

A Network-based Approach to Brokering Research Evidence for Impact

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Summary

This section outlines the Impact Initiative's approach and learning on strengthening relationships and networks across an epistemic community of researchers funded by the UK's Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC) and Foreign, Commonwealth & Development Office (FCDO) (formerly Department for International Development – DFID). A key element of the Impact Initiative's strategy to maximise the impact of a diverse portfolio of research was to act as a broker to create connections and build networks between researchers and with policy audiences. Social network analysis (SNA) was used throughout the programme to monitor and generate evidence of how Impact Initiative activities strengthened connections and networks and to reflect and learn about our different strategies to broker research evidence. This section is structured around a series of different examples of how SNA was applied to explore this concept of brokerage to share our learning on:

- Identifying synergies and connecting bodies of knowledge by building relationships across research communities
- Facilitating spaces that promote engagement between researchers and policy audiences and creating opportunities to discuss and interact around evidence findings
- Supporting repeat engagement and furthering our understanding of the concept of sustained interactivity as a key element of effective research–policy partnerships.

3.1 The Impact Initiative's brokering approach

A key element of the Impact Initiative's strategy to maximise the impact of a diverse portfolio of research was to act as a broker to create connections and build networks between researchers and with policy audiences. This section outlines the Impact Initiative's approach and learning on strengthening relationships and networks across an epistemic community of over 200 projects funded by the ESRC and FCDO to connect communities of researchers, practitioners, and policy professionals and to generate insights into how research evidence informs decision making. We have used social network analysis (SNA) to visualise and analyse the network structures created by building relationships among research projects and facilitating their access to policy conversations and spaces. This visual approach provides a valuable perspective to demonstrate the concept of brokerage, defined as strengthening relationships to support the effective use of evidence in policy contexts.

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The Impact Initiative's approach to brokering aimed to strengthen relationships and support networks at a portfolio level to demonstrate the whole as more than the sum of its parts. Our theory of change was based upon the assumption that a networked approach could add value to the evidence, building upon a body

of evidence that suggests the ‘impact of evidence on development policy and practice is a social and interactive process built on personal relationships and social networks’ (Georgalakis *et al.* 2017: 17). Our emphasis on establishing and strengthening relationships demanded taking a systemic approach that would create more effective channels to support research uptake than by focusing on single projects and would position grantholders to supply research evidence and respond to emerging policy opportunities.

This strategy emphasised the brokerage role of the Impact Initiative through two pathways:

1) The first brokerage pathway was to build networks and strengthen relationships within an epistemic community of researchers across two ESRC-FCDO (formerly DFID) grant portfolios – the Joint Fund for Poverty Alleviation (Joint Fund) and the Raising Learning Outcomes in Education Systems Research Programme (RLO). This involved navigating and exploring synergies across a large and complex portfolio of research, including grants of different durations, thematic focus, methodologies, and scale, to identify complementary bodies of knowledge and opportunities for cohesion around key messages.

2) The second brokerage pathway involved understanding the wider context that the research could be situated in and creating opportunities and facilitating spaces to connect researchers to relevant policy and practitioner conversations in order to use this evidence base to offer diverse methodological and thematic perspectives and solutions to development challenges.

An emerging dimension of our brokerage approach was our growing awareness of the importance of sustained interactivity. This concept emerged from Impact Initiative work (Georgalakis and Rose 2019a)¹ to reflect on the qualities and challenges of establishing effective partnerships that informed an analytical framework that identifies three key qualities: sustained interactivity, bounded mutuality, and policy adaptability. Georgalakis and Rose (2019b) explore the interactivity of these concepts and argue that an assessment of partnerships intended to increase the use of evidence in policymaking must look beyond shared agendas and analyse ‘sustained interactivity’ between members of the partnerships, concluding that ‘sustained interactivity that strengthens networks and results in changes in relationships appear equally important to promoting evidence use’ (p. 7).

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Our work explored the potential of SNA to demonstrate how the Impact Initiative was linking bodies of knowledge within and across research portfolios through its synthesis publications and engagement events. These data were used both for accountability as part of our annual funder reporting and to inform our own learning and reflections on how effective our different outputs, events, and activities were in delivering our outcome goal of quality engagement that would bridge academic, policy, and practitioner communities. The section will share our learning on three different ways that SNA has been used to inform our thinking and reporting on our brokerage role to contribute to:

- 1 Building relationships and supporting synergies across evidence findings.** Sub-section 3.3.1 outlines our learning and reflections on how effective our communications and engagement activities were in establishing connections and strengthening relationships amongst researchers.
- 2 Sustained engagement to promote effective research–policy partnerships.** Sub-section 3.3.2 discusses the data generated from tracking researchers, policy, and practitioner engagement over multiple years that supported our learning on sustained interaction as an essential component of brokering research evidence for impact.
- 3 Creating spaces to facilitate engagement and linkages between converging sectors.** Sub-section 3.3.3 presents the application of SNA to proactively promote networking between researchers, policymakers, and practitioners to identify new opportunities to collaborate across diverse thematic areas and geographies.

Social network analysis is an established methodology within the social sciences that is used to understand the actors or nodes within a network, the relationships that exist between them within a specific space or domain, and the network structure that is created through these interactions. There is a significant

literature that explores how these social structures can explain power, influence, and access to resources within social groups. Metrics are often used to identify key network positions that link otherwise disconnected segments of the network, creating both possible entry points to access new information and connections and potential bottlenecks that can control the flow of information between clusters of connected actors. A lesser explored area of SNA is the use of two-mode or bipartite networks (Borgatti and Everett 1997), which can demonstrate patterns created by interactions between people and events as used by Davis *et al.* (1941) in their influential study on social class relationships. Two-mode networks are not direct social connections between individuals or organisations but proxies of a relationship based on a mutual connection through an event or collaboration on a publication.

This section presents examples of how two-mode network mapping was used to demonstrate programme-level knowledge brokering across a diverse global portfolio of research. These network maps were used to visualise collaborations among research projects to deliver outputs and activities as well as the interactions between researchers and policymakers at multiple events and spaces that created opportunities for policy engagement. This network-based approach has potential value for similar initiatives that wish to maximise the impact of evidence across research portfolios. Our experience also provides insights into the challenges of establishing connections across thematically and geographically diverse research grants and building relationships that can provide policy actors with timely and relevant research evidence.

3.2 Applying social network analysis to explore the different dimensions of brokerage in research–policy linkages

Our approach is grounded in a wide body of literature that explores the complexity and non-linearity of the research to policy interface that invariably emphasises the importance of building long-term relationships and networks as a way to gain insights into policy problems and build credibility within the policy arena to eventually gain access to opportunities to shape policy agendas (Oliver and Cairney 2019; Mayne *et al.* 2018; Cairney and Kwiatkowski 2017; Jessani, Kennedy and Bennett 2017; Tilley *et al.* 2017). Establishing trust is repeatedly mentioned as a key prerequisite for effective research to policy relationships with strong emphasis on building relationships with policymakers, as well as potential allies and advocates, as a necessary investment in creating future opportunities to influence policy (Cairney and Kwiatkowski 2017; Kingdon 2003; Mayne *et al.* 2018).

This advice to researchers also converges with a growing literature that describes how SNA has been used to explore the concept of brokerage and to demonstrate the relational dynamics of pathways to policy impact (Jessani *et al.* 2018; Jessani, Boulay

and Bennett 2016; Cvitanovic *et al.* 2017; Shearer *et al.* 2018). The ability of SNA to visualise networks can create opportunities to proactively leverage relationships and network structures and better understand the role of informal networks to improve knowledge flows and strengthen efficiency (Jessani *et al.* 2017; Serrat 2017). Network data can reveal inherent power dynamics and vested interests creating an imperative to manage partnerships sensitively to avoid exacerbating existing asymmetries (Faul 2016). A study by Shearer *et al.* (2018) looked at how network structures affect the use of research evidence by three health policy networks in Burkina Faso and the resulting innovativeness of the policies made. They determine that:

...heterogeneous networks are more likely to be exposed to new ideas, and thus to use research evidence and adopt innovative policies. High levels of centralised control and power may support innovation when the new ideas are consistent with the dominant network paradigms; otherwise, new ideas may receive less traction. (Shearer *et al.* 2018)

These power dynamics exist both within and between communities of researchers and policymakers and practitioners and create an additional dimension for brokers to navigate to bring together epistemic communities and connect them to policy conversations.

The Impact Initiative's brokerage approach had two key dimensions: firstly building alliances among researchers with similar agendas, and secondly connecting them to policy conversations. The first dimension is supported by evidence that indicates that connected epistemic communities can be key to influencing policy outcomes as their shared common values, beliefs, and concern for validity give their expertise credibility and increases their ability to make authoritative claims in political spaces (Haas 1992). Furthermore, it has been argued that 'the more internally cohesive an epistemic community, the more likely it will achieve a high degree of influence on policy outcomes' (Cross 2013: 138). We also noted the counter argument that highlights the limitations of homogeneous epistemic communities and their potential for failure in the policy space (Dunlop 2017; Löblová 2017). Thus, working with such a diverse portfolio of research we needed to explore the complementarities of the epistemic communities and their bodies of research and navigate the diverse perspectives to identify the points of cohesion around key policy questions.

The second dimension is based upon broad consensus that academic institutions and government agencies should nurture a variety of relationships to span the boundaries of research production and policy formulation in order to foster an interactive process in which research is informed by policy conversations and research findings are made more relevant to policymakers (van Kammen, de Savigny and Sewankambo 2006; Jessani *et al.* 2016, 2018). This boundary-spanning function is contingent upon observing overlapping networks to bridge the research policy divide and act as conduits to enhance engaged scholarship and promote informed decision making. Further value is added through sustained engagement plus a strong understanding of audiences and how they access and consume evidence. A 'focus on facilitating knowledge exchange means that they assess how different actors understand and process information, and aim to cultivate meaningful, trusted and sometimes sustained relationships among those involved' (Bednarek *et al.* 2018: 1179).

SNA is a valuable tool to understand research to policy linkages but there is acknowledgement that further work is needed to understand their evolution and how these relationships and the network structures they create can be strengthened over time (Jessani *et al.* 2016, 2018). Moreover, there is space for greater sharing of lessons from the evidence for the policy and practice community to explore ways to embed a brokerage function into the design of research systems and to bring together experiences across disciplines to address knowledge gaps about evidence production and use (Oliver and Boaz 2019). There is strong potential for SNA to provide a representation of pathways to policy impact by identifying key stakeholders and their relationships to visualise social structures and reveal informal relations and complex networks. However, there are limitations to effectively capturing knowledge flows and interpreting causation between network structures and outcomes. The insights generated by SNA are substantially strengthened when supplemented with qualitative data to explore the quality of the conversations that result from those connections and how they may or may not support evidence-informed policymaking (Reed, Bryce and Machen 2018; Jessani *et al.* 2017; Popelier 2018).

The literature discussed in this section primarily focuses on communities and samples of interactions that are much more specific than the Impact Initiative's

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work to deliver brokerage at the breadth and scale of a global research portfolio that involved engagement across multiple themes, geographies, and levels, from local to national to regional. There are no definable boundaries to the potential policy and practitioner audiences for the scope of the evidence generated by the RLO and Joint Fund portfolios, which is a key factor in our efforts to both deliver

and map brokerage. Throughout the Impact Initiative we have constantly pursued a balance between breadth of engagement, identifying opportunities and connections across the thematic scope of the multidimensional aspects of poverty alleviation, while supporting sustained interactivity that establishes trust between groups and identifies synergies around complementary agendas.

3.3 Applications of SNA by the Impact Initiative

3.3.1 Building relationships and supporting synergies across evidence findings

Our first example is the application of SNA to demonstrate brokerage across clusters of ESRC-FCDO grantholders, using two-mode network maps to demonstrate how grantholders in the research portfolio engaged with the Impact Initiative through their involvement in the production of outputs or participation at events to generate insights into what brokerage across the portfolio looked like. The maps only included activities that involved more than one grant. As such, outputs that only involved individual grants, such as impact stories (see Section 5 of this report) were not included.

Each year of the Impact Initiative, these data demonstrated the evolution of the brokerage strategy to bring together bodies of knowledge within the portfolios we were supporting. In its first year the Impact Initiative was very much in a scoping phase, characterised by events and outputs that tried to engage with large sections of the portfolio and identify common areas for engagement. The emphasis was on understanding the scope of the portfolio and building relationships with grantholders, delivered through a flagship event in Pretoria to celebrate ten years of the Joint Fund,² as well as working on a number of evidence synthesis products around themes such as gender, children and youth, and health and development. There were also more targeted events, such as one focused on disability working with both Joint Fund and RLO researchers and non-academic partners, including from the South. This provided initial insights into the value of identifying and working across smaller clusters of research grants.

As the Impact Initiative moved into its second year, efforts to strengthen relationships among grantholders and to integrate the RLO and Joint Fund projects began to take shape. This resulted in grantholders' participation in a range of thematically focused outputs and events connecting grants and incorporating learning from multiple studies. These were a combination of Impact Initiative convened events,³ for example on children and poverty research or research focusing on Bangladesh, and facilitating grantholders' participation at broader sectoral events such as the UK Digital Development Summit. The brokerage strategy was still in its infancy, and for the most part repeat interaction across grants was limited, although a small number of researchers began to interact with the Impact Initiative across a number of outputs, events, and

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themes, connecting different areas of work and creating a cohesive network structure that suggested common threads across the diverse bodies of knowledge.

As relationships were strengthened between the Impact Initiative and grantees, brokerage within the portfolio was characterised by many grants engaging with multiple events and outputs and the emergence of different thematic sub-groups around issues such as health, gender, children and youth, and further developing work on education. Group activities included Impact Initiative convened events such as Putting Children First⁴ held in Ethiopia, and facilitating grantees' participation at the Universal Health Care symposium⁵ held in the UK and the United Nations Commission for the Status of Women (UNCSW)⁶ event focusing on social protection held in the USA. These events also created spaces to hear directly from Southern researchers as an integral part of the strategy to connect and support researchers to profile their research and explore the nexus within and across thematic areas.

A key innovation in the Impact Initiative model at this point is the introduction of Research for Policy and Practice papers (R4PPs)⁷ that bring together the evidence of a small group of grants on a specific policy theme (see Section 4 in this report). The SNA data (see, for example, Figure 3.1) demonstrate how R4PPs were frequently distributed at specific events that brought grantees together to discuss their evidence with each other and with policy and practitioner audiences on panels or at other networking opportunities. For example, at a side panel session at the 62nd UNCSW entitled 'How can we improve the life choices for women in rural Africa?' two grantees discussed their research with a leading international advocacy NGO (Georgalakis 2018). The R4PP *Women's Life Choices* was distributed at the event (Benson and Shephard 2018). The Zambia Minister for Gender, Auxilia Bupa Ponga, who attended the event, reflected on the value and utility of the evidence presented:

You can have policies and government programmes but ordinary people look to traditional leaders and communities for advice so when research is community based such as the ESRC-DFID research it is very valuable. Your research can help us understand what girls want and need. Research can provide knowledge validation around community understanding and views – because the research is



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both qualitative and quantitative it can really add value to our understanding of the policy challenges we face in the Zambia.

(Ponga pers. comm. 2018)⁸

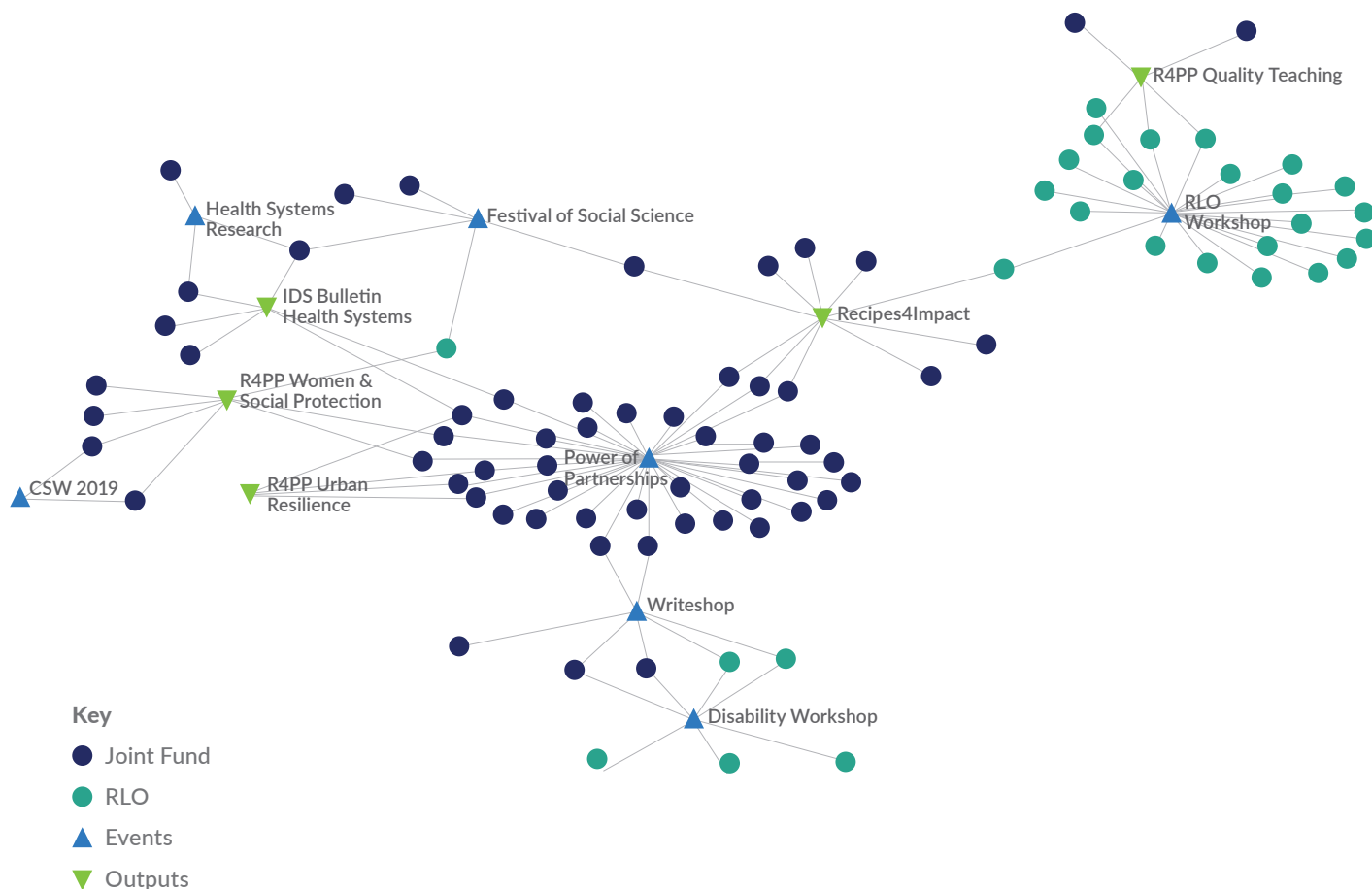
For Nicola Ansell, a grantee who attended the event:

Participation at CSW was a valuable experience to connect our research to international policy audiences. We have existing relationships with policymakers in the countries where we work but it is much harder to connect at the international level. Working with the Impact Initiative has made me think more strategically about how I present my research and think about potential audiences to put greater emphasis on strengthening relationships and ensuring that my presentations are engaging.

(Ansell pers. comm. 2020)⁹

Over six years of using SNA data to report to our funder, the evolving network patterns suggested an increasing confidence and maturity in the brokerage role of the Impact Initiative and our ability to identify synergies and complementarity of the evidence within bodies of knowledge. Work to deliver annual workshops with the RLO grantees were particularly beneficial for building relationships. The example in Figure 3.1 shows how our events and outputs delivered during Year 4 connected grants to contribute a strong policy offer that had more value to decision makers than would be possible by presenting the findings of any individual grant. This highlights the value of working with researchers to strengthen their epistemic communities and explore their different perspectives on the policy solutions in order to bring coherent and comprehensive messages into policy conversations.

Figure 3.1 Example of Impact Initiative engagement across grants reported in Year 4



Source: Impact Initiative

A key moment in the Impact Initiative’s brokerage journey was the second flagship event, the Power of Partnership conference in Delhi in 2018,¹⁰ which brought together 100 researchers, policymakers, and practitioners to celebrate 13 years of the Joint Fund. The networking opportunities and relationships developed at this event and the policy engagement activities in Ethiopia, Somaliland, Uganda, and India that resulted from the connections made are discussed in greater detail in sub-section 3.3.3. Plans for a final flagship event during Year 6 were cut short by Covid-19. However, production of R4PPs continued and the planned reflection and consolidation activities on the range of impact pathways supported by the Impact Initiative during its six years moved online. While opportunities for face-to-face networking were lost, in some cases this shift to online events enabled broader policy audiences who were more easily able to participate in a 90-minute webinar than a multi-day event.

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The Impact Initiative used SNA to report to our funder on how our brokerage strategy was evolving as well as to inform our own reflections on the most agile approach to create and build on relationships across the RLO and Joint Fund portfolios. One of the key factors in this evolution was the building of the Impact Initiative's own relationships with grantholders and increasing knowledge of the research in the portfolios. This increased our ability to identify synergies and mechanisms for grantholders to collaborate on events and outputs. There was also increasing awareness of and trust in the Impact Initiative among grantholders, supporting greater willingness to engage and recognition of the value of the opportunities created to present and discuss their research with policy and practitioner audiences. The network-based approach demonstrates the importance of embedding this brokering and impact support function within a research portfolio in order to build strong relationships that can identify linkages and synergies across research themes and geographies. The following section will discuss how we built upon this foundation to deliver the other key objective of our brokerage strategy to strengthen and sustain connections between researchers, practitioners, and policymakers.

3.3.2 Sustained engagement to promote effective research–policy partnerships

To date, the Impact Initiative has organised 38 face-to-face and virtual events that have brought together 327 grantholders from across 187 Joint Fund and RLO grants, with 667 policymakers and practitioners and an additional 357 academics. These events span six years, four continents, and numerous thematic areas and share a specific emphasis on supporting research–policy networks. Of these, 106 ESRC-FCDO (DFID) grantholders from 71 Joint Fund and RLO projects participated in more than one event, alongside 86 policy actors and practitioners and an additional 35 academics and researchers. In this section, we use repeat participation at events as a proxy of the perceived value of the engagement, based on the assumption that busy professionals would not attend a second event if they had not seen tangible benefits from previous participation.

There was not one model for Impact Initiative events, and numerous examples have emerged over the course of the programme. These include: flagship events that brought together large cohorts of researchers; facilitating grantholder presentations and policy conversations at side events of global policy meetings such as the UNCSW and Health Systems Research; workshops to prepare focused policy messaging to feed into the Global Disability Summit; ensuring a strong research audience at All-Party Parliamentary Groups; creating networking opportunities for researchers and policymakers at conferences such as UKFIET International Conference on Education and Development¹¹ and Comparative and International Education Society (CIES);¹² collaborating on the ESRC Festival of Social Science in 2018 and 2019¹³ as well as the focused events with national policymakers facilitated by the Dragons' Den collaborations (see Shephard 2019), discussed in more detail in sub-section 3.3.3. The key thing that these events had in common was creating opportunities to broker relationships between grantholders, policymakers, and practitioners and discuss how research evidence across multiple grants responded to policy questions and opportunities.

Figure 3.2 shows the network structure created by tracking the participation of individuals (researchers, policy actors, and practitioners) at multiple events as a proxy of the opportunities that the Impact Initiative has created to facilitate conversations around issues of common interest to identify mutual agendas and opportunities for collaboration. Attendance at an event does not offer any guarantee of relationships established or strengthened and cannot prove knowledge flows, but we believe repeat engagement increases the likelihood that connections and trust will develop. This is another two-mode network map that focuses on participants who attended three or more Impact Initiative events and Impact Initiative events that involved three or more grantholders as an example of how SNA can be used to demonstrate the concept of sustained interactivity.

Figure 3.2 Repeat participants at Impact Initiative events



- Key**
- Academics
 - Policy Actor
 - Practitioner
 - Impact Initiative Events

Source: Impact Initiative

This network visualisation provides insights into how researchers, policy actors, and practitioners interacted across multiple events. It helps us to analyse a crucial dimension to the Impact Initiative's brokerage strategy, supporting sustained interaction and creating spaces for researchers and policy audiences to reconnect on specific issues over multiple years to develop trust and build networks that would last beyond the programme itself. Policy conversations around disability and children provide particularly strong examples of this multi-year engagement. For example, researchers who had met at a meeting of the Coalition to end Child Poverty in 2016³ reconnected again at a three-day conference in Ethiopia in 2017⁴ to discuss solutions for fighting child poverty in Africa; this network was built on in 2020 with an online meeting to discuss the benefits of engaging in global movements (Roelen and Shephard 2020). Similarly, those who attended the event on disability in Year 1 re-convened, together with key policy actors focused on education and disability, for a workshop in preparation for the Global Disability Summit. Along the way, targeted outputs including blogs, working papers, key issues guides, podcasts, and articles captured the evolution of these policy conversations. In some cases, this led to a clear commitment for action bringing together researchers, policy actors, and practitioners, as was the case for Putting Children First⁴ and for the Global Disability Summit (Impact Initiative 2018a).

Using network data in this way does not provide empirical evidence of connections created, trust established, or use of evidence in specific research to policy relationships. Further follow-up and feedback from participants is still required to explore the value of the interactions and evidence shared in these events. For example, feedback from participants in the Putting Children First event included:

[The event] uncovered research on key issues around children in poverty that we wouldn't otherwise have been aware of, providing a platform and spotlight for Africa-related and -based research.

(Richard Morgan, Director of the Child Poverty Global Initiative, Save the Children, quoted in IDS 2018: 26)

[The] whole tenor of the conference has provided an additional dimension that we would have missed – the issue of child poverty in inequality. It has also helped to sharpen our messaging when we work with member states.

(Saurabh Sinha, Social Development Policy Division, United Nations Economic Commission for Africa, quoted in IDS 2018: 26)

The network data presented in this section provides insights into what brokering looks like at the level of global research portfolios, where policy networks are disparate and dispersed with multiple interacting factors at play in the research engagement process. Supporting sustained interactions across these groups requires identification of shared interests and agendas that motivate participation and demonstration of the quality of the evidence and value of shared reflection of key issues from the different perspectives of policy, practice, and research. Brokerage to support the desired outcome of evidence-informed policymaking requires time and trust. SNA can provide a snapshot of how relational structures evolve between different groups, but additional qualitative data are needed to fully understand and explore the quality and reciprocity of engagement through these interactions as well as the role of external contextual factors and opportunities to drive decision making.

3.3.3 Creating spaces to facilitate engagement and linkages between converging sectors

Our final example discusses how the Impact Initiative used SNA at events to explicitly encourage networking and provide a real-time visualisation of conversations and interactions between delegates. This approach was first used at the Power of Partnership event held in Delhi in 2018 and subsequently used at the Raising Learning Outcomes annual grantholder meeting in 2019. Both events also included the Dragons' Den methodology (from the eponymous television programme, also known as *Shark Tank*) that invited grantholders to work together to pitch ideas on potential collaborations with Impact Initiative support on policy-influencing activities, providing an additional incentive to create and establish connections.

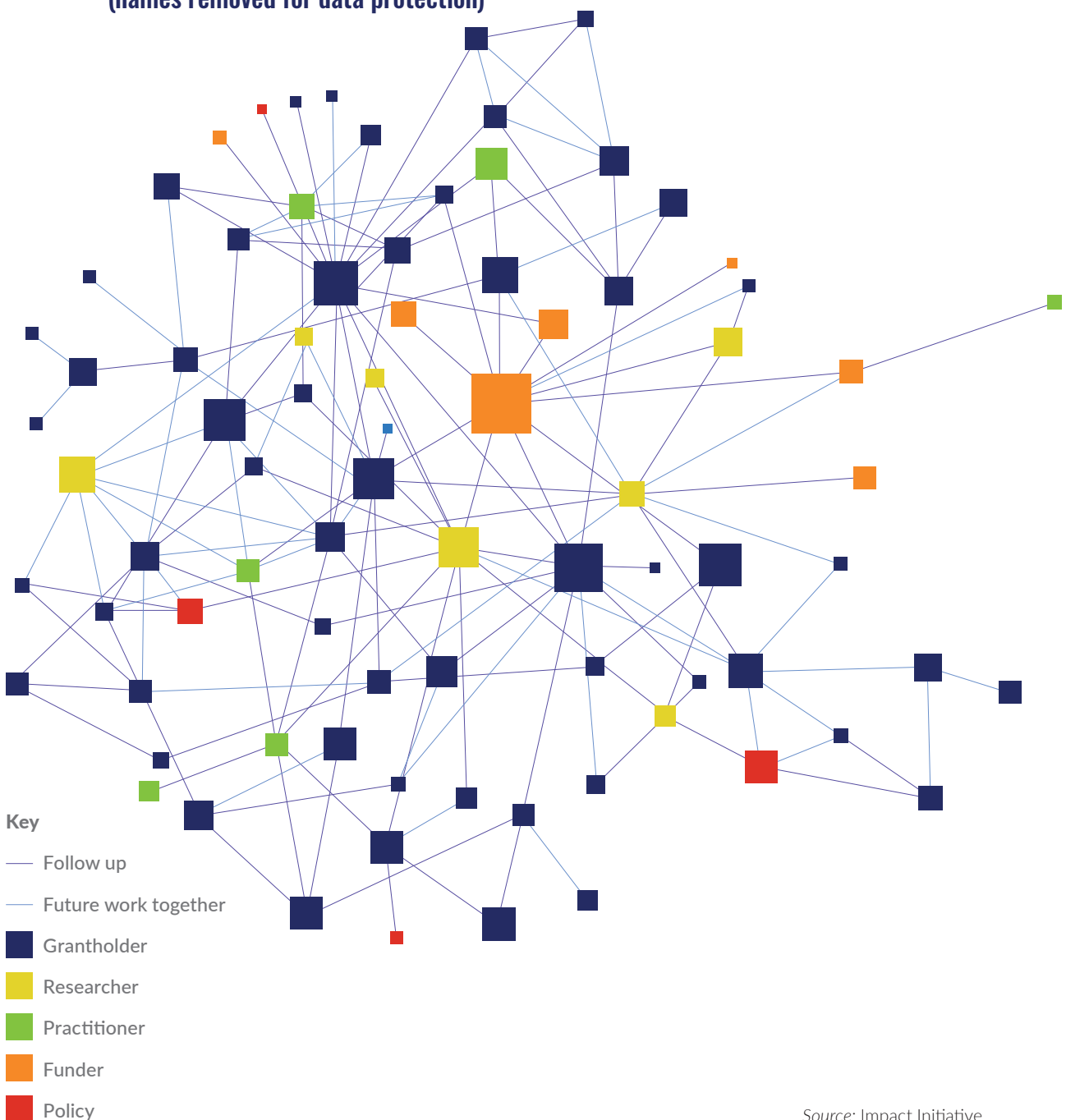
In contrast to the above examples where we analysed our programme monitoring data using different social network software (Netdraw¹⁴ and Kumu¹⁵), this exercise generated data using a licensed application called SumApp.¹⁶ This provided all meeting delegates with a unique web link that took them to a profile page where they could share a photo and some basic biographical information about themselves and see who else was attending the event a few days before the meeting took place. A simple drop-down menu enabled all users to indicate their connections to other delegates and indicate people that they knew prior to the event in terms of whether they had previously

worked together, met, heard of their work, or had some social connection. This provided us with a baseline to track the level of new and strengthened relationships over the course of the event while introducing delegates to others who were attending the conference.

During the event delegates were encouraged to track the people that they had met with whom they had conversations of mutual interest or identified actions for follow-up after the event. The SumApp data was exported to Kumu, an online visualisation platform, and an updated network map was

presented back to delegates in the opening plenary session each morning. This was used as a prompt to encourage people to log their conversations during the day, building momentum around the exercise and incentivising increased participation. The evolving network map was also made available on the project website (Impact Initiative 2018b). Delegates had the option to opt out of the visualisation and not appear in the map by name, although the vast majority were happy to appear in the maps as this also enabled them to locate themselves in the network.

Figure 3.3 Network map of strong relationships established at Power of Partnership conference (names removed for data protection)



Source: Impact Initiative

During the three days of the event, 82 per cent of delegates actively used the tool and 95 per cent of delegates were mentioned. This generated a rich network data set of the different levels of conversations while making the networking value of the meeting explicit and encouraging delegates to be purposive in their conversations to identify future opportunities to collaborate. After the event, these data were filtered to remove connections of people who already had a strong connection or had previously worked together or reported conversations that were not linked to future collaboration or identifying shared areas of interest. Connections to the Impact Initiative team were also removed. This left 267 new connections made between 84 people who agreed to follow up and 73 people who planned to work together in the future. Figure 3.3 shows these 267 connections of which 187 had been made between actors who had not previously met and 68 between actors who had previously communicated but not met. This provides strong evidence that the Impact Initiative had facilitated new and strengthened existing relationships during the conference.

While the tool certainly encouraged proactive networking and generated a rich data set, it was a means and not an end and just one element in bringing grantholders, policymakers, and practitioners together at the event. Providing a concrete focus for these interactions in the form of a research to policy Dragons' Den encouraged researchers to formulate proposals for policy engagement opportunities in their coffee-break conversations and develop a pitch on a policy opportunity to a panel of policymakers and practitioners. These collaborative proposals led to a series of events that put evidence directly into the hands of policymakers addressing issues of youth and disability inclusion in Ethiopia, urban planning in Bangladesh, and transport to support food security in Uganda, each of which was supported by an R4PP. The networking and Dragons' Den combination was also used at the RLO annual meeting and generated a pitch from SCAFFOLD (Stakeholder Convergence

for Focus on Learner Disadvantage), which went on to deliver a national networking event (De and Samson 2020) and policy brief (De *et al.* 2019) to share emerging findings from seven projects to 39 policymakers and key stakeholders including government, NGOs, and journalists. Connections made at this event led to plans for one project to discuss their findings with state government officials and teachers, which were unfortunately postponed by Covid-19. However the evidence synthesis and policy conversations to date:

...will serve to substantively enhance our understanding of critical governance questions in education. I believe this work offers us the foundation for building new analytical frameworks and identifying new forms of practice that will serve to shift India's education system firmly in the direction of improving quality and inclusiveness.

(Yamini Aiyar, Chief Executive, Centre for Policy and Research, India, quoted in Impact Initiative 2020: 1)

These events provided a further platform to consolidate relationships between researchers and create new connections to policymakers, presenting their combined research evidence to feed into policy conversations at the national level.

While the majority of development professionals, be they academics, policymakers, or practitioners, acknowledge the networking value of events and meetings to make new connections and listen to new ideas, this example highlights the benefit of making that networking explicit and providing a visual reference that both encourages and supports connections. The connections created have led to collaborations to deliver the policy events mentioned above as well as establishing lasting connections among researchers who have gone on to collaborate on future funding calls, bringing together their different perspectives and building upon existing networks and evidence to continue to explore solutions to development challenges.

3.4 Conclusion

Our experience has demonstrated the value of network analysis to both monitor our performance and inform our strategy to deliver programme-level brokerage to strengthen relationships among researchers and create connections to policy

conversations. Tracking these interactions over the six years of the Impact Initiative has generated a valuable dataset to demonstrate the evolution of our brokerage pathways and reflect on the challenges of bringing people together across sectors and disciplines. The

use of two-mode or bipartite network mapping supports new learning around how knowledge-brokering projects can use events and outputs to build relationships and support sustained interaction around key thematic areas. Used systematically, SNA has potential to support brokerage initiatives to promote collaboration among research cohorts by building awareness of how relational structures can be leveraged to maximise evidence uptake. Although SNA

data alone are insufficient evidence that brokerage and strengthened networks increase evidence use, these data can help us to better understand the different dimensions of brokerage and explore the relational patterns created by sustained interactions. This can help us to understand the ways in which research knowledge helps shape discourse and provide new conceptual understanding of both key issues and potential solutions.

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Endnotes

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† Direct quotes included throughout this paper are sourced from surveys and interview recordings – these are included

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†† Illustration on page 27 © Jorge Martin 2021

1 A special issue of the *IDS Bulletin* on [Exploring Research–Policy Partnerships in International Development](#) (*IDS Bulletin* 50.1, June 2019) aimed to identify how partnerships focused on the production of policy-engaged research seek to achieve societal

- impact and the challenges in these processes: DOI: [10.19088/1968-2019.100](https://doi.org/10.19088/1968-2019.100)
- 2 [Lessons from a Decade's Research on Poverty: Innovation, Engagement and Impact Conference](#), Pretoria, South Africa, 16–18 March 2016
 - 3 A combination of Impact Initiative convened events took place including the three examples cited:
 - Global Coalition to End Child Poverty Research Day, IDS, Brighton, UK, 18 November 2016
 - UK Digital Development Summit 2017, London, 13 March 2017
 - Bangladesh in Focus: Successful Development Through Inclusive and Sustainable Research, London, 27 February 2017
 - 4 [Putting Children First: Identifying Solutions and Taking Action to Tackle Poverty and Inequality In Africa Conference](#), Addis Ababa, Ethiopia, 23–25 October 2017
 - 5 ['Making Universal Health Coverage a Reality by 2030: Evidence of What Works'](#), satellite session at the 5th Global Symposium on Health Systems Research, Liverpool, UK, 8–12 October 2018
 - 6 Side event on 13 March at CSW63: ['Does Poverty Stop at Employment?'](#), New York, NY, 11–22 March 2019
 - 7 The 12 Research for Policy and Practice papers (R4PPs) can be accessed from <https://theimpactinitiative.net/resources>
 - 8 Impact Initiative interview with the attending Zambia Minister, Auxilia Bupe Ponga, at the Commission for the Status of Women in New York, NY, in March 2018.
 - 9 Impact Initiative correspondence with Nicola Ansell, Brunel University (30 November 2020).
 - 10 [Power of Partnership: Research to Alleviate Poverty Conference](#), New Delhi, India, 3–5 December 2018
 - 11 ['The Opportunities and Challenges of Translating Evidence into Policy and Practice'](#), workshop on 18 September at UKFIET International Conference on Education and Development, Oxford, UK, 17–19 September 2019
 - 12 ['The Role of Evidence in Advancing Policy to Raise Learning Outcomes Equitably for Sustainable Development'](#), panel on 16 April at CIES 2019, San Francisco, CA, 14–18 April 2019
 - 13 From [Period Poverty to Oil in Kenya in 2018](#) and [Ending Pensioner Poverty in 2019](#)
 - 14 Netdraw, <https://sites.google.com/site/netdrawsoftware/download>
 - 15 Kumu, <https://kumu.io>
 - 16 SumApp, <https://greaterthanthesum.com/sumapp>
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DOI: 10.35648/20.500.12413/11781/ii362