

**THE INDEPTH NETWORK  
MIDTERM STRATEGY REFLECTIONS and REVIEW  
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**PAUL ROSENBERG  
Independent Consultant to the INDEPTH Network**

## Introduction

INDEPTH is a global network of health and demographic research centers, joined by design to answer critical questions about the health and lives of people in low- and middle-countries (LMICs). INDEPTH's member centers observe the life events of the people in the communities where they work, providing the only data of its kind for research and policy making in the world's LMICs. As a network, INDEPTH has the power to harness streams of data from 44 health and demographic surveillance system (HDSS) sites – run by 38 research centers in 20 countries in Africa, Asia and Oceania -- into a platform ideal for conducting health and demographic research at the highest levels of rigor.

The potential value of such a platform to improve the lives of people in the global south, as well as support the governments that serve them is undeniable. INDEPTH and its partners have begun to deliver on this promise. INDEPTH member centers have developed world-class facilities and staffs that have the ability to compete on the world stage. These assets are the result of years of investing in institution building at the Secretariat and throughout the network. They form the backbone for landmark multi-center studies in malaria prevention, vaccination and child survival, sexual and reproductive health and others.

While the Network's scientific achievements in this strategic period have been impressive, this report argues that the most important achievements of this period have been in building the assets and the processes it needs for its scientific work, ensuring that the network's greatest scientific achievements may yet lay ahead. Institution building is a difficult, resource and time intensive process that requires patient capital. However, as non-profit organizations are increasingly held accountable for delivering measurable value for money, institution building becomes an even more difficult proposition. The result is that capacity building often gets short shrift, and chronically lean non-profits must execute before the organization is fully mature. This has been the path that INDEPTH has traveled during this strategic period. It has worked to deliver impactful results while trying to build a stronger network. The areas in which the Network has taken its most important strides have not surprisingly been in areas in which metrics are less meaningful in expressing progress. This report will discuss significant areas of progress where INDEPTH has built assets necessary for its future success, notably in areas of strengthening the network, improving the quality of data, as well as developing the mechanisms and personnel necessary to improve the creative process that drives scientific inquiry. Most importantly, these assets signal a much greater level of cohesion and buy-in from the 44 HDSS centers, a relatively unsung, but critical development for INDEPTH as an entity.

INDEPTH's potential has always invited high expectations. However, its recent progress leaves no doubt now that it must deliver results. The Network is certainly well-positioned to meet the higher bar. As with any organization aspiring to still greater pursuits of impact, however, there are a number of areas in which the

organization should consider further strengthening. A selection of recommendations follows, highlighting three areas where INDEPTH can continue to make progress.

## **Accomplishments**

Throughout its early years, INDEPTH has walked the most difficult road. As a pioneer in health and population research in a world seeking answers to poverty and social inequity, new partnerships and donors have swarmed to the INDEPTH concept. However, the potential of the concept and the organization's rapid growth created great expectations of what the nascent network could accomplish in short time. Consequently, in these early years of INDEPTH's arrival, the Network has grappled with a tension between building the institution to meet these expectations and the need to produce in the immediate term. INDEPTH has succeeded in navigating these rough waters by building around landmark multi- and single-center studies, and successfully winning core support awards that gave the Network space to build the assets it would need to produce consistently at a high level. INDEPTH sought to build the plane while flying it, and it has indeed built a plane that can fly. In this period INDEPTH has built a strong, cohesive network composed of autonomous centers that have bought into the concept. The Network has taken steps to ensure that the quality of the data it collects is at the highest level. INDEPTH has also developed the tools and mechanisms it needs in order to push the scientific work forward. Finally, it has built the foundations of a professional institution, with professional staff, structures and processes to manage the needs of an ever-growing network and the scientific undertakings to come. These are the kinds of assets and soft-infrastructure that rarely lend themselves to meaningful measurement. Consequently, organizations often do not get the credit that they deserve for investing in themselves and their future. Rather, credit is typically only earned when the organization leverages these investments to ultimately deliver. By walking the more challenging road, INDEPTH has indeed built an organization that is ready to take off and truly deliver on its mission.

## **Toward a Better Network**

One of the most valuable victories in INDEPTH's early years was to simultaneously improve the quality and cohesiveness of its network, while also growing and diversifying its membership. INDEPTH has undoubtedly grown rapidly, from a partnership of a handful of sites at its inception, to a flourishing global network of 44 sites. Rapid growth comes with great risk, as not only could the sites dilute their ties to one another, but it also risked thinning the resources of a Secretariat supported by an already lean staff. Composed entirely by autonomous centers, whose own financial incentives and research responsibilities live independently of the network, INDEPTH had to invest early and often in seeking the full buy-in of its membership. Working with the Network would entail work beyond the natural

scope of each center's core business. Therefore, the goal in the early period had to be to build the value proposition for its member centers.

In building its value proposition to the centers, the secretariat has invested heavily in an engagement strategy, including capacity building and inclusive research opportunities. Its capacity-building strategy has built value and engagement by strengthening the scientific and data management capacities of the member centers. Through investments in graduate degree-granting programs, workshops, and direct technical assistance from secretariat staff, INDEPTH has effectively supported its member centers to strengthen their core business with financial and human resources that would not otherwise have been available. In so doing, the Network has also successfully improved the capacity of new and emerging HDSS sites to be able to work with other partners within and without the network. Increasingly, secretariat and member center personnel are deployed to administer capacity building programs, including training at the University of the Witwatersrand, as well as workshop training, most notably the recent data quality workshops in Accra. These collectively have the effect of not only improving the level of the science conducted at the sites, but also of creating important center-to-secretariat and center-to-center linkages that strengthen the quality of the Network.

Equally importantly, the Network has also delivered inclusive opportunities to the range of its membership for multi-center research projects, as well as a platform to present research to the international scientific community and donors. By encouraging its members to compete for research projects administered by the Secretariat, INDEPTH has not only created invaluable new opportunities to its members, but also an important culture of equity. This culture is reinforced by its International Scientific Conference (ISC), which puts all HDSS sites on equal footing for the opportunity to showcase their work to an audience of their peers and funders. Without a doubt, one of the most sought-after rewards for scientific research is the opportunity to be recognized by the scientific community for one's work. For many of INDEPTH's scientists, however, the opportunity cost of doing this important work in remote field sites has been isolation from the greater scientific community. The ISC gives these scientists the rare opportunity to re-engage in an international venue and to demonstrate the quality and importance of their work. These collectively have had the effect of building buy-in to the value of the secretariat, as well as creating pathways for engagement between sites.

Ultimately these strategies build more than just productivity, they also build a stronger network. While network quality may be challenging to measure, there are clear signals from the membership that these activities have had the desired effect. One of the most promising signals can be found in the willingness of all of the centers to augment the quality of their data to a new, higher standard that will be shared across the Network. Another significant signal is that the centers have also agreed with the Secretariat on a data sharing policy and platform, so that this gold mine of data can reach even closer to INDEPTH's mission to improve lives. For 38 autonomous member centers whose *raison d'être* and incentives live in their local

geographies to be willing to invest resources in changing their data formats and making their data public requires an extraordinary act of faith in the Network. These are the kinds of behaviors that demonstrate that the HDSS sites are willing to give and sacrifice in order to be a part of the greater Network. Similarly, the centers have submitted to Secretariat-led monitoring and evaluation, many have begun to brand their journal articles as INDEPTH-affiliated papers, and they all have agreed to finance their own participation in the Annual General Meeting. Cohesion is otherwise difficult to measure in any meaningful way. It is nevertheless an important accomplishment in and of itself, but more than that, it forms the foundation upon which INDEPTH has built other instrumental pieces for its success in this strategic period.

## **Better Data**

One of the most persistent challenges for the Network has been to produce consistent data across all 44 HDSS sites. The challenge is completely natural to a Network composed of autonomous data centers that have collected and managed data their own way, for their own purposes, in some cases for as long as several decades. However, if the reliability of data were unpredictable even from a single center, it would cast doubt on the reliability of multi-center research from the Network as a whole. Moreover, in the absence of a unified system across the network, the comparability of the data between sites could not be assured. Data quality, therefore, presented a strategic problem for the Network. INDEPTH leadership wisely addressed the problem by investing core funds in a strategic solution. Building on the foundation of a stronger network, INDEPTH's solution would not only bring the sites into wholesale alignment, but would further guarantee that this would never be a question again.

With the full breadth of INDEPTH's membership supportive of establishing a unified data standard, INDEPTH was empowered to advance a new data format with efficient quality checks built-in. INDEPTH's data quality initiative brings data managers in waves to Accra to train and reformat their centers' data. Experts at these workshops mentor data managers on the spot with their real center data to convert them to "long" format. The conversion gives the centers a shared package of variables in a common format that ensures comparability of data across centers, and readily lends itself to event history analysis and quality checks.

INDEPTH wisely built tools and training programs proactively around this data initiative to ensure that these changes would endure, and that data quality would not be in question again. First, data managers train to write software that ensures that any new data collected will convert to the same format. The software creates an efficient, automated process that makes the addition of new layers of data worry-free and quality-controlled. Secondly, tools developed by the Secretariat and partners allow center managers to test the data quality themselves, thus allowing the Secretariat to ensure data quality without the kind of micro-management it's

simply not staffed to do. Finally, to try to control the loss of data management personnel in the sites, a new recently-funded graduate degree program at the University of the Witwatersrand gives otherwise-isolated data managers opportunities for career advancement. Much like their social scientist counterparts, data managers forgo opportunities in much more career-friendly urban environments to do meaningful work in often-remote venues. The result is that data managers and other support staff who are not local to the HDSS site may leave for career opportunities elsewhere. While the previously mentioned software solutions are designed to maintain data integrity, in order to guarantee data quality it is also logical to put measures in place to retain the talent that created these tools. To this end, the data management degree program may not be the only solution, but it is a fundamentally strategic move to invest in retaining these specialized, and difficult to replace personnel.

INDEPTH's data improvement initiatives together represent one of the more important strategic achievements of INDEPTH's young life. INDEPTH, together with its partners, identified a surmountable challenge to its future success. It designed a multi-faceted strategy to not only rally its membership to effect change throughout the Network, but also made it efficient to manage moving forward and put pieces in place to ensure its continued success. The implications of these achievements are clear. First, that INDEPTH can now demonstrably work as a unit to improve the research prospects of its constituents. Secondly, when the rollout of this initiative is complete, INDEPTH can go back to the donor/funder community with the assurance that its data are of high quality, its results are credible, and that it once again is the only scientific group capable of mustering these data to improve the health and lives of people in LMICs.

## **A Stronger Institution**

As INDEPTH grew from a partnership of a handful of centers to an expansive research network with global reach, it was clear that the Secretariat would need to take on greater leadership roles to keep driving the science forward. A Secretariat that once played exclusively a support role would very quickly have to play a stronger leadership role as the Network sought a greater presence in the international community. This ultimately requires the kinds of programs, processes, and professional non-scientific personnel that could handle donor/funder needs, that could elevate the profile of the Network internationally, and that could add value to the scientific process in ways the sites could not otherwise do individually. This is no small task for a scientific institution, particularly one as historically lean as INDEPTH. This is the kind of difficult heavy-lifting that every young organization has to struggle with in its infancy, with little return on investment in the early going. INDEPTH has nearly completed this journey, however. With the good faith of patient capital from its donors, it has built much of the institutional capacity it needed in

order to truly “take off” and take on the lofty expectations that come with its potential.

One of the keys for INDEPTH’s future success has been the development of a professionally staffed Secretariat that has won the trust of the Network membership. A major feature of the Secretariat culture has been to develop its existing staff to fill the growing needs of the Network. This serves the purpose of keeping the Secretariat lean, while also providing career development opportunities for its staff. This kind of staff retention and development policy mirrors that of its strategy to maintain data management expertise at its member centers by carving out a clearer career path. This approach has worked well. Finance staff delivers technical assistance to the centers whose administrative capacities are often even leaner than the Secretariat. Project management has grown organically out of its information technology department, where many of the project management needs have efficiently layered on top of IT project needs at the centers. A large portfolio of internal communications work has grown out of its external relations staff. Even grants management was entirely home grown from administrative roles. These internal growth moves have largely succeeded in addressing the revealed functional needs efficiently, as well as tightening the relationships between the sites and the Secretariat. These officers have relationships with center staff and offer a plug-and-play option when the centers need additional support in a variety of roles. It is significant that INDEPTH has grown into a professionally staffed institution, capable of supporting the underlying processes that make the science possible.

In developing a multi-pronged approach to scientific development over the last several years, INDEPTH has built important structure and process around its core business that will ultimately propel the institution forward. Beginning as a nascent organization composed of a handful of partnered research centers, INDEPTH began with an organic, ground-up process of developing its scientific agenda. HDSS sites naturally gravitate toward scientific inquiries that might solve the problems they observe. This process addresses on the ground-problems in specific geographies well. With an increasingly diverse Network, the likelihood of identifying health and population problems common to multiple centers improves. The social impact is potentially great in the geographies that the centers serve, and possibly generalizable in larger contexts. That said, the international community tends to expect solutions that address the most pressing problems across as much of the developing world as possible. Some of INDEPTH’s greatest hits have been at this level, but scientific development needed institutional solutions that could continue to generate new projects. Rather than develop just one solution, INDEPTH developed four more. The missing pieces were clearly global vision and entrenchment in the international scientific and donor communities. INDEPTH’s scientific working groups are one such mechanism, composed of internal players and external partners bringing the international vision piece together with the on-the-ground expertise. The Scientific Advisory Committee brings a layer of internationally scientifically accomplished heavy hitters to the table, whose track record of seeding studies with impact ensures the consideration of big ideas for

multi-center studies. INDEPTH has also aggressively pursued partnerships with external research shops, where INDEPTH's unique data and scientists can couple with social scientists who walk in different scientific and donor circles. In all three cases, the underlying theme is to uncover new scientific questions by bringing different combinations of external and internal players into INDEPTH's big tent. The missing piece was having in-house leadership that could bring scientific talent as well as the international networks and vision. Professor Tollman of the University of Witwatersrand has taken on this role on a part-time basis. Prof Tollman indeed brings these qualities to the table, in addition to the kind of diplomatic demeanor that is crucial when trying to move project ideas from the Secretariat to autonomous sites. However, Professor Tollman has a full-time post at Wits that already demands the lion's share of his attention. Indeed, this is the feature that perhaps differentiates this position from the other mechanisms. INDEPTH needs an internal resource whose sole purpose is to exercise scientific leadership, with a specific eye toward the answers that the international community seeks. However, the fact that INDEPTH has developed five structures for scientific development is extraordinary. This institutionalizes scientific inquiry, and at its best leaves no stone unturned. The Secretariat needed to develop a strong leadership role in the Network's scientific agenda, and the development of these mechanisms demonstrates that it is well on its way. Moreover, the aforementioned confidence-building and network-building progress virtually ensures receptivity to Secretariat leadership. Together with a professionally-staffed Secretariat, these are the assets upon which INDEPTH can bank on having a bright future.

INDEPTH has wisely spent early core funding on building an institution that can deliver. It is simply not possible to buy research results as a social investor, without building the research machine and all of its parts, first. In the case of INDEPTH, it needed to cultivate buy-in from its membership for the network concept and all that entails. It needed to make the quality of its data undeniable. INDEPTH's data is a part of its unique value proposition and it has to be bulletproof. It needed to develop the structures, processes, and personnel that support and drive its scientific work. The needs of the donor community, the technical and capacity needs of the sites, and its unique scientific platform all demand a professional secretariat to take the lead in these ways. These are the internal assets and the foundation that INDEPTH will need in order to move to a new level of productivity and ultimately toward greater impact. By opting to invest in itself in the early going, INDEPTH has indeed built an organization that is ready to take off and truly deliver on its mission.

## **Outstanding Challenges & Recommendations**

### **Scientific Inquiry and Project Development**

With an ever-growing trove of data on the lives of millions from every geography in LMICs, INDEPTH is uniquely positioned to answer the most pressing questions in health, population dynamics, and development. Indeed, INDEPTH has taken great

strides toward delivering on this promise. In short time, 44 sites have joined the fold, from 20 countries where information on the lives and deaths of billions is scanty. These are the very lives that national governments and development agencies strive hardest to improve, and yet are the least understood without sufficient high quality data. INDEPTH's initiatives to improve data quality and comparability have brought the majority of its research centers to a new standard of quality that donors can rely on. This effectively opens the door to new multisite research opportunities, with a greater diversity of sites credibly capable of taking on these kinds of projects. The Network also possesses greater scientific capacity, owing to years of sending its young scientists for further study, and to the growth of research partnerships with elite universities, think tanks, and government bodies. INDEPTH's progress will no doubt create higher expectations to produce on its promise.

Rising expectations for the impact of INDEPTH's research coincide with a global trend among donor governments seeking "value for money" on foreign assistance, while many of the large blue-chip Foundations have begun to shy away from general operating support funding. Neither trend tends to favor general support for research, nor do they favor institution building. Rather, both donor trends favor measurable results and definable impact. These trends present both opportunities and challenges for INDEPTH. Moving forward, unrestricted funds will be harder to come by, but can be otherwise found in the margins of major research projects. The Network has the scientific assets it needs to succeed in this environment, and it has succeeded with building around overheads from research in the past. The current environment for research funds demands that INDEPTH reaches for projects with the potential for greater impact. Studies that have been designed with clear implications for development policy and programs are more likely to attract interest.

In order to succeed in this environment, INDEPTH should first recruit a scientific programs manager who possesses the scientific vision to lead the network's scientific agenda, as well as a strong understanding of the donor community's priorities and how to meet them. Historically, the Network has embraced a bottom-up strategy for developing project proposals. There is good reason to support such a strategy. Scientific questions naturally emerge while monitoring populations, and in response to observed problems. In this way, INDEPTH member centers can motivate multisite research that directly responds to real needs. However, there needs to be a parallel process that also sends research proposals from the top down. INDEPTH has already made this a priority and taken some steps in this direction. The use of scientific working groups as well as Professor Tollman's time as Principal Scientist are a good start. However, in both cases, these scientists must spend the bulk of their time dedicated to their work at their home institution. INDEPTH needs an officer who can be placed in a dedicated leadership role for the Network's scientific work. Such a leadership role would not entail changing the sites' work per se. Rather, the scientific programs leader's role is fundamentally to be strategic. Part of this strategic role should be to look internally at the Network's scientific assets. The

Network's strengths are not necessarily the sheer number of potential sites it can muster for any one project. The Network's strengths are more strongly rooted in its people. These scientists and teams specialize in certain skills and areas of substance. The Network should be able to market itself based on these strengths, and less on the premise that it can do anything. The scientific leader can help the Network to consolidate the vast body of its work into a short list of areas of expertise. One useful example of this could be JPAL, one of INDEPTH's peers and a potential research and training partner. It is clear to anyone that spends five minutes with JPAL personnel, or on their website, that JPAL specializes in randomized controlled trials, and that they have a particular interest or track record in seven issue areas. By contrast, in interviews with donors who fund research in INDEPTH's areas of expertise, many had not heard of INDEPTH, or more tragically did not even know that INDEPTH worked in their field of interest. It will be an essential step for the scientific leadership to be able to consolidate INDEPTH's work into categories of "what we do best".

The second major element of strategically positioning INDEPTH's scientific efforts will be to "meet the donors where they are". Donors' interest areas are relatively transparent. However, simply suggesting research in their interest areas is rarely compelling. As donors become increasingly more strategic, they have specific goals they are trying to achieve. In this environment, every social investment has an inherent opportunity cost. This necessarily demands that potential research investments must add value to the donors' strategies for achieving its goals. In other words, consider whether the proposed study "lies on the critical path" to the donors' success, or would scarce funds be better used somewhere else. Part of scientific leadership in this environment would not be to ask whether INDEPTH's projects already lie on the critical path to a donor's success. Rather, the scientific leader needs to determine what projects *would* lie on the critical path to achieving a particular donor's goals, and matching that with INDEPTH's member centers' capabilities. Further, it will be incumbent on the scientific leader to determine what critical questions in these issue areas remain unanswered. Today's donors fund research because they are looking for evidence that can inform decisions. INDEPTH can meet the donors where they are, by developing project proposals that fit with the way the donors see the world and what they're trying to achieve. Having a clear impact orientation, with research questions that specifically address decisions that donors are trying to make will assuredly make the Network's proposals into compelling funding opportunities. Finally, "meeting the donors where they are" also entails understanding what they look for in proposals. This may sound self-evident, but it is much more difficult than one might think. While many donors may have forms or even specific questions that they ask prospective grantees to respond to, that is a minimal amount of guidance for what they are looking for. Underlying the application are expectations about the arguments that a grantee will make to justify funding. The kind of thinking and the kind of language they're looking for is less transparent. It is also important to know how INDEPTH or its prospective projects could fit into their strategies. A scientific leader in the secretariat would ideally be experienced in these matters, know the major funders well, and would have enjoyed

success in seeking grants from them.

As expectations rise, and with a more impact-oriented donor environment, the INDEPTH Network should work to develop another landmark project as its landmark malaria studies wind down. As it has been suggested here, this is an opportunity that needs the Secretariat to take the lead. There are few, if any, research organizations that are structurally designed, as INDEPTH is, to answer the most important questions in development. INDEPTH's longitudinal data design is uniquely structured to answer questions about impact, which is what every donor fundamentally seeks when considering funding research. No other organization has the infrastructure nor the expertise to be competitive with INDEPTH on these grounds. Now that INDEPTH has fortified the quality and consistency of its data, the opportunity is ripe to develop another signature project. It would help to add much-needed funds to the Secretariat's budget, but more importantly it would be crucial for increasing INDEPTH's profile.

Not only is INDEPTH now well-positioned to take on major questions in development, but there is also great opportunity to do so. One example issue area for INDEPTH to tackle could be family planning and reproductive health. Questions about the efficacy of family planning programs and the cost effectiveness of family planning for household welfare are at the heart of the Hewlett Foundation's program in Population and Poverty. The Gates Foundation reemphasized family planning as one of its "focus" areas in 2012. The Buffett Foundation continues to be one of the largest international players in family planning investment. DfID committed to family planning as its 2012 "Golden Moment". The French development agency (AFD) is the latest major government donor to enter this space. There is incredible potential for major donor backing for a project with the power to effect real change. This is one space where INDEPTH can be ambitious, ask *big* questions, and meet heightened expectations head-on. These are the *kinds* of big-ticket projects that donors are eager to support, and with the potential to net the kinds of overhead margins that INDEPTH needs to replace potential loss or lack of growth in general support funds in the future.

## **Capacity Strengthening**

Capacity building is undoubtedly one of the most challenging elements of growing a young, lean organization. At its best, it is a long-term, resource-intensive endeavor with a great, but uncertain reward at the end. A lean non-profit must grapple with the inherent conflict between its long-term interests and its short-term imperative to deliver results on areas of its core business. For INDEPTH, the challenge has been further complicated over the last several years by a difficult grant-seeking environment for capacity building. The successful pursuit of select capacity building grants notwithstanding, the environment for such grants has weakened over the years, as a trend toward results-driven grant making has risen. Furthermore, as the Network has continued to expand, capacity building needs will only grow. In this

environment, it is clear that the Secretariat will need to strengthen the case for capacity building to its donors, tighten the capacity building strategy, and seek efficiencies in its capacity building activities.

The great challenge for INDEPTH in a results-driven donor environment is undoubtedly to make the case to its donors that capacity building is inextricably linked to the specific scientific outcomes that they seek. Few of the large institutional donors are willing to fund capacity building as an outcome unto itself. This is not an insurmountable problem. Two types of capacity building strategies appear feasible in this kind of environment. The first positions specific capacity building goals as critical pieces to specific scientific outcomes in project grants. INDEPTH has compelling experience with this approach. The second must define specific capacity building goals for the network more strategically, and less opportunistically.

Building capacity strengthening into multi-center research projects should be an integral part of the capacity strategy. Not only has INDEPTH successfully negotiated for significant capacity building funds with this approach in the past, but also the great success of these projects serves as crucial *proof of concept* for future negotiations with its donors. Most recently, INDEPTH successfully built significant capacity building funds into the MCTA and INESS projects. The lesson to be drawn from these projects as well as other single-center cases such as Navrongo and Matlab is clear: donors are willing to support capacity building when it is clearly on the critical path to the scientific outcomes that they seek.

Furthermore, and perhaps just as importantly, INDEPTH now has a narrative that proves it can deliver scientific results with targeted investments in capacity building. Risk-averse donors focus increasingly on investments in “what works”, and predictable returns on investment. In this environment, non-profits must be able to demonstrate that they not only have a theory about why their proposals will work, but where possible, that they have evidence that they’re right. INDEPTH is uniquely capable of making the case that it knows how to build capacity for results, and that it has a track record of success. Documenting the narratives and the strategies of these successes, perhaps in the form of case studies, is essential. While the environment for capacity building grant funds may be challenging, donors are more willing to invest scarce funds when the non-profit can demonstrate that not only are specific capacity building activities necessary for the outcomes that they seek, but that it has a proven track record of success in translating investment into results.

INDEPTH prioritizes network-wide capacity building efforts, a strategy that can lift participating sites together, as well as potentially reap efficiencies. To date, the secretariat has initiated most of its capacity building efforts in this way, in order to reach the broadest breadth of sites. These activities have included workshops administered by the secretariat, as well as degree granting programs, fellowships, and post-doctoral opportunities. The challenge is quite simply that there are few opportunities with such a diversity of sites to lift all, or even many sites together.

Moreover, it is an even greater challenge to sustainably fund these training programs over a long time horizon, whether by secretariat core funds or by targeted donor funds.

Moving forward, these efforts will be more cost-effective if they were more tightly tied to specific strategic goals for the Network. Indeed, INDEPTH has taken some steps along this path. For example, the Network had a clear focus on setting a minimum standard for clean, consistent event history data to facilitate multi-center research. With a clear, strategically essential goal in mind, the Network delivered a workshop designed to bring the sites to the level needed to make a case for network's data quality to the international community. In this way, capacity building becomes fundamental to success. Put another way, this is an example of how capacity building must be thought of strategically, as a part of the organization's theory of change, whereby it plays an explicit, instrumental role in achieving outcomes.

The Secretariat can and should play a central role in meeting the diverse needs of the sites without veering from its strategic interests. The Secretariat can pivot from being a capacity building provider to being a capacity builder broker. The Network sits on a gold mine of talent ranging from scientists in the sites to IT managers. The Secretariat can deploy these human resources to the sites for training, and perhaps multi-center workshops if it were more efficient. In this way, the Secretariat can continue to be nimble and meet the needs of the centers at a lower expense. The first step must be to identify and inventory its human assets beyond the current HRWeb tool. This kind of exercise does not lend itself to surveys, which have proven time consuming for Secretariat and center staff, while not yielding the desired results. Similarly, the Secretariat should assist the centers with building their strategies so that capacity needs are identified strategically, and less reactively. The Secretariat would then be in a strong position to match human capacity strengths with capacity needs at other sites. In many cases this may require one person to travel rather than dozens. Equally importantly, these are the kinds of trainings the sites can afford themselves. The Secretariat could assist with the finances on a limited basis, but the value should be driven by its brokering role rather than its financing role.

Lastly, it is essential that the Secretariat develop a stronger evaluation practice for its capacity building work. As the Network seeks continued funding for these activities, it will need compelling evidence that the funded programs have begun to bear fruit. Monitoring and evaluation will be important not only for demonstrating the value of these investments, but also that the Network is learning from its capacity building work. Evaluating capacity building is notoriously difficult. As it has been previously acknowledged, outcomes of capacity building activity have long time horizons. Clearly, this makes the question of impact quite impossible in the short run. However, INDEPTH must still ask itself, "how will we know if it is working"? In order to answer this question, INDEPTH needs to have a strong hypothesis that posits how its capacity building efforts contribute to its strategic

goals. This could be expressed with a logic model that more explicitly nests capacity building work within the overall strategy. This will give the Network a framework for defining which metrics can give shape to that narrative for the short run and the medium run. This will also ensure that measurement is strategic, and not simply measuring what is measurable. Evaluation in this sense does not entail large, expensive, experimental projects, but rather developing a narrative for success, and a system of inquiry that can test whether these activities are producing the desired results.

## Communications

Strategic communications is quite easily one of the most difficult challenges any research organization grapples with in its work. Donors have spent years and precious grant funds trying to engineer marriages between research organizations and communications shops. Regrettably the tension between the need for strong messaging and doing justice to the science and its nuances is unavoidable. These challenges notwithstanding, it is still quite clear that we can do better than we are. Communications shops might suggest that research organizations do research that we can more easily communicate about. On its face that is not palatable for scientists, but underlying that request is that research organizations be fundamentally strategic in the research that we conduct. What is the problem that we are trying to solve? What do we want to accomplish? What solutions do we propose that we'll find? Why is this important? If we can answer these questions at the development stages of our research, the communications piece is easy and less likely to get lost in the swamp of methodologies and the peculiarities of data. While this would be ideal for both parties, the reality is that not every study can discover a cure for cancer, and that level of world-shaking research is more the exception than the rule. There are limitations to scientific methods, our theories, our data, and the resources at our disposal. That reality notwithstanding, we can still do better with what we have.

One area in which INDEPTH can take some major steps forward is with its branding. INDEPTH is the only organization in the world capable of producing reliable longitudinal data about the lives of those living in the developing world. Furthermore, INDEPTH has done what is necessary to ensure that its data are consistently credible. INDEPTH produces the data necessary to study and solve the world's greatest social problems. No other organization can credibly compete with the INDEPTH Network on that. The development community needs to know that fact. When a development agency thinks about conducting field-based research, the first organization that should come to mind is INDEPTH, even if it means partnering INDEPTH with other research organizations. Furthermore, INDEPTH needs to build its brand around its landmark successes, rather than on its potential and the breadth of the network. INDEPTH should message around its ability to *produce* impactful studies. The previously mentioned JPAL is known world-wide first for randomized controlled trials for development, and secondly for its game-changing

studies, particularly its cost-effectiveness study on deworming as a strategy to improve attendance and learning. JPAL is similarly a network of autonomous scientists with scores of studies completed and underway. The critical point is that the organization is known for what they uniquely do best, and that they've proven they can deliver real impact in this way. INDEPTH has a similar promise, and there is real untapped potential to clarify and consolidate its brand, and use it for messaging.

A second important step for INDEPTH in the next couple of years will be to consolidate its communications around more strategic messaging. One of the great challenges for a research organization is around what to communicate, to whom, and how. Most often research results get packaged into policy briefs, presentations at conferences, and it eventually finds a home somewhere on the research organization's website. There is nothing wrong with these tactical tools per se, but all too frequently they are done because they *must* be done, rather than purposefully. This process should start with the question "whom are we trying to reach?". INDEPTH communicates effectively within the network and the scientific community. Arguably, as INDEPTH was building the network in these early years, these were two of the most important audiences for it to engage with. As INDEPTH has matured, it should focus on a different kind of messaging vis-à-vis the donor community and the international development community. Donors who invested early in the promise of INDEPTH in its youth are increasingly looking for INDEPTH to produce outcomes and impact with its research. Policy makers are looking for research results that can help them make decisions about their work. This calls for a different strategy – one that consolidates the vast amounts of information INDEPTH wants to push out into digestible messages that accomplish its goals.

One of the challenges INDEPTH faces as a network is communicating to the international community about the wide-ranging work and accomplishments of a large and increasing population of affiliates. The challenge is of course compounded by the need to have a lean staff at the secretariat, and the internal communications needs of having 43 active centers. However, as INDEPTH as a network has grown to greater prominence and with greater expectations, it is crucial to its future work and funding that it focuses efforts on how it engages with the donor, policy, and development communities. A clear first step is to develop pithier messaging about what it does, and what its value proposition is. This is crucial for recruiting new donors, new partners, and new consumers of INDEPTH's work. INDEPTH is the *only* organization in the world that can deliver the kind of data and research opportunities that are its core business. It is uniquely well positioned to grapple with and provide answers to the most important questions in development. Yet, this is not well-understood by the donor and policy communities. It should be clear to anyone that engages with INDEPTH for two minutes what INDEPTH is capable of, and how valuable partnership with the Network would be. This demands clear, jargon and acronym-free language that can capture the interest of potential donors and partners who are not as familiar with DSS sites or their value for research.

Furthermore, for a donor community increasingly focused on outcomes and impact, it is essential that INDEPTH do the same with its communications. The Network has great research successes under its belt that should be more prominently featured in its external relations. These audiences want to know that INDEPTH can deliver. INDEPTH has proven that it can. Therefore, INDEPTH should be running on its track record of research success *and impact*. MCTA, INESS, and the Vitamin A trials are great examples, but the INDEPTH story is indeed longer, and the highlights need to be emphasized. Even single-center studies are illustrative of what could be done with larger, multi-center projects and these successes should be featured as well. When have INDEPTH center studies influenced policy? When have these studies influenced decision making about programs or services? These should be the tools in INDEPTH's arsenal when it meets donors, and should also occupy a prominent place on the website.

Finally, INDEPTH should consider how and where it delivers these important messages. The website is one important venue for this. The website as currently configured is an excellent vehicle for directing intra-Network traffic to a vast array of important information resources. However, for the external audience it is quite easy to get lost in all of the information and links. It is worth considering whether the website can serve both internal and external purposes effectively. For external purposes, the website can be the platform in which the previously suggested pithier messages can take prominence, but they need to be clearly featured and easily accessible. The website is often among the first points of contact with external audiences, so we need to ensure that they access the information they need and they leave with the impressions you want. It is also worth considering whether there may be other ways to deliver the messages from INDEPTH's research to the right audiences. It was surprising to find INDEPTH's pitch for playing a role in monitoring MDG progress strictly in a journal article, rather than more traveled venues for donors or featured prominently on its website. Donors at a meeting to discuss monitoring MDGs 4 and 5 for general budget support and health SWAps shortly after the article's release had never heard of INDEPTH nor its proposal. They similarly had not heard of INDEPTH member centers' accomplishments with the MDGs in countries they were hoping to monitor. These are just anecdotal examples of perhaps a broader message about making sure that INDEPTH's successes are distilled and distributed in targeted ways for the audiences INDEPTH seeks.