

## CHALLENGES AND RECOMMENDATIONS

6.1 At a deeper level, a key challenge for the INDEPTH Network is to identify and address research and policy questions for which the unique longitudinal and multi-dimensional platform of the HDSS (which also makes it very expensive) is utilized as an indispensable component. Several of the impact case studies that we assessed are based on research projects that could have also been gained from much simpler research designs (e.g. interventions to reduce prevalence of certain diseases). This is in part due to the nature of funding which is biased at the moment towards specific health related projects that do not utilize the full potential of the HDSS setting including its extensive demographic components.

*Recommendation: In addition to being responsive to specific donor driven and mostly exclusively health-related projects, the INDEPTH Network and its funders should invest in the conceptualization of directly policy relevant research questions that optimally utilize the great capabilities of the longitudinal and multi-dimensional HDSS platform. One example for such an effort could be the highly policy relevant study of the interactions between health, education and fertility and the micro and community level. While the scientific literature suggests that these three factors are greatly interconnected (with effects going in all directions) the empirical assessment of these has been hindered by the need for a complex longitudinal and multi-context study design of precisely the sort that HDSS offers. Another example is unpacking the causal linkage between reproductive health and women's economic empowerment. New insights on the nature of these interactions would be of highest policy relevance, from the global level Sustainable Development Goals down to the design of community- level health and education services.*

6.2 Another challenge that the Secretariat faces in coordinating and leading network-level work on translating research into policy and practice is the lack of staff at the Secretariat with appropriate skills of policy engagement. While funding is one part of the problem, the Secretariat has been trying unsuccessfully to recruit a senior policy and communications analyst.

*Recommendation: The Network should widen and intensify its efforts to recruit a policy dialogue and communication specialist to support the Executive Director in coordinating the policy engagement work of the Network. This person should have knowledge of the international policy arena. While it is desirable that the person is based at the Secretariat, another option might be to recruit one or two experienced people from HDSS centers on a part-time basis.*

6.3 The Network does not have a clearly defined strategy for policy engagement, and as a result, most of the activities in this area are ad hoc making it difficult to track impacts. Specifically, the Network has not yet identified and mapped the primary stakeholders it wishes to influence, nor how to proactively communicate and engage with them. In 2009, the Network developed a Communications and External Relations Strategy (CERS), which is a useful component of a Policy Engagement Strategy, but it is not clear if the CERS is being implemented or monitored. There has been limited interaction with global high-profile bodies (e.g. World Economic Forum) and while contact has been established with major regional bodies in Africa and Asia (e.g. NEPAD/African

Union, Asian Development Bank, African Development Bank), there is potential for INDEPTH to do more to influence these stakeholders.

*We recommend that the Network should develop a policy engagement strategy which clearly identifies the potential stakeholders and beneficiaries of INDEPTH's products, what activities are necessary to ensure that there is impact, and an evaluation plan. In identifying its stakeholders, the Network may want consider mapping stakeholders (e.g. funders, policy actors, media, civil society, academic community and so on) and it should develop action plans to engage with each group. On policy actors, INDEPTH should look beyond WHO and ministries of health.*

*We further recommend that the Network should review its Communications and External Relations Strategy to align it with the Network's revised strategic objectives. There should be clarity between the actions that are being led by the Secretariat and those led by center members. Annual action plans would be a useful way of managing the implementation of the strategy.*

*At the national level, we see the role of the Secretariat as being strategic but in the background, supporting the HDSS centers. At the international level, the Secretariat should play a lead role in targeted and direct engagement with the international policy and donor community.*

6.4. A distinction between HDSS centers that are more successful in policy engagement and those less engaged is that the former use a proactive approach to policy engagement, with strong links with the stakeholder beneficiaries. HDSS that develop trusted relationships with end-users of research are more likely to be successful in translating research into policy and practice. Where researchers are trusted, the relationship can be bi-directional, with stakeholders sometimes making the first move.

*We recommend that HDSS centers that have not yet developed policy engagement strategies should be encouraged to do so, being clear of the audience they wish to influence and developing trusted relationships with stakeholders.*

6.5 With regards to publications from HDSS centers, the "INDEPTH" brand is not highly visible. Although the INDEPTH Data Repository has citation information for more than 3,000 journal publications published by researchers affiliated to HDSS centers, the majority of these do not mention their affiliation to INDEPTH. In contrast, researchers often acknowledge their connection to the Network when applying for grants as there is a perception that this enhances the chances of success.

*Since research findings from HDSS centers published in peer-reviewed journals are a key outlet that has the potential to influence the international state of the art, we recommend that efforts should be made to increase the visibility of INDEPTH in the publication and dissemination of such findings. It may be a promising idea to occasionally publish (in the form of reprints or summaries of findings) a bundle of such scientifically influential studies and distribute them under the INDEPTH logo.*

*We also recommend that the Secretariat should identify key "cross-cutting products" that it can spearhead in dissemination for policy translation. Repeatedly, the "cause of death" work was mentioned as one such example that the Secretariat should focus on.*

6.6. Recently, the Network has launched the INDEPTH DATA Repository and INDEPTHStats which have the potential to increase utilization of the data by the wider research community.

*We recommend that efforts should continue to make more surveys and more standardized variables available so that over time this could become one of the standard references for international comparative studies. Investments in software to reduce the time between data collection and analysis could reap huge rewards. We recognize that dealing with longitudinal data is more challenging than for example, the widely used IPUMS and DHS databases, but ultimately it must be the goal to make as much INDEPTH data as possible available to the international research community in order for it to become a significant resource for international policymaking.*

6.7. Funding for research usually ends with data collection or publication of findings in journals without any funding for impact activities. Also, because of the lag time between the end of a project and realization of impact, there is often no money left for policy engagement activities.

*Our recommendation to the Network is to ensure that project costings include budget lines for policy engagement and impact-related activities. Periodically, the Secretariat could apply for follow-on funding to “mine” INDEPTH’s research for policy engagement and societal impact. Examples of such opportunities include the Wellcome Trust International Public Engagement grants and grants for systematic reviews.*