ESSENCE Members Mini-Meeting

05 April 2023
via zoom
15:00 – 16:30 (GMT + 01:00)

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Meeting Minutes

Facilitators

- Thabi Maitin, *Co-Chair ESSENCE, Co-Chair Working Group on Review of Investments (WGRI).*
- Garry Aslanyan, *Head of Secretariat (WHO/TDR)*

The agenda and list of participants are available in Annexes 1 and 2.
The presentation slides are enclosed to these minutes.

1. Welcome and Introduction / Review of action items from 17 May 2022 annual members virtual meeting – Thabi Maitin; Garry Aslanyan

   Thabi welcomed everyone to the meeting and thanked them for joining to assist the group's vision as ESSENCE. She reminded the participants of the group's work in facilitating potential collaborations, as well as what ESSENCE represents - an ambit, in which funders can feel they have a safe space to share ideas, find synergies, and new pockets of collaboration.

   The link to the notes on the website has been shared with the broader members via email in advance of the meeting. The Steering Committee (SC) has been looking at the implementation of some of the items discussed at the meeting

2. Draft quick guide for funders on effective research capacity strengthening: review and endorsement - Garry Aslanyan, Frederic Nduhirabandi, MRC South Africa, Imelda Bates, Liverpool School of Tropical Medicine (LSTM).

   Background

   - The guide is a new document jointly developed by ESSENCE and the Liverpool School of Tropical Medicine (LSTM). It is being presented at this meeting for final review endorsement by the members.
   - There was a working group collected and volunteered from across different countries, and the team also worked with the small group set up by ESSENCE and another at LSTM who pulled all the evidence together and packaged it into three key areas.
   - The document was developed to respond directly to some of the funders working with LSTM, to help produce a more evidence formed approach and to put together a common platform that all the funders could use.
   - It is a more operational document that is expected to help funders who are either doing or are considering to do the work in capacity strengthening as separately or as part of their programs.

- While the document has gone through several iterations and discussion through emails, a useful part of the process involved collecting case studies from funders to highlight some of the key issues in the field and to try and align it with other ESSENCE good practice documents.
- Many of ESSENCE funders have engaged with other centers that worked on the document including LSTM based on their experiences and work with funders.

Brief Review

- For those in the practice and field of any research capacity strengthening (RCS) and development, the guide is easy to use. It offers the necessary tool to initiate, execute and evaluate programs in the context of RCS and development.
- Compared to other books or journals available online, in which the evidence is scattered and fragmented in different sectors and types of journals, the guide provides all the necessary information in one document including case studies to verify and compare with what the user intended to do.
- There is also a concise summary that users can use for any specific program in context that gives a holistic view of everything in the guide; as well as evidence to be able to measure whether their investment in capacity strengthening has been valuable or not.
- The guide would enhance the design, implementation and evaluation of programs in three areas that have been focused on, and help funders to compare with such capacity strengthening activities across different programs and between different funders programs.
- This is expected to accelerate learning about how to do capacity strengthening better, and to make the best use of limited resources.
- Priority for doing the work is to try and make global partnerships more equitable, and to help improve resilience so that researchers and the research institutions can respond better to national priorities. The presentation slides are annexed to these minutes.

Input from participants

- A call was made to have the document translated into other languages similar to other ESSENCE publications. It was mentioned that this would be possible.
- Rather than consider its potential for adaptation, it was suggested to have it a bit more tailored for the different uses, and by different groups or entities.
- It was mentioned that the document has been purposefully developed in that way and may not be needing a lot of adaptations for different specialities. The LSTM team has drawn evidence from health, natural and social sciences, although health has always been the lead when searching for the strengthening of capacity.
- The CIHR team would shop it within the agency to get more holistic sort of feedback from its different branches including their partners and other global health groups. In principle, the agency endorsed the document considering it fits under its learning health and system portfolio.
- With regard to how it could be disseminated in order to maximize the reach of the finished product down the line, the participants were encouraged to share the pdf version with their networks, colleagues within their agency, and on their agencies' webpage.
- ESSENCE would also put together virtual workshops where certain parts of the document would be looked at in more detail, and with the cases unpacked.

CAVEAT: *Most of the evidence that has been published that the team collected has been based in health primarily or science-related research programs. While the team does not lay claim that the guide is going to be useful for humanities or other areas, they would still consider it as being generic since it would not be too difficult to adapt.*

NEXT STEP: *The team is going to finalize the document since readers and designers have looked and been through it, and then obviously to disseminate and promote uptake of it. The team at LSTM will also try to produce a companion guide for researchers that aligns with the current one.*

3. Update from ESSENCE Working Groups

A. Implementation Research (IR) - Morven Roberts, *Global Alliance for Chronic Diseases (GACD)*

- The working group (WG) back in 2022 surveyed ESSENCE members to identify where there may be gaps and opportunities in the field of IR that the members might address jointly.
- The priority topic that emerged was a perceived "disconnect between clinical trials and implementation."
- Research demonstrating intervention (randomised controlled trial -RCT) effectiveness is seldom in itself enough to convince decision makers to take up the intervention context factors. These are specifically, operational, political, and societal feasibility and acceptability; plus costs, sustainability, and scalability, which can significantly impact whether an intervention is adopted into practice. Implementation research (IR) explores the context, providing evidence for optimising uptake.
- As funding agencies, we may inadvertently accentuate the disconnect by not supporting or linking both RCT and IR. The WG is therefore interested in understanding and exploring this issue further with a number of potential activities.
- However, the group has a little less resource than originally anticipated and so will streamline the activity as much as possible. A short high-level survey amongst ESSENCE members is planned as a first step, to determine where fundamentals of disconnect may arise, and what some funding agencies may be already doing to reduce any disconnect.
- Thereafter the WG plan to prepare case studies of best practice to provide some guidance to funding agencies who may be interested reducing the disconnect between trials and IR.
- The anticipated output will be a type of a quick practice guide for funding agencies to understand better how they might reduce any disconnect and hence barriers in getting effective research through into practice.
- The WG is a small one, but anyone with an interest in the question is encouraged to join.

B. Research Management (RM) – Garry Aslanyan

- The members of the group have worked on further disseminating the second edition of the *five keys* good practice document around research costing.
- Have plans to develop some training materials around it in 2022, but are hopeful to complete that this year.
- The group also conducted a survey of members around a broad range of issues but narrowed it down to professionalization of research in the area of RM and how funders can be involved in supporting this area, especially in LMICs.
- More work will be done in the area of supporting professionalization of research going forward.

C. Working Group on Review of Investments (WGRI) – Thabi Maitin

- The working group met in March 2023 to revisit the outcomes from the Third meeting of the ESSENCE Mechanism, as well as identified a volunteer from NIH to co-chair the group with SAMRC.
- Are hopeful that the revised manuscript from the 2022 meeting submitted to the Annals of Global Health would be accepted. This is to ensure that the mandate received about the mechanism gets documented for it to be in the public space.
- Priority was to model the mechanism in-country, for which a lot of work went into deciding what countries ESSENCE could actually establish national mechanisms for coordination.
- The group would welcome ideas on research capacity investments in LMICs, and how to chat the way forward on making the Mechanism work in-country to improve coordination and collaboration in research capacity investments.

Input from participants

- The ongoing challenges in the area of research ethics, and the work that could be done around good practices, examples, and capacity strengthening resources, were raised.

- The growing interest and commitments from many stakeholders to make research a sort of database and open information not just in terms of the published articles, but the data sets for research projects, were also raised as important areas to consider.
- Emphasis was given to the topic of data management for research funders. What role can ESSENCE play in this area, and how can donors support that? What are the experiences or lessons learned and the practices, including in capacity strengthening on the topic?
- These issues would be put as priority areas for the ESSENCE SC to look into, as well as see if other agencies are interested in order to bring them together.

4. Working Groups continued, Q&A, expressions of interest to join working groups or suggestions for potential new areas

- Expressions of interest to join working groups or suggestions for potential new areas were solicited from members present at this meeting.
- Participants were encouraged to consider colleagues in other parts of their organizations so as to reach out for new members, or interested in some of the topics discussed at this meeting. Noting the more diverse the working groups are, the better.

5. ESSENCE Steering Committee (SC) Elections timeline and process
   - The current committee has expired in terms of the original plan indicated in the Essentials of ESSENCE.
   - The Head of Secretariat will send an email to the broader members asking them to express interest and nominate themselves or others within their organizations to be part of the SC. Not more than one representative from each agency for a two year commitment for SC.
   - New, same or a combination of people can express interest, although there is a limited number stated in the Essentials. There may or may not be an election, but based on what is received, this could be discussed further.
   - The committee meets 10 times a year except in July and August, and is supported by the Secretariat, which is increasingly decreasing.
   - The new committee, which is expected to be formed soon will then select a chair or co-chairs out of the group. Until the new committee is formed, the current is still the committee.

6. Plan for a face-to-face side meeting at EDCTP Forum in Paris November 2023
   - Tentatively scheduled for Paris at the side of the 11th EDCTP forum in November.
   - It is potentially an event and a place that many ESSENCE members will be attending because its mainly Europeans and African institutions.

Action (s):

- *The Secretariat to put out a communication listing all the working groups and inviting people to express interest without prejudice.*
- *Send an email to the broader members asking people to express interest to be part of the SC, with a 3-4 weeks deadline.*

Final remarks by Thabi Maitin, Co-Chair, ESSENCE:

Thabi thanked everyone for their time, input and for a great gathering. She reiterated that the next members' face-to-face meeting will be at the side of the 11th EDCTP forum, the precise date will be confirmed.

Annex 1: AGENDA

Wednesday, 05 April

14:55	*Participants should connect at least 5 minutes in advance*
15:00	1. Welcome and introduction ▪ Thabi Maitin, Co-Chair ESSENCE, *Co-Chair Working Group on Review of Investments (WGRI).* ▪ Maria Teresa Bejarano, Sida, Co-Chair ESSENCE, *Senior Research Adviser, Department for partnership and Innovations, Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency (Sida)*
15:05	2. Review of action items from 17 May 2022 annual members virtual meeting and regular updates to members during the year ▪ Garry Aslanyan, *Head of Secretariat, (WHO/TDR)*
15:10	3. Draft quick guide for funders on effective research capacity strengthening: review and endorsement ▪ Garry Aslanyan, Frederick Nduhirabandi, MRC South Africa, Imelda Bates, Liverpool School of Tropical Medicine (LSTM).
15:40	4. Update from ESSENCE Working Groups – Implementation Research (IR), Research Management (RM), Working Group on Review of Investments (WGRI) – Presentation 5 minutes each followed by discussion ▪ Kathleen Victoir, *Institut Paseur (IP);* Thabi Maitin, SAMRC; Morven Robert, *GACD;* Garry Aslanyan.
16:00	Photo de famille and short break
16:05	5. Working Groups continued, Q&A, expressions of interest to join working groups or suggestions for potential new areas - all
16:10	6. ESSENCE SC Elections timeline and process - all
16:15	7. Updates from members – all
16:20	8. Plan for face-to-face side meeting at EDCTP Forum in Paris November 2023 – all
16:25	9. Wrap up / Final remarks, Co-Chairs ESSENCE Adjourn at 16:30

Annex 2: List of Participants

Steering Committee Members		
Thabi Maitin	*Thabimaitin@gmail.com*	Co-Chair ESSENCE, Co-Chair WGRI
Val Snewin	*val.snewin@dhsc.gov.uk*	Department of Health and Social Care, UK (DHSC)
Christine Sizemore	*christine.sizemore@nih.gov*	Fogarty International Centre / U.S. National Institutes of Health (FIC/NIH)
Montasser Kamal	*mkamal@idrc.ca*	International Development Research Centre (IDRC), Canada
Garry Aslanyan	*aslanyang@who.int*	ESSENCE Secretariat, WHO/TDR
Meeting Participants		
Branwen Hennig	*B.Hennig@wellcome.org*	Wellcome, UK
Margaret McCluskey	*mmccluskey@usaid.gov*	United States Agency for International Development (USAID), USA
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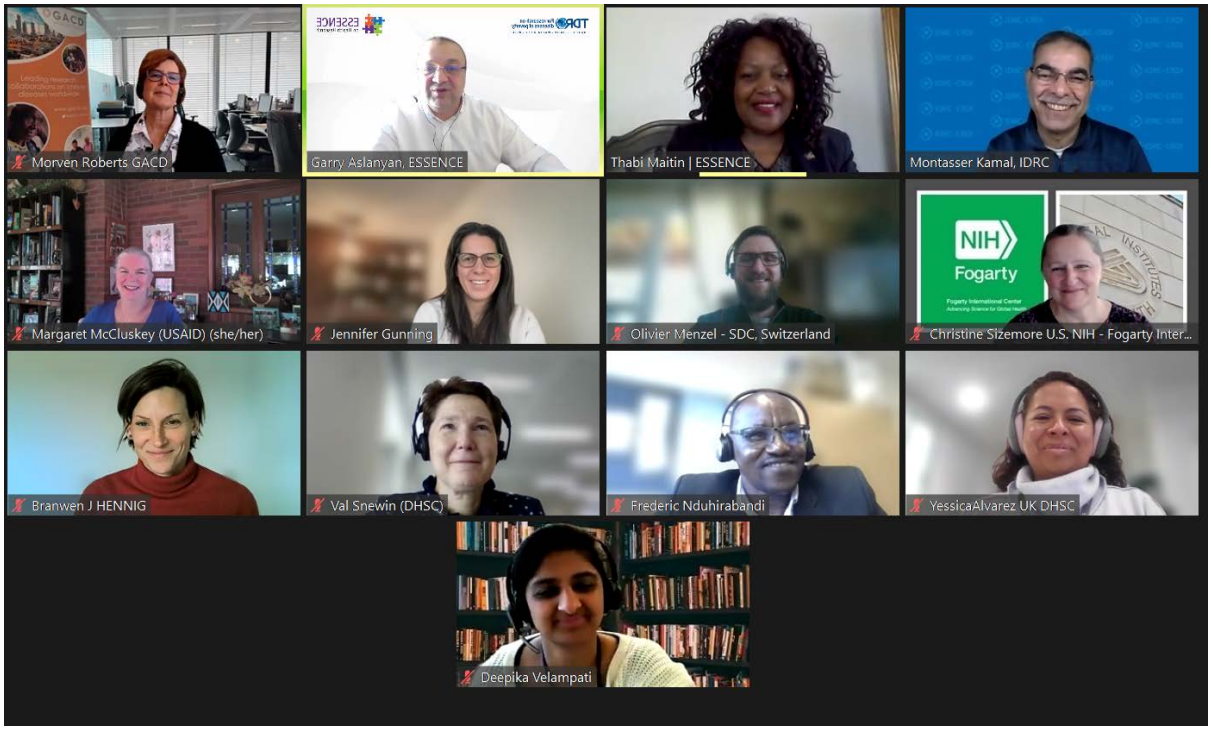
Marisa Creatore	*Marisa.Creatore@cihr-irsc.gc.ca*	Canadian Institutes of Health Research (CIHR/IRSC), Canada
Frederic Nduhirabandi	*Frederic.Nduhirabandi@mrc.ac.za*	Medical Research Council, South Africa (SAMRC)
Yessica Alvarez	*Yessica.Alvarez@dhsc.gov.uk*	Department of Health and Social Care, UK (DHSC)
Imelda Bates	*imelda.bates@lstmed.ac.uk*	Liverpool School of Tropical Medicine
Deepika Velampati	*Deepika.velampati@nih.com*	NIH/National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases (NIAID)
Olivier Menzel	*Olivier.menzel@eda.admin.ch*	Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation Federal Department of Foreign Affairs (SDC/DEZA), Switzerland

Photo de famille



ESSENCE Meeting
5 April 2023

LSTM
CENTRE FOR CAPACITY RESEARCH

ESSENCE on Health Research

Why do funders want a 'quick guide' on research capacity strengthening (RCS)?

The problem

- Many $billion have been spent on strengthening research capacity
- Much of this has been invested in activities that were not based on evidence, and which were not measured
- Funders do not know if their investment produced meaningful outcomes and impact

The purpose

- To assist funders (and ultimately, their awardees) to use an evidence-informed and common approach to programmes with a research capacity strengthening (RCS) component
- To enhance the design, implementation and evaluation of RCS programmes
- To enable comparisons among RCS programmes and accelerate learning about how to make the best use of RCS resources
- To ultimately create more equitable global partnerships and resilience to respond to national priorities

How was the ‘quick RCS guide’ developed?

- Co-developed with funders (health and non-health) in low-, middle- and high-income countries
- Co-produced by CCR-LSTM and ESSENCE members
- CCR collated evidence, produced draft
- Facilitated discussions, workshops and revisions with ESSENCE working group
- Collated funders’ case studies to highlight key issues
- Adheres to the style of ESSENCE Good Practice guides

The ‘*quick guide*’ applies particularly to **health and science-related research programmes in low- and middle-income countries** since the evidence is derived primarily from these contexts.

However, lessons learned are widely applicable and we have made the contents relevant to a range of disciplines and contexts.

Definition and Principles

Definition of research capacity strengthening:
"*enhancing the capacity of individuals and organisations to conduct, manage, share and apply research, while enabling national and sub-national research systems to effectively support research and the linkages between research and practice.*"

Three central principles underpin this definition and inform the *quick guide*:

1. RCS takes place at, and between, the individual, institutional and 'societal' levels;

2. RCS has different dimensions related to national, institutional and programme strategies, resources, leadership systems, infrastructure, skills and culture;

3. RCS is an emergent, systemic and long-term process in which everyone involved has a responsibility (and a right) to contribute and benefit.

A *quick guide* for funders – layout and content

Section 1: Understanding the concept	When funding for RCS works
Section 2: Design of RCS programmes	Equity in research partnerships Genuine partnerships Communication with applicants Developing individual and institutional needs
Section 3: Tools to assess RCS applications	Panel members and proposals Evaluation of proposals against measurable long-terms goals Inclusivity and knowledge sharing
Section 4: Evaluating RCS programmes and learning for future practice	Building interdisciplinarity Assessing project impacts Knowledge translation

A quick guide for funders – layout and content contd.

Published, valid and robust indicators for measuring many aspects of RCS are scarce, and data tend to be more descriptive than quantitative. This makes the evaluation and selection of RCS proposals difficult and complex. Increasingly, RCS funders are seeking to collaborate with researchers to develop appropriate, evidence-based processes and indicators for monitoring the impact of funded RCS.[13]

In general, assessment panels check that applicants have identified important research capacity gaps and needs, confirm that this process was consultative and inclusive, and discern whether the RCS response strategies devised seem appropriate (with reference to measurable baselines or benchmarks). In other words, panel members assess proposals to ensure that awardees:

- demonstrate their awareness of funders' requirements for RCS impacts;
- explicitly align their activities with an overarching framework or ToC related to RCS in their institution and/or region;
- show that they have included diverse partner needs and interests (individual and institutional) when prioritising RCS initiatives;
- explain how, after consulting with the staff cohort at all levels, they conducted a baseline assessment and developed their RCS action plan with partner institutions;
- use evaluation tools and indicators to measure impact at the end of a funding cycle that cover the individual, institutional, regional and/or societal levels, as well as a broad range of research capacity changes. These changes should include quantifiable and unquantifiable, tangible and intangible, technical and managerial, strategic and operational, programme- and institution-oriented, short- and long-term shifts.

Towards the end of a funding cycle, when it's time to assess and evaluate its impact, funders should consider asking all awardees to report against a small set of common indicators derived from the funding programme's ToC.

Sub-sections consist of:

- a short explanation of each topic based on evidence (with key references) and
- highlights important aspects for funders to consider

Case 6 Capacity assessments inform programme decision-making

One Health is a global movement that acknowledges that human health is inseparable from the health of all life on Earth. The movement is bringing multiple sectors together to collaborate on the design and implementation of programmes, policies, legislation and research, with the aim of achieving better health outcomes for our planet and all who live here.

The One Health Regional Network for the Horn of Africa (HORN) is a multi-disciplinary, international partnership of universities and research institutions based in Kenya, Ethiopia, Somalia, Somaliland, Eritrea and the UK, as well as some national and international funding organisations and NGOs.

Shortly after it was established, HORN undertook a series of capacity assessments to identify gaps in its partner institutions' facilities. These were prioritised and reflected in action plans. As a result, the University of Addis Ababa decided to use some of the allocated funding to obtain 26 new biological microscopes and a teleconferencing system. A similar assessment at the University of Nairobi led to the refurbishment of an old cold-storage facility, enabling staff to remove temporary cold-storage equipment from laboratories and corridors, and freeing up space for researchers.

Lessons learned

- Research institutions in many LMICs cannot rely on state funding, so research budgets have to include allocations for the purchase, maintenance and eventual replacement of basic infrastructure and resources.
- It takes time to build and adequately equip multi-regional and multi-disciplinary partnerships, and funders must therefore plan for long-term involvement.

HORN is partly funded by UK's Global Challenges Research Fund. For more information, see http://onehealthhorn.net.

A quick guide for funders – Case Studies

Eleven short case studies drawn from funders' experiences of RCS programmes

Checklist Tool

Effective research capacity strengthening: checklist for funders

Designing RCS programmes

- ✓ Are the RCS goals of your programme clearly articulated and have you indicated the pathways by which you expect the goals to be achieved, using a theory of change (ToC) or equivalent framework?
- ✓ Have you clarified whether the RCS programme aims to benefit individuals, institutions or (inter) national research systems (or which combinations of these)?
- ✓ Is RCS the primary programme objective or is RCS embedded in a larger research programme? If it is embedded, what proportion of effort and resources should be devoted to RCS?
- ✓ Where RCS is embedded in a larger research programme, have you allowed for the additional time and resources awardees need for RCS activities (including to establish understanding and trust across multiple disciplines and to obtain ethics approvals – possibly in multiple countries)?
- ✓ Have you considered including a specialist RCS 'learning team' to support awardees with RCS-related activities and evaluations (especially at institutional level), and to generate data that will help funders improve current and future programmes?

Providing guidance for applicants on funders' expectations

- ✓ Have you informed applicants of your expectations regarding RCS achievements and given them your programmes' ToC or equivalent framework? Have you made applicants aware that their own ToC or framework should align with yours?
- ✓ Have you told applicants that you expect them to use published evidence (and not rely purely on personal or anecdotal experience) to design and evaluate their RCS approaches?
- ✓ Where RCS components are embedded within a larger research project, have you made it clear to applicants what weighting to allocate to RCS compared to the primary research, and (broadly) how you expect them to assess and report on RCS processes and achievements?
- ✓ Have you given applicants access to resources (such as webinars, Q&A sessions, FAQs with responses, publications) to help them align their RCS efforts with your programme's vision and optimise the quality of their RCS approaches?
- ✓ Have you made it explicit that you require all RCS activities to be designed with a view to ensuring local ownership and long-term sustainability and not just paying lip-service to these goals?
- ✓ Are awardees aware that they need to consider development needs of everyone involved in the research process (not just the researchers) and make sure that where training is provided for individuals, this also meets their institutions' expressed needs and priorities?
- ✓ Have you encouraged awardees to support potentially disadvantaged members of the research team (for example, people with caring responsibilities, different first languages, mobility restrictions) in ways that enable them to contribute fully?
- ✓ Have you considered providing RCS sessions for successful awardees at your first pan-programme meeting to brief them about your RCS requirements, and provide individualised support to help them improve their plans for conducting and evaluating their RCS activities?

Selecting and informing panels that assess RCS applications

- ✓ Have you put together a diverse and gender-balanced selection panel (including representation from LMICs if appropriate) with relevant experience, skills and knowledge of the evidence related to implementing RCS for individuals, institutions and (inter)national systems?
- ✓ Do panel members have clear information about your expectations and assessment criteria regarding RCS activities including what weighting should be given to RCS compared to other components in the application?
- ✓ Have you provided an evaluation template that the panel can use that shows how your programme-level ToC aligns with the guidance and resources provided for applicants?
- ✓ Are the panel aware that (where appropriate) you would like them to assess the quality and effectiveness of multi-disciplinary collaborations in the applications, beyond simply listing disciplines and numbers of collaborations?
- ✓ Are the panel aware that applications should outline how opportunities for equitable development will be provided (for management, administrative and technical staff, etc.) and that they should also consider the needs of the institutions and/or (inter)national research systems?
- ✓ Have the panel been instructed to select applications that promote institutional leadership, ownership and sustainability of RCS impacts, and which provide evidence that these align with institutional needs?
- ✓ Is the panel aware that applicants should build on existing institutional systems rather than set up parallel processes?

Evaluating RCS outcomes and impacts to improve future practice

- ✓ Among the many possible options, are you clear about how you want awardees to measure and report on their RCS efforts? Have you considered whether any of these measures should be the same across all projects within a programme in order to accelerate learning about how to improve RCS initiatives?
- ✓ Have you considered how you will demonstrate that your programmes' RCS goals have been achieved and do these go beyond simply numbers of people trained and workshops held? For example, how will you know whether RCS improvements are locally owned and embedded, whether and how they have impacted institutions' systems or research environment and culture, and whether the changes are sustainable?
- ✓ Many RCS impacts will occur several years after a programme has finished and cannot be measured, but are awardees aware that you need them to demonstrate the ways in which they are on a trajectory towards achieving these impacts?
- ✓ Have you considered offering tapering funds to support and document post-programme RCS sustainability? Would you consider providing limited funds so that awardees can collect data to understand why and how RCS success was or was not achieved?
- ✓ Have you considered joining or setting up an RCS learning network among funders you work with to collect and share data on RCS, and to inform future agendas for research on RCS?

Impact of using the '*quick guide*' for improving RCS

The '*quick guide*' will **expand the quality, reach and impact of RCS programmes** through:

- More equitable partnerships, including south-south and south-north learning and sharing
- Measurable - and needs-driven - enhanced ability to do and manage research that meets national priorities
- More conducive and supportive research environments globally that put wellbeing and integrity at the centre, and which value everyone's contribution to the research process

What next?

- Finalise, disseminate and promote uptake of the '*quick guide*'
- Continue to expand RCS evidence and fill knowledge gaps
- Produce a companion '*quick guide on RCS*' for researchers

A quick guide for funders - Working Group Members

Frederic Nduhirabandi, Medical Research Council, South Africa
Tade Aina, Mastercard Foundation
Karen Gosch, GIZ
Theresa Köbe and **Detlef Boecking**, DLR Projektträger
Sepo Hachigonta, National Research Foundation South Africa
Branwen Hennig, Wellcome
Sue Kinn, UK Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office
Linda Kupfer, National Institutes of Health (USA)
Lydia Manoti, African Academy of Sciences
Kemi Oladapo, ESSENCE Secretariat
Charlotte Seeley-Musgrave, UK Department of Health and Social Care

Additional Input from: European and Developing Countries Clinical Trials Partnership & UK Collaborative on Development Research