?

Lessons and recommendations

24. Is there a need for ebpdn?

25. What might a refreshed ebpdn do (functions, activities) to create more value in the next 5 years?

26. How can ebpdn be more effectively structured (in terms of members, stewards, regional spaces, etc) to create better value?

27. How can ebpdn be better facilitated to create better value?

28. What minimal resources does ebpdn need for it to function effectively

4.3.11 For donors
1. Was there a particular reason to develop a network? What was it meant to happen?
2. Was there any systematised monitoring of the use of the money that was given to ODI?
3. Do you think ebpdn has influenced the wider community of ebp in any way?
4. What in your opinion a network such as ebpdn should do?

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