
DECI-4 – RESEARCH ICT AFRICA CASE STUDY

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1. INTRODUCTION

About this case study

This case study is part of a series that describes how five organizations were mentored to take ownership of the design of their evaluation plans and communication strategies. The focus of the case study is on the mentoring process itself. All the organizations are research think tanks working on applied research on information society research, including topics of cyber security, privacy, and digital innovation. The five organizations were part of the IDRC-funded Cyber Policy Centre (CPC) Initiative. The mentoring was provided by an IDRC-supported capacity building project called DECI (Designing Evaluation and Communication for Impact).

The Cyber policy Program

IDRC's Networked Economies (NE) program supported the improvement of governance of cyberspace in the global South over several decades. As part of NE, the Cyber Policy Centre (CPC) Initiative sought to strengthen independent policy research institutions through core support to build institutional capacity and sustainability; mentorship and skills building to strengthen research and policy capacity; and global knowledge networking and policy uptake. The first phase began in 2017 and the second in late 2019-2020 for a total duration of four years. The five CPC projects funded included Research ICT Africa (RIA) in South Africa, the Centre for Intellectual Property and Information Technology Law (CIPIT) in Kenya, Derechos Digitales (DD) in Chile, Centro Latam Digital (CLD) in Mexico, and LIRNEasia in Sri Lanka.

The DECI Project

Since 2009, the [DECI project](#) (Developing Evaluation and Communication Capacity for Impact) has provided IDRC partners with training in evaluation and research communication. DECI has been a component of IDRC's Network Economies' strategy to support capacity building among its partners.

DECI has provided independent mentoring by a team of experienced evaluation and communications advisors. Their support has emphasized just-in-time mentoring to help partners learn the steps of evaluation and communication planning through practice. The DECI Team includes regional (Africa, Asia, and Latin America) mentors and it was made available on a voluntary basis to IDRC partners. Its relationship is formalized through the use of an MOU with each partner which outlines the nature of the responsibilities of both parties.

DECI is separate from IDRC's reporting processes. In addition to its training services, DECI is a research project: a learning lab in capacity building in evaluation and communication. The DECI website includes a searchable [knowledge base](#) with case studies of past experiences. Each mentoring experience is unique, and the DECI team goes to great lengths to adjust to partners' needs and contexts.

Case Study Organization – Research ICT Africa (RIA)

Research ICT Africa (RIA) is an African think tank focused on the development of a sustainable information society and digital economy across the African continent. RIA is based in Cape town, South Africa. Its office was in an old brewery with a view of Table Mountain. RIA's founder and director, Dr. Alison Gillwald, is the glue that holds the ever-fluid research staff together, pushes the research agenda in a rapidly changing research environment, all the while accessing funds to keep the organization moving forward. The RIA website tells us that, "It (RIA) seeks to address digital inequality through providing alternative policy and regulatory strategies and has done so by building the multidisciplinary research capacity needed to inform evidence-based policy and effective regulation." In short, RIA has steadily become a powerhouse for data equality and policy change within the African environment.

The DECI team has been privileged to have a long-standing relationship with RIA stemming from an early (2014) organizational evaluation involving 5 DECI team members. This task was followed by the first Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) with RIA for DECI-2, enabling two DECI team members (Julius Nyangaga and Wendy Quarry) to initiate a mentoring process in Utilization Focused Evaluation (UFE) and Research to Policy Communication. Research to policy communication was the first item on their agenda. RIA had hired a young researcher, Chenai Chair to become the communication focal person. Chenai professed to know very little about communication but was eager to learn and ready to work. She quickly became a mainstay within RIA and worked hard to institutionalize the RIA Communication Strategy. Towards the end of DECI 2, just prior to initiating the UFE process, RIA sped up the need for evaluation initiatives by hiring an external consultant to manage a more conventional evaluation process within the organization. As a result, the DECI team did not focus on evaluation with RIA until the start of the Strengthening Cyber Policy Centre (CPC) project in 2018.

RIA's participation in IDRC's CPC in the Global South initiative, opened the door for DECI to continue the mentorship in Utilization-Focused Evaluation and Research Communication. This was meant to further enhance RIA's communication initiative, as well as its evaluation and adaptive management capacities. In November 2018, Ricardo Ramirez, Julius Nyangaga and Wendy Quarry travelled to Cape town to meet with RIA staff to learn about RIA's focus on the CPC program and discuss modalities for the on-going mentorship process. Research staff clearly expressed their interest in becoming part of the mentoring sessions. Suggestions were made as to how this process might be handled. By this date, RIA had grown from its original staff of 5 or 6 researchers to a large group boasting full and part time staff all wanting to be included in the DECI process. It was at this session that Alison made it clear that she needed to appoint a Research Manager to share some of the management burden. She had hoped that Enrico Calandro, a former PhD student and now full time RIA researcher would take this position. Enrico was too much of a researcher to want that title, so it was decided that Ondine, Alison's full time administrative officer would be included in the DECI mentoring process. We were all concerned about finding ways to 'institutionalize' the UFE/ResCom processes within RIA, particularly in the face of staff turnover.

RIA decided that its research focus during the CPC initiative would be on cybersecurity. Although RIA had been involved with cybersecurity issues since 2014, it did not have a great deal of experience in this digital arena, knew of its importance and assigned this area to their lead researcher, Enrico Calandro.

2. Steps in the Mentoring Process

Readiness and situational analysis

The start of DECI-3 meant that the mentors would read as much as possible on cyber security issues and try to figure out how to manage DECI mentoring sessions with so many people planning to be involved. Earlier the DECI mentors had worked with RIA to try to assess RIA's 'readiness' to embark on this next stage of the mentoring process. RIA, led by Alison, declared itself 'ready,' including the many different staff members, most specifically Chenai Chair, who understood what would be at stake. Unfortunately, the attempt at 'institutionalizing' the process was complicated by challenges of how to work with several of the interested (or tagged) researchers during the mentoring calls. In the beginning, the step of identifying the person responsible for evaluation and the one responsible for communication was omitted. The mentors tried hard to make the full team approach work, but after several hits and misses, they finally concluded that a group call would not work and that it would be necessary to go back to working with two to three key people who would carry the process forward. Meanwhile, the group would try to figure out how to 'institutionalize' the process within the organization by other means. By March, it was clear: Enrico who was heading the research on Cyber Security along with Naila Govan-Vassen (recently hired from industry to be the new research manager) would be responsible for evaluation. Chenai, already familiar with communication, would be responsible for communication strategies and

institutionalizing the communication process. From the beginning, Enrico showed great enthusiasm and caught on to what we were doing quickly. Naila, who was very new to the organization, (whereas Enrico was not) was by necessity, more cautious while she grappled with the new environment.

Confirming users, uses, key Evaluation Questions, audiences, methods, and media

Given that DECI-2 had been building capacity in communication, the mentors began afresh with a focus on Utilization Focused evaluation (UFE) and what It might entail. Quickly, the discussion moved on to selecting the evaluation USERS and USES and deciding on the key evaluation questions. Initially, the USERS included Enrico, Naila and Alison with a possible mention of IDRC, but soon narrowed down to Enrico and from there to Alison. Given RIA's aim to become the 'go to' place in Africa for knowledge on cybersecurity (CS), managing an in-house evaluation on the cybersecurity research outputs, really mattered. Later, Alison intervened and suggested an additional use – assessing the quality of their research. The quality of research was and is extremely important to RIA. This request was separate from, but related to, the need to have their research taken up or 'used' to be considered effective. Thus, the USE around assessing the quality of research was added to the UFE framework. As a result, we ended up with 5 USES which was, in reality a few too many for a small organization at that time

1. To assess RIA's level of credibility as a CS research organization
2. To assess the maturity of the CS capacity building program (network and policy makers and scholars)
3. To assess RIA's internal capacity building program
4. To assess RIA's ability to influence public attitudes and policy around cybersecurity, and
5. To assess RIA's quality of research

Understanding their need for support, RIA partnered with a range of organizations, including the Global Cyber Security Capacity Centre (GCSCC), Oxford University, UK; the Information Systems Department, University of Cape town (UCT) and the Norwegian Institute of International Affairs (NUPI). Eventually this led to the formation of the Cybersecurity Capacity Centre for South Africa (C3SA). In addition and given the importance that RIA takes on getting its research into policy (along with quality research), Enrico was a member of the advisory board of the Global Forum on Cyber Expertise (<https://thegfce.org/>). The board consisted of academics and policy makers (or those close to policy makers). This position gave Enrico the opportunity to both introduce and discuss ideas for new policy decisions around cybersecurity as the research unfolded. As such, Enrico stayed at RIA long enough to develop RIA's position as an organization with insight into cybersecurity issues. In January 2020, he left RIA to become Co-director of the Cybersecurity Capacity Centre (C3SA), at the University of Cape Town. This Centre remains affiliated with RIA.

Evaluation plans, communication strategies vehicles for adaptive management

Up until April of 2019, as the DECI team worked with Enrico, Naila and Chenai, the focus was on UFE and the development of the key evaluation questions rather than communication or research to policy issues. However, after Chenai left RIA in June 2019 to take a job with the World Wide Web, she was eventually replaced by Fazila Farouk, a woman with a communication background and a very strong sense of direction in that field.

Fazila came into RIA, completely reorganized the communication strategic approaches within the organization, and was cautious before she was ready to fully participate in the communication mentoring with the DECI team. In hindsight, it's evident that what Fazila was able to do was set up the 'scaffolding' for an embedded communication strategy: she redid the website; set up a monthly newsletter and introduced a more cohesive social media platform to complement the website. This work was done at breakneck speed, making it difficult for Fazila to attend DECI mentoring sessions.

The relative weakness in the 'research to policy' function of communication gave the mentors an entry point to introduce new ideas into Fazila's repertoire of communication initiatives. Here we were able to suggest a new domain to her communication 'know how' by using the RAPID framework as a point of discussion. One of RAPID's strengths (in our opinion) is that it introduces the idea of relationship building as a communication pathway towards getting research into policy. It also stresses the idea of looking out for 'windows of opportunity' that might offer a moment of time to introduce new research for policy change. From our standpoint, this slower and more interactive approach is needed to augment the more one-way 'messaging' style of communication.

A second breakthrough came when it was suggested that Fazila fill out a template that indicated the different uses/needs for a communication input and go from there to indicate how each use/need would be met. For the first time, the mentors decided to send Fazila an example of such a communication matrix by sending her the communication strategy prepared by Derechos Digitales (DD), another CPC supported project. The DD strategy offered an excellent example of a comprehensive communication strategy with a gradient of outcomes derived from Outcome Mapping that made it possible to measure change. It was hoped that seeing this strategy might trigger Fazila's interest in preparing a similar document. This idea paid off. Fazila did an excellent job at producing a communication template (like that of DD but different enough to bear her own stamp). This success made it easier to start talking more or less 'on the same page.' It is unfortunate that Fazila fell ill and had to resign from her position at RIA. She was gradually becoming more engaged and offered insights that were useful to the group as it worked its way through the mentoring process.

Just before Fazila left, Dr. Araba Sey, an experienced Ghanaian researcher living in the United States, joined RIA as principal researcher leading a number of projects including some of the new IDRC funded AI4D projects. Unfortunately, due to COVID (which hit

South Africa rather hard), Araba was never able to leave the United States and work together with the South African team in situ. At the same time, the RIA team moved out of its office and shifted all their work online. Once again, DECI tried to manage a 'catch up' process with Araba who was quick to learn, although in the beginning, she did appear to question the purpose of the exercise which came after her years of experience and well-known reputation as a strong researcher.

It was interesting to note that with this new change in staffing and increasing responsibility in interacting with DECI, Naila became much more confident in her participation. Araba, as a senior researcher was already confident of her own capability, and although appeared to be somewhat skeptical of the purpose behind DECI, UFE and ResCom mentoring, joined fully in the discussions. She was, therefore, always able to contribute to the UFE and ResCom strategies as the discussion moved forward. At this stage, the mentors attempted to bring into play DECI-4's main interest in institutionalizing evaluation and communication within RIA rather than a focus on individual staff members.

3. Unpacking the mentoring process

Once the DECI mentors got past the difficulties of trying to mentor 4-5 RIA staff at once and narrowed the field to just three people (the project lead, the new research manager and the person charged with communication), it became possible to move the process at the pace dictated by the mentees, Enrico, Naila and Chenai. At this point (March 2019) as mentors, we were aware of what we thought would be a rather limited time frame but did not need to use this to dictate the pace of the joint conversations. In the end, the CPC money was extended so the funding problem ceased to exist. Slowly we began to see how clear it was that so much depended on the personality of the mentee and their commitment to be part of the process. In Enrico's case, he knew he wanted to focus on cybersecurity, so he was eager to absorb as much as possible to help him in this process and in the role, he hoped to play as the one 'knowledgeable' about cybersecurity. He was also familiar with RIA, secure in his position and eager to learn. Naila, by contrast, was new to RIA and new to this more academic research world (coming from industry) and understandably cautious as she moved forward. Chenai had already received more than a year of mentoring and was familiar with the process. She was also given the task of 'managing' the DECI-RIA connection.

Within these team dynamics, it soon became possible to quickly walk our way together through a discussion of evaluation uses, users and key evaluation questions. It was later (October 2019), when Alison asked to be on the call to make it clear that she hoped that RIA would be able to develop an evaluative way of thinking across the organization and that communication would come later. She expressed concern that even though the mentors had been working with UFE all these months, she didn't see where there was a component to address the quality control of the research. It was at this point that the 5th USE of Research Quality was added to the other USES.

Once the group was satisfied that the UFE framework was in place, it was time to move on to create a research communication (ResCom) structure to address the cybersecurity communication needs. Given the nature of RIA as a research institution, the ability to influence policy is a key element of its communication strategy. Here RIA was ahead of the game given that Enrico was a member of the advisory board of the Global Forum (mentioned above) and was able to discuss research directly with policy makers through this initiative. In essence, Enrico helped set up the ResCom framework while involving policy makers through every step of the research process for cyber security.

After January 2020, when the RIA goal posts changed again – Enrico and Chenai had left the organization, Naila was still in place as RIA’s research manager, Chenai had been replaced by Fazila Farouk, as Research Editor and Communications Manager and Araba Sey, as principal researcher and the lead across a number of projects. As mentors, it meant that it was time to adjust the process and quickly adapt the approach to meet the needs of this new team.

A few months later, COVID took over everyone’s agenda. South Africa went into lockdown – a lockdown that has still not completely lifted at the time of this writing (April 2022). RIA gave up its office headquarters, staff were forced to work from home (and Araba Sey remained in the United States) while DECI, RIA and a great deal of the rest of the world turned to online platforms while everyone worked from home.

4. Reflections and Lessons

The personality of the mentee and the person’s interest and willingness to participate in the mentoring process is something that is always going to drive the agenda. Fazila Farouk brought an entirely different dimension to the process. As already mentioned, she came with a great deal of communication competency and ‘know-how’ to her role as head of communication thus it took some time before she was willing to be mentored in communication and evaluation. The DECI mentors were finding it difficult to find a subject that would interest her enough to encourage her to fully participate. Once we did, she was able to make use of the ideas and turn them to a RIA advantage. Likewise, Enrico knew he was going to move on to focus on cybersecurity hence he was determined to glean what he could from the mentoring process,

There is no question that organizations with a high staff turnover will find it harder to embed the UFE/ResCom way of thinking into the fabric of their institutional structure. With RIA, there was an advantage since the Director, Alison Gillwald was (and is) highly supportive and determined to ‘institutionalize’ research to policy influence (communications) and monitoring and evaluation within RIA. As a result, despite the constant staff turnover, there remained a person at the helm steadfastly ready to keep interest in the process to institutionalize a UFE and ResCom mindset within the institution, alive. The mentors did notice, however that the organizational position of the person on the call can also be an important aspect that can affect future

institutionalization and uptake of the UFE/ResCom approach. With RIA, an organization where the value of 'good' research is so highly regarded, the person with the title of lead researcher is high on the organizational chart and appears to have more influence on the process than those with cross cutting positions (such as Chenai with ResCom and Naila as Research Manager) who have slightly less clout. As a result, it fell more to Enrico and later, perhaps to Araba to take a lead in pushing the institutionalization agenda towards creating a UFE/ResCom mind set within RIA.

This reality is not necessarily a hard and fast rule – more a notion of hierarchy since there is no doubt that with time comes confidence. Naila grew in confidence as she stayed in place while many senior researchers came and went. She also gained her own knowledge of RIA and through this, gained confidence in her ability to speak her mind. As senior researcher, Araba always appeared to speak freely and with confidence but because of COVID, she was never able to meet with the RIA staff in person, nor gain from that palpable vibe that such a dynamic group can bring to any research organization. Due to her distant location, she was also nine hours behind Cape Town in terms of daylight time and was often forced to start her meetings at 7 a.m. Araba lasted in this position for almost a year but had to give up when the on-going pandemic made her situation untenable. She has remained connected to RIA as a Research Fellow.

It was quite interesting to notice that while the idea of institutionalizing the evaluation and communication mind set within RIA was evident to Araba, she found it difficult to accept that she herself would also be expected to embed UFE and ResCom within her own research work around AI. In essence, each lead researcher must also become an evaluator and a communicator and not everyone is ready to do so. It is difficult to generalize about this observation but wonder whether a focus on one aspect (institutionalization) must come at the expense of another (i.e. the individual research project needs for UFE and ResCom). The experience with RIA may mean an initial focus on one person and maybe one project would be a more effective way to serve as an entry point for the organization.

When Chenai commented on her experience as a DECI mentee, she wrote:

“I think my comms mentoring was really a process that was intense but also rewarding. It worked well in that it was focused on me as an individual and I would then have oversight on how to share my learnings with the organization. It was also practical learning which I think is different to the current team as they are coming into build up on a foundation of DECI. This current training is also happening in a background of organizational change with three team members having left, a funding crisis and a need to deliver on current projects. With my experience I was also available, I was not travelling as much during my initial mentoring process.”

It has already been noted that only once was the process moved forward by showing a communication strategy that others had used, but as a practice, the mentors did not

write material for the mentees (did not produce objectives, draft Uses nor key evaluation questions). The DECI approach was usually to wait, to coach and to nudge the mentees to complete the process. The DECI Team continues to wonder whether the process might have got somewhere faster by nudging the process forward through showing more examples from other mentees. The one experience when the Derechos Digitales communication strategy to Fazila certainly triggered a positive response.

5. Institutionalizing the process

Alison Gillwald initiated a recent zoom link by stating, *“I have been talking to IDRC about the problem of ‘institutionalization’ for years and nobody has an answer.”* So true. Prior to the interview, Julius and Wendy had suddenly realized that while ‘institutionalizing’ the DECI UFE and ResCom process was/is an integral part of DECI thinking, there has never really been a full discussion as to how this can be done. This situation is particularly true for an organization like RIA that started off small and was attached to the University of Witwatersrand until 2008, and later had an affiliation with the University of Cape Town in 2010, through RIA’s director, Alison who is adjunct professor at the UCT Mandela School of Public Governance. As RIA continued to expand, it moved into separate offices, and grew, not only in staff size but more importantly in terms of taking on more and more projects. This growth in stature, independence and reputation became both a curse and a blessing. A blessing because RIA has gained a reputation both in Africa and internationally as the ‘go to’ place for digital knowledge building and therefore attracts more and more funding. The downside is that everyone is always scrambling to produce the research required by that funding and not everyone can or wants to work at Alison’s normal breakneck speed. The RIA staff turnover is a revolving door – certainly this is partly due to unforeseen circumstances (illness and COVID) but may also be due to the pace of work required by RIA to keep the organization in its place.

In RIA’s case, the focus and continuity upon institutionalization comes because the head of the organization (Alison) truly wants RIA to have an inbuilt evaluation and communication mindset. However, it is hard pressed to figure out how to do it given the constant inflow and outflow of staff (staff who have undergone the DECI process but moved on before it could become institutionalized). During the last six months of DECI’s mentoring process, the mentors tried to focus as much as possible on this issue. Fortunately, Enrico came back to facilitate a zoom workshop for the entire RIA team to introduce his learnings around UFE and ResCom. However, DECI’s experience is that one workshop is hardly sufficient and within the COVID environment of back-to-back on-line workshops, meetings, and interviews, it is hard to know whether the learning has been retained in anyone’s consciousness.

As a project, there may not have been adequate discussion and concurrence of what is entailed in ‘institutionalization of UFE and ResCom capacity’ in the CPC centres. Since DECI’s aim was developing that capacity within the CPC centres, institutionalization meant establishing a system where use of that knowledge or approach becomes part of

the organization's fabric, sustained beyond inevitable staff changes. DECI's plan for institutionalization (what exactly this was and how) may not have been clear enough or sufficiently deliberate with RIA (and the other CPCs). We loosely left it to be developed by the mentees. However, with their greater interest in their own (personal) skills for their work, the extent to which they exerted effort and energy to the institutionalization varied and got affected. Especially since they first had to be confident in what they were doing. RIA has institutionalized outcome mapping in its reflective periodic reports. Their reports contain outcome achievements using the outcomes progress marker gradients of "Expect to see", "Like to see" and "Love to see". This leads us to believe it is possible that the same can be done using the UFE and ResCom frameworks. Or the concepts can be merged into the institution's reporting approaches and frameworks. We did not quite explore this for implementation.

But what to do about it? As Alison pointed out, it's one thing to institutionalize a process within an organization that is, for example attached to a larger institution like a university or aid agency. These organizations tend to have some form of core funding (it may not be called that) that brings with it continuity of staff, career paths and processes that get written into the fabric of the organization. Consequently, the staff is there to maintain it and is exempt from the constant need to chase after the next project that comes along. Within a few short years, RIA has taken on digital rights, cybersecurity, artificial intelligence and always with the intention of being the best in its field. This commitment takes a toll.
