

DECI-2 Case study

Mentoring the “Research on Open Education Resources for Development” Project in Evaluation and Research Communication

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Summary of Objective 3: Networking
 - Build a network of OER scholars

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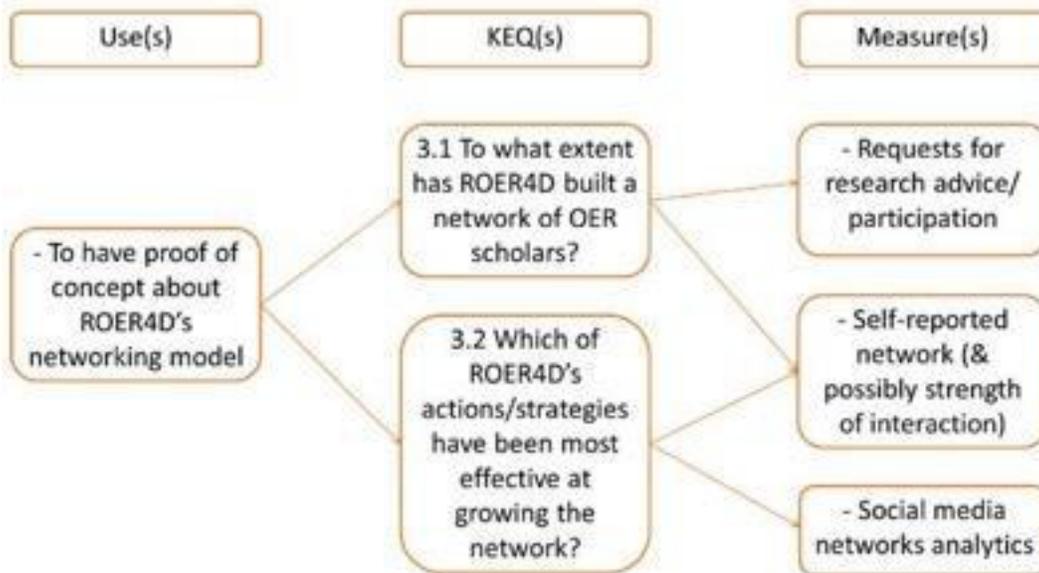


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About the Series

This series of case studies emerged from an action-research project entitled Developing Evaluation and Communication Capacity in Information Society Research ([DECI-2](#)). Its predecessor, Developing Evaluation Capacity in ICTD (DECI-1) project focused only on evaluation mentoring in Asia. The subsequent DECI-2 project collaborated with research networks and grantees supported by IDRC's Information & Networks Program between July 2012 and 2017¹. This particular case summarizes work with Research on Open Education Resources for Development (ROER4D), based in Cape Town, South Africa.

Introduction

Research on Open Education Resources for Development (ROER4D)

Research on Open Education Resources for Development (ROER4D) is based in Cape Town, South Africa. It is implemented by the Centre for Innovation in learning and Teaching (CILT) at the University of Cape Town (UCT) with a staff complement of seven people and an multidisciplinary advisory board from across the globe. It has both financial and technical support from IDRC, DFID and the OSF. The primary objective of this research network is to improve educational policy, practice, and research in developing countries by better understanding the use and impact of Open Educational Resources (OER). The project aims to provide evidence-based research from 18 sub-projects spread over a number of countries in South America, Sub-Saharan Africa and Southeast Asia. Overall, it was guided by the research question:

Whether, how, for whom and under what circumstances can engagement with open educational practices and resources provide equitable access to relevant, high quality, affordable and sustainable education in the Global South? <http://roer4d.org/about-us>²

ROER4D's specific objectives are to³:

1. To build an empirical knowledge base on the adoption and impact of OER in education;

¹ This period included support from DFID's INASSA program.

² The original wording was: "In what ways, for whom and under what circumstances, can the adoption of OER impact upon the increasing demand for accessible, relevant, high-quality and affordable education in the Global South?"

³ The original objectives were: 1. Build an empirical knowledge base on the use and impact of OER focusing on post-secondary education; 2. Develop the capacity of OER researchers; 3. Build a network of OER scholars; 4. Communicate research to inform education policy and practice; and 5. Curate output as open content.

2. To develop the research capacity of OER researchers;
3. To build a network of OER scholars; and
4. To communicate research to inform education policy and practice.
5. To develop a strategic approach towards the curation, publication, and dissemination of research documents and data collected in the project. <http://roer4d.org/about-us>

Developing Evaluation & Communication Capacity in Information Society Research (DECI-2)

Developing Evaluation and Communication Capacity in Information Society Research (DECI-2) is an action research project that has been funded by IDRC's Networked Economies Program⁴ During the DECI-1 phase starting in 2009, the application of Michael Quinn Patton's, Utilization Focused Evaluation (UFE) was tested by supporting five Research Networks in Asia also funded by IDRC all of whom produced evaluation reports. DECI-2 that followed in 2012⁵, broadened this approach to include both UFE and Research Communication (ResCom). This was based on the assumption that the combination of mentoring in evaluation and communication could improve a project's impact.

The specific objectives of DECI-2 are the following:

1. **Meta-level action-research:** To develop and test-drive a combined approach to UFE and ResCom mentoring.
2. **Capacity development for regional consultants:** To build capacity among regional evaluation consultants (*mentors*) in the concepts and practices of both UFE and ResCom.
3. **Capacity development for project partners:** To provide technical assistance to NE project researchers, communications staff and evaluators toward improving their evaluation and ResCom knowledge and skills.
4. **Assistance to project evaluations and communication planning:** To contribute towards the completion of UFE evaluations and communication strategies for designated I&N flagship projects.
5. **Sharing lessons:** To communicate the DECI-2 project findings and training approach to practitioners, researchers and policy makers.

The DECI-2 Team started off by helping the ROER4D team develop their evaluation plans and communication strategies. The initial DECI-2 road map consisted of a sequence of planning steps in evaluation and communication, some of which were clearly complementary. During the preceding DECI-1 project, we had witnessed how utilization-focused evaluation (UFE) works as a decision-making framework within which numerous evaluation approaches can co-exist. The

⁴ Formerly known as Information and Networks (I & N).

⁵ At the time of this writing, DECI 2 is still ongoing

communication steps turned out to be no different as the planning sequence challenged project managers to be clear about their communication purposes, audiences and expected changes.

Approach

Utilization-focused evaluation (UFE)

In simple terms, UFE is an evaluation approach proposed by Patton (2008)⁶ that seeks to generate useful, learning-focussed evaluation. In order to attain such a goal, UFE follows a series of iterative steps from the early stages of a project being evaluated:

- Identification of primary evaluation users;
- Formulation of key evaluation questions (KEQ) in a systematic way
- Identification of relevant/cost-effective data collection tools and analysis processes;
- Facilitation of findings use.

Although Patton subsequently increased the number of UF-E steps to 17 (Patton, 2011)⁷, for the sake of simplicity the DECI-2 team preferred to follow the original 12-steps process (Patton, 2008).

Research Communication (ResCom)

Research Communication (ResCom) refers to the use of communication strategies to support project planning, including networking, engagement and making research findings available, in a timely, relevant and useful way to policymakers and stakeholders. This approach is especially relevant for projects seeking to influence public and institutional policy. Although ResCom did not have a step-by-step process as in the case of UFE, the DECI-2 team proposed a similar 12-step planning process for ResCom. Such a process is based largely on the RAPID framework⁸ and on the common and complementary aspects of ResCom and UFE. In the same way that UFE tries to make evaluation “useful”, ResCom focuses on clarifying a range of communication purposes from the start of a project.

Combining UFE and ResCom

DECI-2’s central assumption for combining UFE and ResCom is that the integration can help programs improve their outcomes.

- They share some common planning steps (situational analysis, stakeholder/audience analysis) that can enable complementary preparatory efforts.

⁶ Patton, M.Q. 2008. *Utilization-focused evaluation*, 4th. ed. Sage.

⁷ Patton, M.Q. 2011. *Essentials of utilization-focused evaluation*. Sage.

⁸ <http://www.odi.org/sites/odi.org.uk/files/odi-assets/events-documents/2764.pdf>

- UFE requires evaluators to be explicit about what to evaluate which necessarily brings attention to the essential purposes of a research project. This in turn prompts communication advisors to clarify the different communication purposes and objectives.
- Both approaches call for researchers to “listen” to what partners, stakeholders and audiences need and what is relevant to them.
- The emphasis on “use” in UFE is comparable with the emphasis on defining communication intent or purposes.
- The emphasis on “facilitating use” in UFE, where the evaluators ensure the evaluation findings get utilized (as opposed to being left to chance) reminds us that communication activities and products need follow-up to heighten their effectiveness.
- The integration of evaluation and communication processes help projects focus on communication objectives and development results that are realistic, traceable and measurable in terms of reach and short-term outcomes.

Despite these complementarities, there are also some **significant differences** that can make it challenging to utilize the UFE – ResCom combination.

- Some projects simply need evaluation or communication support and not both; so the framework should be flexible to welcome such needs;
- Large projects can afford to have staff assigned to each of these fields, however smaller ones may have a single person covering both evaluation and ResCom areas.

ROER4D, however did require support in both evaluation and communication and did have an individual staff member for each category. The project was subsequently mentored jointly by the two regional DECI-2 mentors (Charles Dhewa and Julius Nyangaga) and the co-PIs (Dal Brodhead and Ricardo Ramirez).

Mentoring

We have learned that both UFE and ResCom are understood through practice: experiential learning is at the core⁹. Both require an accompaniment that matches learning moments (this, we have come to understand, is one reason why the impact of workshops is limited). People are often neither ‘ready’ nor able to absorb the information at one time because they lack the knowledge of how to implement the learning in their particular project context. In DECI-2, we have been experimenting with a combination of coaching (that follows an established set of steps associated with the UFE and ResCom frameworks) and with mentoring (that focuses on guiding, adjusting, and trouble-shooting together). We have found that we often do a bit of both. In addition, this supportive process in our project takes place through regional mentors who, in turn, are learning themselves.

⁹ Kolb, D.A. 1984. *Experiential learning: Experience as the source of learning and development*. Prentice-Hall: Englewood Cliffs, NJ.

Our project support to partners in UFE and in research communication is spread over a calendar that is agreed with the project partners. Most of the mentoring takes place via Skype, though we may fund up to two face-to-face meetings to coincide with major design and decision-making moments during the evaluation and communication work plan of each project. Since DECI-2 brings added challenges in terms of combining mentoring in evaluation and communication, we have added more support at the start to review or encourage readiness.

Establishing Readiness: 2012-2013

Undertaking the application of both Utilization-focused Evaluation (UFE) and Research Communication (ResCom) requires a certain level of project readiness. This preparatory readiness step identifies the commitment, ability and interest that a partner needs to bring to the table for the linked evaluation and communication approach to be helpful. Readiness is especially key for DECI-2 support to projects. Our primary role is to mentor and facilitate thinking and application in evaluation & communication, rather than directly implement the processes. The DECI-2 Team has learned that attention to “readiness” in these terms needs to be explored, understood and encouraged. It may take time and, once achieved, may require continuous nurturing.

The DECI-2 Team began its journey with ROER4D by establishing a relationship with the ROER4D team (and the project.) We first met Prof Cheryl Hodgkinson-Williams, ROER4D’s principal investigator, at a gathering of project partners hosted by IDRC’s ‘Networked Economies’ in Rio de Janeiro in December, 2012. We then made a Skype presentation to a ROER4D team gathering in Jakarta in January 2013 while their project document and budget was being finalized. This exercise encouraged the project team to introduce budget allocations to include both evaluation and research communication. We had subsequent exchanges during which we specified the support available from DECI-2 and the resources that ROER4D needed to bring to the table to confirm readiness. Next, in October 2013, we held an introductory meeting with the ROER4D team in Cape Town.

The DECI-2 projects’ duration is longer than that of our partners’. This extended period allows us time and flexibility to encourage readiness and / or to await it. We do not need to rush the start of an action to meet our timeline when a partner is not ready for our support.

We refer to this session (first meeting) as **Step Zero** (out of UFE’s original 12-steps) in that it provides an opportunity to learn about each other’s project, clarifies roles and expectations, and expands on the issue of Readiness - all stipulated in our draft Memorandum of Understanding. At

the October 2013 meeting, we underlined our mentoring role, and differentiated it from the traditional role of external evaluators of a project. We also explained some of the principles behind utilization-focused evaluation and research communication. The ROER4D team identified some tentative evaluation uses which included: reviewing the call for proposal process; analysing the project's overall design and theory of change, and integrating some assessment of the communication activities that were already envisioned.

Not surprisingly, the ROER4D team had its hands full with the launch of its project and had limited capacity to take on the additional evaluation and communication tasks. We suggested a delay in the start of the collaboration until the ROER4D team had recruited staff to be in charge of both items. By early December 2013, two additional staff had been hired. Soon after this, we signed the Memorandum of Understanding, which for DECI-2 was confirmation of a satisfactory level of mutual readiness.

Implementation: 2014-2015

The DECI-2 Team met with the ROER4D team for two days in Cape Town in February 2014 for further familiarization (especially for the new ROER4D evaluation and communication staff members: Mthunzi Nxawe & Sukaina Walji, respectively). At this meeting we reviewed our role as evaluation and communication mentors and described the steps of UFE and ResCom. The meeting was also attended by representatives of IDRC's Networked Economies Program.

ROER4D already had an impressive array of communication activities in place. This prompted us to begin our mentoring by asking the team to summarize these according to communication activities, methods and media. The ResCom exercise was meant to help the program review its underlying strategy. We also summarized progress using the UFE and ResCom checklists as a means of confirming readiness details (such as organizational buy-in, and interest in learning).

Our ResCom checklist notes show that, "The project already has a communication plan, where the most urgent purpose was making ROER4D visible to the outside world." We also made note of the fact that the ROER4D communication person, Sukaina Walji "... (was) ready and (brought) into ROER4D a marketing background. She also knew the subject matter since she has studied Open Education Resources which is the ROER4D domain." As a result of the initial mentoring process, Sukaina agreed to focus her attention on audience research, especially to segment the different stakeholders and consult with them to confirm their media preferences.

We further agreed that the UFE support would be provided at Hub level in Cape Town, where ROER4D was established as research network. The primary intended users (PIUs) were proposed and confirmed: Cheryl Hodgkinson-Williams, Sukaina Walji and Tess Cartmill of ROER4D. Other candidates were Maria Ng (Singapore), Matthew Smith (IDRC), and possibly Patricia Arinto

(Philippines), and members of the Advisory Committee, but they did not stay in this role. In the end the confirmed PIUs were basically the project management team; with Sukaina Walji - communication advisor- and Sarah Goodier – the new evaluator that replaced the initial one - as the drivers of the process.

The following uses were sketched out:

- o To analyze the effectiveness of the communication strategy
- o To analyze the effectiveness of the capacity building strategies
- o To analyze the effectiveness of the networking models

It became evident early on that the program’s system of online communication would be of great support in interaction and sharing of information including data collection and report development (especially the use of Google Docs). During the first quarter of 2014, the ROER4D team produced ResCom and UFE plans that were available on-line (GoogleDocs).

ResCom

Sukaina Walji, the communication contact person, completed a stakeholder analysis (comparing each stakeholder’s level of influence and the extent to which the research would affect them) and verified their media channel preferences. These steps were summarized into a report with an associated Slide Share presentation (October, 2014). The text box below is abstracted from the report, and illustrates some of the high level findings, which indicate how some of the audience research work confirmed or adapted the communication work already in progress.

High-level findings from the audience research

- The ROER4D Website (www.roer4d.org) is seen as important, credible and attractive and at centre of the project's communications. Researchers seem happy to refer others to it.
- Different sub-projects are and plan to use the website for their communications in different ways - some to host their own communications on their own page and others to use their page to make links to their own websites and other communications channels.
- The website is fulfilling its purpose for the first stage of the project "what the project is about".
- Researchers consider that ROER4D should pursue its social media strategy (Twitter, Slide Share and Facebook) as that is where our audiences are.
- Sub-projects feel generally connected to the central hub and feel part of the project. Those who participated in Question Harmonisation (QH) live sessions feel more connected and know what is going on.
- Personal connections especially with Tess Cartmill, the project manager, and with Cheryl Hodgkinson-Williams and Henry Trotter have helped make people feel part of the network.

Among the improvements that this research revealed as indicated in Sukaina Walji's presentation, were the following:

- *Some researchers wanted **more content and sharing** on the website than is currently available e.g. Question Harmonisation process and resources, other resources, sharing of research processes.*
- *There was an appetite for **regular monthly news bulletins** of project level news - at least three researchers suggested a newsletter or email of project roundup independently of each other.*
- ***Social media was not used extensively** by many researchers with a few notable exceptions so there was a need for other ways of alerting our researchers to network news, links, etc.*
- ***Researchers were responsive to the network team** helping with a research communications strategy or feeding into it.*
- *There was a desire for **regular live sessions using Adobe Connect or Hangouts** for other topics and to open these out to outside of the network.*

- **Vula¹⁰ was used/seen more as a repository rather than a communication channel. One researcher felt it is not user friendly.** (Source: Walji, S. 2014. Developing a research communications strategy: Audience analysis findings. Slide 28.)

As the work progressed, the DECI-2 team worked closely with Sukaina to move into the definition of communication purposes and objectives. The mentoring also extended to Sarah Goodier, evaluator, who worked closely with Sukaina and the management team. This process took several iterations with inputs from the wider ROER4D team and DECI-2 mentors. Table 1 summarizes the communication PURPOSES objectives and associated Communication Objectives]:

Table 1 Communication Purposes and Objectives

PURPOSES	COMMUNICATION OBJECTIVES
Visibility	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. To establish ROER4D as a significant OER Research project <i>using the website, Social Media (mainly Twitter & Facebook), SlideShare, publications and external press</i> among global OER networks, organisations and programmes to the extent that the project receives invitations for dialogue and participation from external OER network members. 2. To establish credibility and receptivity (as research develops and findings can be communicated) <i>through physical and online participation at key conferences in 2014-2016</i> with OER researchers and policy makers to the extent that positive feedback is received and the project receives invitations for further dialogue and participation at other events. 3. To engage those in the educational field including publishers, MOOC providers and related research projects globally <i>through the newsletter, website, social media, and face-to-face events</i>, to expand reach of project beyond the immediate partner networks.
Knowledge generation	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. To share our research process openly with both internal researchers in the ROER4D network and external OER researchers, to contribute to the field of ‘open research’, <i>using Website, SlideShare, publications, social media, webinars</i> to the extent that other networks acknowledge and draw on the practices. 2. To share and communicate research findings that relate to use, adoption and impact of OER in the Global South with both internal researchers in ROER4D network and external OER researchers, <i>using the Website, OpenUCT/open repositories, Slideshare, publications, social media, webinars, blog posts and external press to discuss findings</i> to the extent that ROER4D becomes a “reference point” in the OER field (increase # of papers and Slideshare downloads, increase in citations, increase in conference engagements and Twitter traffic).

¹⁰ Vula: The University of Cape Town’s online collaboration and learning portal. <https://vula.uct.ac.za/portal/>

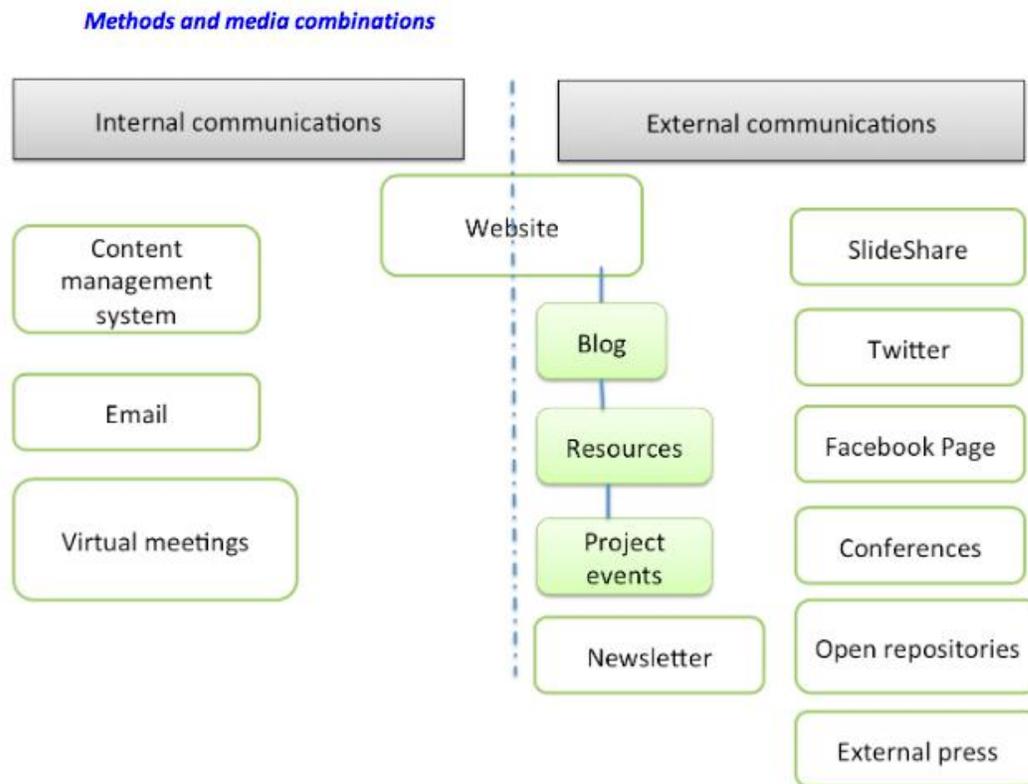
NETWORKING (internal)	1. To build links among researchers within the ROER4D network by sharing information via email announcement, website, newsletter and social media (especially when organizing face to face events and online interactions) to the extent that researchers report feeling part of the ROER4D network (in end-of-event evaluation forms and social network analysis)
RESEARCH CAPACITY BUILDING	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. To share <u>resources</u> with ROER4D researchers using Email announcements, the Website, Newsletter and OpenUCT/open repository to the extent that website, Newsletter, Email announcements and OpenUCT downloads show increased and sustained reach; requests for more information are received; and researchers share relevant new resources email and web links. 2. To support and build <u>research skills</u> of researchers in ROER4D network using live webinars, recorded webinars, presentations available via ROER4D website, workshop sessions to the extent that self-reporting of capacity building via surveys and interviews confirms the extent of skills gained.

The audience analysis work led to a **further refinement of audiences** as follows:

- Policy makers in OER, open education and in Departments of Education in countries and regions in which our sub-projects are situated (specific names and orgs are known within sub-projects).
- “External” OER Researchers and networks based in Global North (e.g. OER Research Hub; David Wiley, Lumen Learning; Open Education Consortium; Creative Commons;)
- “External” OER Researchers and networks based in Global South (e.g. GO-GN network of researchers; OER Asia)
- “External” colleagues working in OER at our participating institutions (OER scholars at UCT, WOU etc.)
- Colleagues working at the host institution(s) - the Centre for Innovation in Learning and Teaching (CILT)
- “Internal” project researchers (lead researchers and researchers)
- “Internal” project mentors and members of the Advisory Group
- Teacher educators in Global South (especially with specific sub-projects involved in Action Research)
- Funders (IDRC, DFID)
- Other funders
- NGOs in open education and open development
- Researchers in Open Development (Katherine Reilly)
- Role players in Open Education (e.g., Open textbook publishers)

The work continued to be adapted over time with attention paid to methods and media that were suited to internal and external communications as shown in Figure 1 below.

Figure 1. Methods & media for the main audience groups



UFE

The ROER4D evaluation contact person (Mthunzi Nxawae) left in August, 2014 and Sarah Goodier took over this role¹¹. The DECI-2 team provided her with background documentation and began bringing her up to speed with the process. The UFE checklist was posted on-line and Sarah kept it updated. She undertook a review of the PIUs and their likely evaluation uses. **Sarah's review of PIUs was integrated with Sukaina's stakeholder analysis table, thus creating a bridge between the evaluation and communication plans.** By September, she had created a slide show summarizing UFE steps 3-5 that was used internally. As with Sukaina's presentation, these slide shows constitute evidence both of the project's progress, and also of the capacity gained by the team. By January 2015, Sarah had produced a UFE Evaluation Design (steps 3-8) using a template provided by DECI-2. The following summarizes the evaluation uses, using REOR4D project objectives [excluding #1] as a guiding structure:

¹¹ When starting the ROER4D evaluation work, Sarah had no experience in UFE. She had participated in informal evaluation work of her own work and performance, as well as that of projects she has worked on. She had a basic knowledge of evaluation as a discipline, and had a research background; and most important, she was keen to learn.

EVALUATION USES (ALIGNED TO ROER4D PROJECT OBJECTIVES):

USE 2:

- a) To analyse the effectiveness of the ROER4D network hub's capacity building strategies.
- b) To help improve the way ROER4D builds research capacity, harmonises questions and shares information about research capacity building best practices.

USE 3: To analyse the effectiveness of ROER4D's networking models.

USE 4: To analyse the effectiveness of ROER4D's communication strategy.

USE 5: To analyse the effectiveness of ROER4D's curation strategy.

Key evaluation questions (KEQ) were generated for each objective and the evaluation report also included data collection tables for each KEQs. (Step 8 in UFE was not undertaken as it was not required.)

KEY EVALUATION QUESTIONS (BASED ON PROJECT OBJECTIVES AND EVALUATION USES):

ROER4D Objective 2: Research capacity building

- 2.1 To what extent have the ROER4D researchers increased their research capacities through ROER4D?
- 2.2 Through which [combination of] methods & media (workshops, research harmonization, mentoring, webinar) has research capacity been enhanced?

ROER4D Objective 3: Networking

- 3.1 To what extent has ROER4D built a network of OER scholars? (number, diversity, linkages, sense of belonging, dependency on hub leadership, dependency on hub funds)
- 3.2 Which of ROER4D actions/strategies have been most effective at growing the network? (PI at conferences, social media, invitations for advice, etc.)

ROER4D Objective 4: Communication

- 4.1 To what extent has the project gained visibility & credibility in the OER community?
- 4.2 To what extent have the research processes and outcomes reached the OER research community?

Objective 5: Curation

- 5.1 To what extent has the project achieved its curation outcomes?
- 5.2 Through which procedures/practices has the project best achieved its curation outcomes?

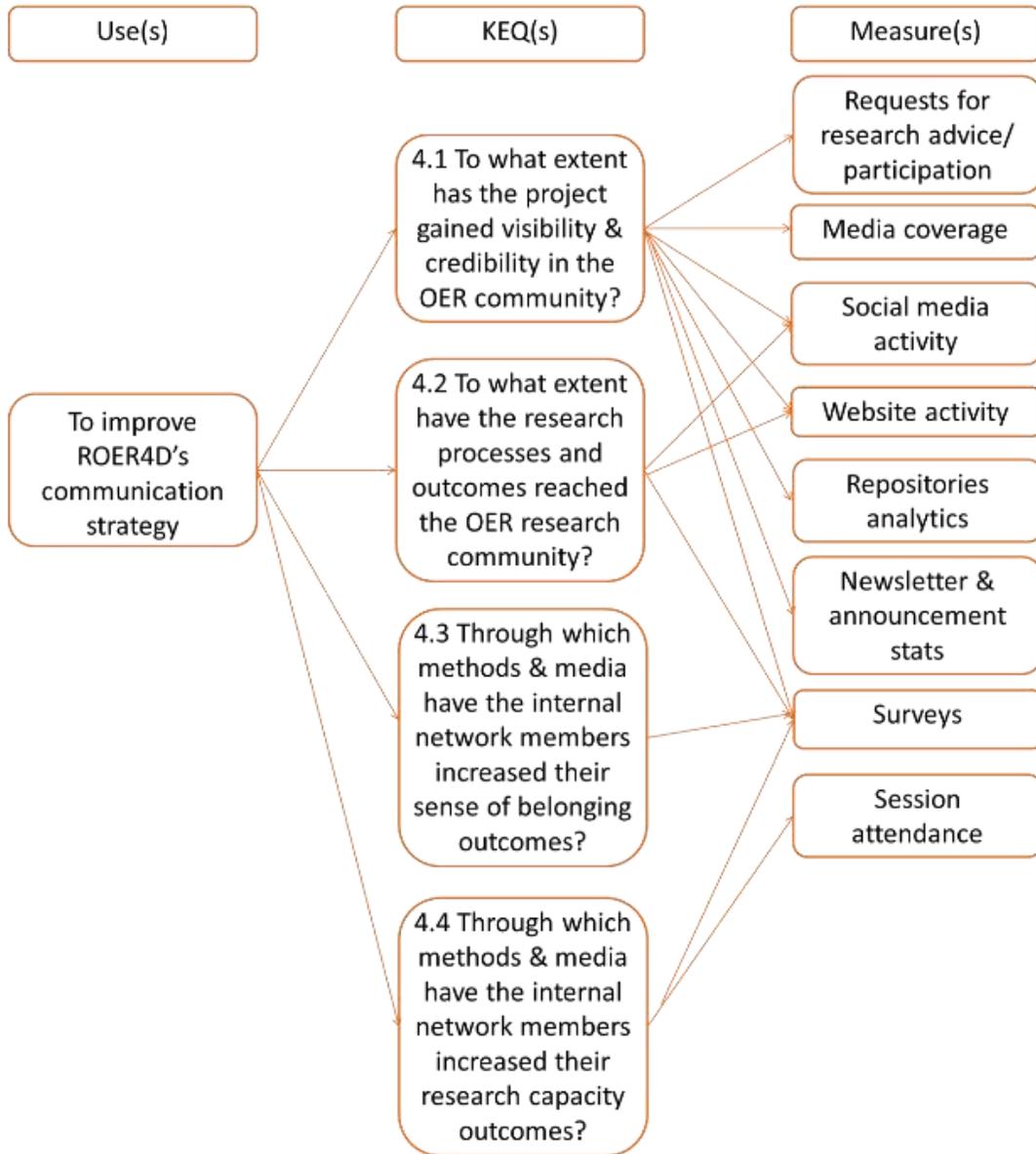
The inclusion of an Evaluation Use 4 provides one example of the integration of UFE with ResCom. At the same time, the evaluation design placed pressure on developing measurable communication objectives (see Figure 2).

Figure 2. Evaluation of the communication strategy

Summary of Objective 4: Communication

- Communicate research to inform education policy and practice

Updated:
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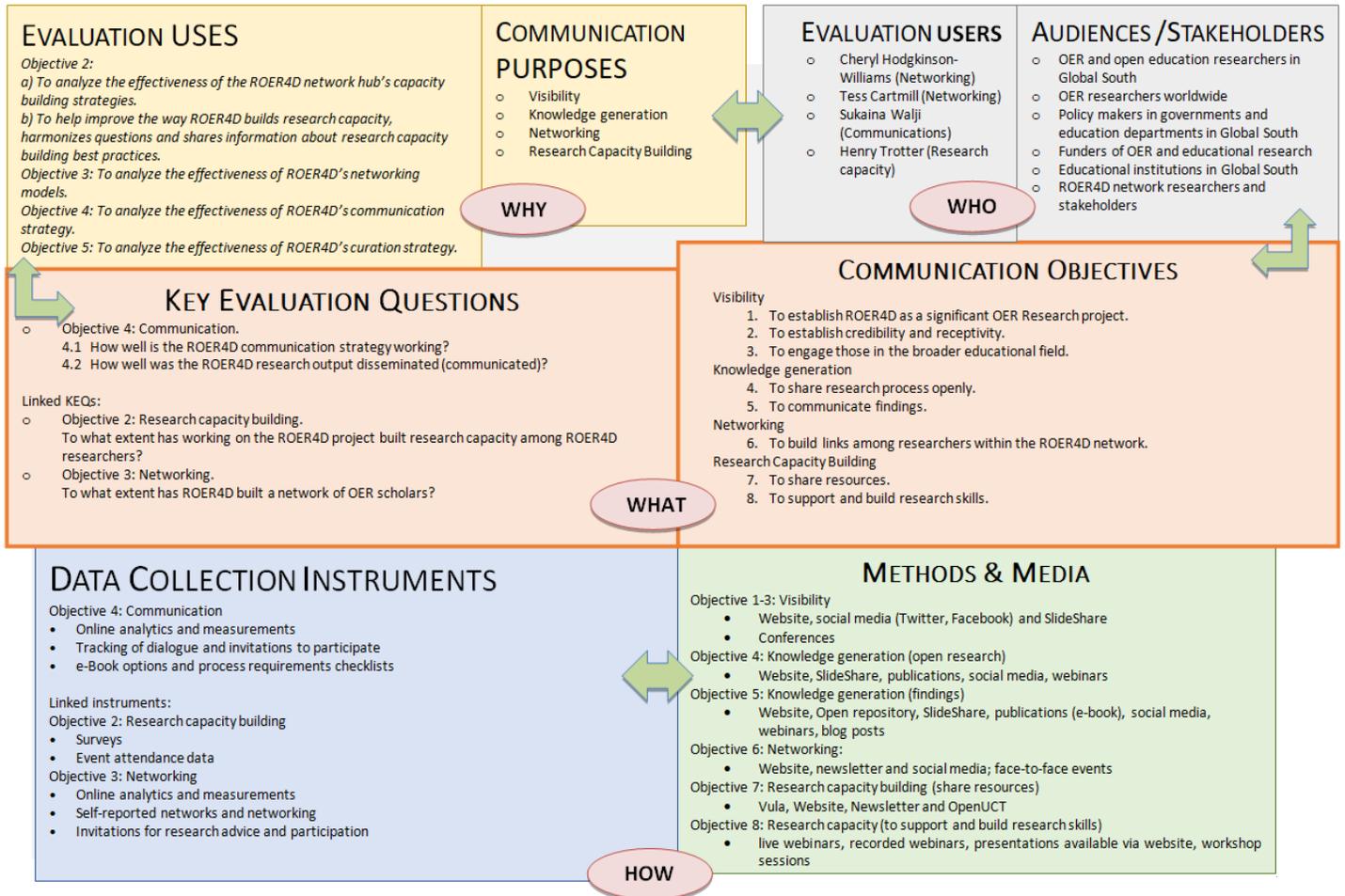
Banff 2015: Updating project emphasis

The DECI-2 process started slowly due to the Project's limited readiness, and then accelerated on the ResCom side in mid-2014, with the UFE component catching up by the end of 2015. In April 2015, the DECI-2 co-PIs met with the ROER4D team in Banff, Alberta, just prior to an Open Education Conference.

During that event and the following Open Education conference, it became clear that the project had achieved some of its original communication objectives. The project name and its leadership were already widely recognized and the grantees were generating findings that would need to be shared. The project focus began to shift away from establishing the project *per se*, to ensuring the findings were disseminated to its key audiences. The group agreed that the ResCom and UFE focus needed to be adapted to this milestone change. In other words, the ResCom component was shifting attention away from VISIBILITY and NETWORKING (internal), to KNOWLEDGE GENERATION and a continuation of RESEARCH CAPACITY DEVELOPMENT.

During this period (mid 2015 on), the DECI-2 team was beginning to integrate ResCom and UFE into a single hybrid tool. In late 2015, we asked the project to summarize the ResCom and UFE plans into a single template and poster summary, and thereby to summarize the updated focus. The ROER4D team sent us several variations of the poster because the format could not accommodate the full scope of their work (see below) Sarah and Sukaina also shared the google-doc tables that were used to keep track of the evaluation and communication plans. For the DECI-2 mentors, this new format was a signal that the process was underway. We also learned that the DECI-2 templates to document the Evaluation Design and the Communication Strategy were not adding value. Instead, the ROER4D team had developed its own multiple formats designed for different audiences and purposes.

Figure 3. The summary poster with the evaluation and communication plans.



Both Sukaina Walji and Sarah Goodier produced summaries of the steps to explain the process internally, and have presented their progress at several conferences¹². This work is evidence of their enhanced evaluation and ResCom capacities. Sukaina's ongoing work with audience analysis (as reported in her January 2016 presentation at Business Communication Conference in South Africa) demonstrates that the project has gained both an evaluation and a community way of thinking.

¹² Several of them are available in the DECI-2 website knowledge base.

Looking back

ROER4D's evaluation efforts have focused on the project objectives of Research Capacity Building, Networking, and Communication. Curation and Dissemination have also been the subject of evaluation to the extent that they have supported the research process and optimised the visibility of project outputs. As revealed in ROER4D's 2nd Technical Report (July 2014 to July 2015) and Evaluation Plan (June – December 2016),¹³ the KEQs for these objectives enabled the project to systematically gather evidence that was used in reporting its achievements.

The EVALUATION FINDINGS that show progress / outcomes from these three actions are as follows:

- 45 unsolicited requests for dialogue, participation and research advice and collaboration received by the ROER4D team from November 2014 to the present;
- ROER4D's PI reports¹⁴ have built an expanded network as a result of conference attendance;
- ROER4D's social media channels¹⁵ show an increase in follows/likes over time and sustained engagement.

Effectiveness of the Communication Strategy

The Communications Strategy has continued to be refined in line with the expanding number of communication activities designed to support the development and trajectory of the ROER4D project. The Strategy has adapted to the Project's shift in focus from preliminary research activities toward full operationalisation within an 'Open Research' ethos. This evolution has compelled the communication strategy to support the Project's Open Research activities and move toward planning for communicating research outputs. From the initial focus on visibility and research capacity building, the communication strategy shifted to give prominence to knowledge generation, curation, as well as dissemination and networking purposes.

Further audience analysis has been undertaken to understand at a finer level, the likely audiences of ROER4D's research beyond the audiences initially established. Audience analysis support has also been extended to ROER4D sub-projects, resulting in some of them translating their websites into local languages (Mongolian and Spanish for example) thus improving their relevance to local audiences.

¹³ A final evaluation plan: Jun - Dec 2016

https://docs.google.com/spreadsheets/d/1HtKqjMMO_zlb2dscr2FxlO1Xf6VzfgHS8Sp51bWqvpM/edit

¹⁴ PI reports have built an expanded network

<https://drive.google.com/open?id=0B0muHoEPL1hXU3dKbWdsWjFsVku>

¹⁵ Relevant reports: <https://docs.google.com/presentation/d/1wQ6PAKq0VwMMS7Lc8OnYQjprz9qBUxnW9n0kZ0yNcTk/edit#slide=id.p4>, "ROER4D Facebook Insights (18 January 2015 - 13 July 2016)"; ROER4D Twitter Activity Presentation (January 2014 - 27 July 2016)

(<https://docs.google.com/presentation/d/1gTfzlkTmPnCqnKcrqvFudmsAqsVETt2WmlGhgX6LPX8/edit#slide=id.p3>);

The ROER4D website¹⁶ remains at the centre of ROER4D’s communications, with the Blog, Project Events and Research and Outputs sections serving supportive but distinct functions. One key development has been a redesign of the ROER4D website, motivated by the Project’s need to improve usability, aid navigation of increased amounts of content, and provide new features in anticipation for when new project findings are released. In addition to page layout and design improvements, two new sections were added: a ROER4D Network Directory¹⁷ and a Gallery¹⁸ to support networking functions and capture key moments in the Project’s evolution. The Blog¹⁹ functions as a conversational space for featuring the work of researchers and other stakeholders working in the Open Education space.

Twitter²⁰ remains the primary social media channel to establish presence, engage in conversation with stakeholders, and drive traffic to ROER4D outputs; while Facebook²¹ remains an important secondary channel to establish relationships with audiences from specific geographic areas. SlideShare²² is used as a hosting platform for presentations by Network Hub researchers, allowing for interesting conference strategies and subsequent tracking. The project continues to produce a weekly announcement which is now shared externally each week on the website blog and social media. The quarterly newsletter has fallen away.

As part of the Communications function being evaluated, the ROER4D Evaluation Advisor collects data and provides evaluation reports that continue to inform how communication activities are functioning and allows informed iteration of the design of communications activities. For example, a report on website metrics informed the redesign of the ROER4D website²³.

The curation and dissemination (C&D) work primarily happened in ROER4D Reach (project extension). Not all of the questions on C&D could be addressed in the timeframe of the evaluation work, as it did not continue into ROER4D Reach. The focus was on the first questions, considering views and downloads for Slideshares, website content, website analytics, and repository analytics (VULA -Internal and OpenUCT -External)²⁴.

¹⁶ <http://roer4d.org>

¹⁷ <http://roer4d.org/directory>

¹⁸ <http://roer4d.org/gallery>

¹⁹ <http://roer4d.org/category/blogarchive>

²⁰ <https://twitter.com/roer4d>

²¹ <https://www.facebook.com/ResearchOERforDevelopment>

²² <http://www.slideshare.net/ROER4D/>

²³ The ROER4D Website Analytics Report (20 February 2014 - 26 July 2016)

(<https://docs.google.com/document/d/1wViFm90KwCLOcB6hZnn-d47sTM0AZ4HqVKF4pjJNKhs/edit#>)

²⁴ This data is available in the Final evaluation report:

https://docs.google.com/document/d/13npWNRHzSavw_SjGHiCwgJFu5qqk1-teJYR93U_01KY/edit# (p. 31-33)

Insights from application of UFE

As part of deploying UFE, the ROER4D Evaluation Advisor has continued to collect data and provide evaluation reports that inform how communication activities are functioning so that they may be adjusted if necessary. For example, the redesign of the ROER4D website was informed by the evaluation. The Evaluation Advisor created a short Process Report on how ROER4D has gone through the process of setting up the collection of the broad baseline of website access analytics, including which pages are most popular and where these hits are coming from, from the date of launch of the website to the present. This document has been shared with the evaluator of the Research ICT Africa (RIA) project.

Working within the iterative nature of Utilization-Focused Evaluation (UFE), the evaluation priorities have continued to shift, with the Evaluation Advisor preparing summary graphics of the evaluation of each ROER4D project objective. In the evaluation of Communication activities, insights into the use of Twitter and how it might help amplify ROER4D's conference activities have been useful. The findings showed that increasing conference engagement is aided by the strategic use of Twitter, and that one area of growth might be to engage more in sustained conversations with stakeholders. This learning continues to inform a more focussed and targeted strategy to amplify ROER4D's visibility, both at conferences and generally in the project, using social media. These results have enabled reflection and ongoing learning about communications in an applied context. The continued use of the MailChimp platform for both the announcements and the newsletters has provided necessary metrics (the analysis of which has been informed by evaluation activity), which has helped to assess their reach and level of engagement.

The interaction between evaluation and dissemination processes informed audience analysis and assisted in the future planning around content dissemination. A Network Hub team member commented that evaluation activity has helped to provide a "much clearer grasp of the effect of our past work and the direction that our future work should go". In this sense, the process has followed a developmental evaluation approach, where findings were used to adjust project activities.

Lessons and conclusions

Given that communication purposes and key evaluation questions have been drawn directly from ROER4D's project objectives, DECI-2 mentorship has helped shape ROER4D's communication and capacity development directions. To a significant extent, DECI-2 also contributed to ROER4D's shift from preliminary research activities to full operationalization within an 'Open Research' ethos. It has also accompanied and supported ROER4D's shift in focus from a focus on Visibility and Research Capacity Building to Knowledge Generation, Dissemination and Networking. The mentorship also assisted in teasing out intended purposes and key audiences for later activities such as curation and dissemination. As a result, ROER4D has been able to become more specific and explicit in its actions, something that was reflected in its final Theory of Change²⁵.

The evaluation of the communication input pointed to the use of Twitter and its amplification of conference activities. The findings demonstrated how strategic use of Twitter aided conference engagement. Another area of improvement revolved around figuring out the extent to which Twitter can sustain conversations with stakeholders. This has led to a more focused and targeted strategy to amplify ROER4D's visibility both at conferences and generally in the project using social media. The evaluation feedback has also revealed that social media use is not prevalent among ROER4D researchers. Therefore, internal communications with ROER4D researchers should focus on other approaches. These results have enabled reflection and ongoing learning about communications in an applied context.

The prime benefit of the evaluation process in terms of curation was the focus it brought on the intended purposes and key audiences that the curation activity was designed to communicate with. This allowed for the originally broad-stroke and generalised policy to become more specific and detailed, and thus more explicit in terms of action items.

The following are some of the emerging lessons:

LESSON 1: It is important to give projects some slack at the start to allow their core work plan to be set in motion.

LESSON 2: Work with what is already in place. Most projects / organizations have a *de facto* communication plan in place.

LESSON 3: Some PIUs will drop off due to time limitations, expect to have some attrition.

LESSON 4: Audience research reveals patterns of media use and channel preferences that can otherwise be assumed.

²⁵ Final ROER4D Evaluation Report (August 2014 – December 2016).

LESSON 5: Audience research gives the project an excuse to engage with the audiences early on.

LESSON 6: Moving from communication PURPOSES to more targeted communication OBJECTIVES is possible when the audience research allows planners to be specific about the how, the what and the type of reach/ outcomes that could be evaluated.

LESSON 7: An on-going audience analysis process means the project has the pulse of its partners, and this in turn allows it to become more strategic in how to engage with each group.

LESSON 8: The integration of UFE and ResCom is possible when teams work in unison, this is a Readiness component that DECI-2 can hope for, but cannot control.

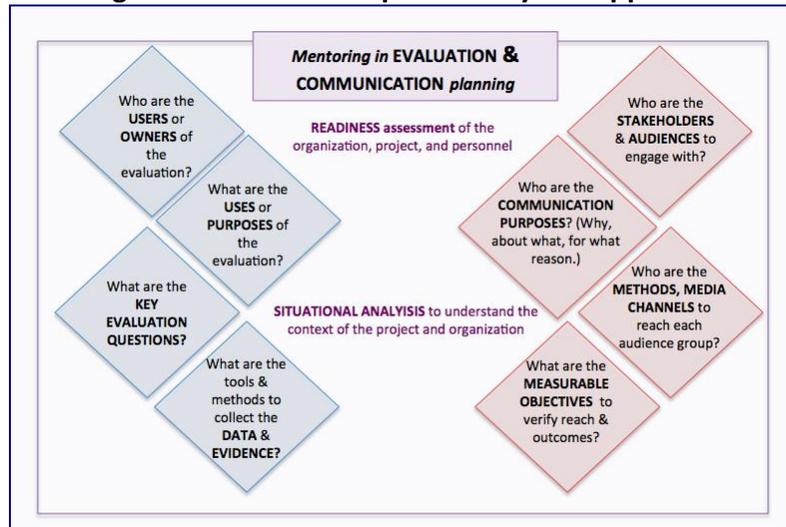
LESSON 9: Evaluation purposes need not mirror all of the project objectives. They will often overlap with ResCom where the reach and some outcomes of the communication strategy merit to be measured.

LESSON 10: UFE and ResCom need to accommodate project changes. This is especially relevant for dynamic, field-building research projects.

LESSON 11: Conference presentations by Sukaina and Sarah highlighting the influence of UFE and Rescom have been some “love to see outcomes”. Only a few project teams have taken on the initiative of reflecting and sharing their learning in UFE and ResCom. These examples of double-loop learning are especially noteworthy as DECI-2 did not initiate these efforts.

The DECI-2 team has learned a great deal from the ROER4D team. During the 2016 Cape Town gathering of the DECI-2 team, we witnessed how effective the ROER4D team was in telling their story, in such a way that it grabbed the interest of the Research ICT Africa team (also based in Cape Town). This led the DECI-2 team to simplify its message and focus on the ‘must-have’ steps in the hybrid approach (see Figure 4).

Figure 4: The basic steps in the hybrid approach



We witnessed how the evaluation and communication portfolios were very much part of the project management team. This allowed for regular updates, an ongoing process of adaptation, and the growth of an internal way of thinking in evaluation and communication terms. This was aided by the status of both the communication advisor and the evaluation contact persons: both were researchers in their own right and regarded as such by the senior team. We witnessed a commitment to sharing within the team that was a contributor to their learning and ability to adapt to change. These aspects of readiness were new to the DECI-2 team, and in our analysis, central to the advanced level of integration that we witnessed. Throughout the process, the ROER4D and DECI-2 teams gained a level of trust that was critical to the collaboration. The relationship meant that ROER4D was invited to critique the process and challenge the DECI-2 team. This process enhanced the DECI-2 research process, and allowed for new insights that would not have been gained in a conventional consulting arrangement.

As mentioned at the beginning, DECI-2 was based on the assumption that the combination of mentoring in evaluation and communication could improve a project's impact. While our own approach to evaluation shies away from seeking direct attribution, this Case Study provides some evidence that the mentoring process was a contributor to ROER4D achieving its outcomes. An external evaluation of DECI-2 confirmed the value of the hybrid approach with ROER4D as a model partner²⁶. The lessons from this experience, coupled with the findings from the external evaluation, shed light on how the hybrid enhances a project team's confidence in adapting and adjusting strategy. The mentoring provided a learning partnership, where the evaluation and communication questions from the mentors challenged the ROER4D team to make assumptions explicit, and review their theory of change. Such a space for learning is necessary for dynamic and exploratory research projects.

²⁶ Hearn, S. & Batchelor, S. 2017. *Evaluation of DECI-2*. Unpublished evaluation report by Gamos, UK for IDRC.