



Reframing RPLC: Networks and their Operation

Introduction

This document aims to provide guidance and recommendations for taking forward the action related to reframing the theme teams to a network approach as agreed at the Steering Committee (SC) meeting in Bologna in March 2017. It draws on previous documents produced by RPLC colleagues and on a very rapid review of the literature. Once the recommendations are agreed, an executive summary will be produced to reflect the core messages for circulation to RPLC networks/partners. This document is primarily concerned with changes related to the current Theme Teams, the Publications Team and the Research and Exchange Team. (see Annex A for status/development as agreed at the Bologna meeting). The operation of teams related to services and activities such as Social Media, Digital, Distance Learning and Institutes will be subject to further work by a small working group with recommendations to take these forward. Once the recommendations for both are agreed and documents finalised, a high level executive summary will be produced to reflect the core messages for circulation to RPLC networks/partners and beyond. It is anticipated that this will be followed up by specific communication from theme leads to their network/members outlining plans/implications is any for their particular theme.

Rationale for Change

The agreement for a change from teams to networks emerged from on-going discussions among Steering Committee (SC) members, partly to address the lack of active participation beyond two or three individuals in some teams and the challenges that some teams have faced in finding successors to take on the role. Also, importantly a move to networks was considered desirable to reflect the ethos of the RPLC as a distributed and inclusive network with a strong interest in building relationships, collaborations and partnerships beyond academia with policy makers and practitioners. However, *it is essential to emphasize that the changes agreed seek to build on the success, energy, learning and achievements of existing teams*. In addition to seeking to ensure the sustainability of the activities and the learning achieved by current RPLC teams, the proposed changes also seek to ensure that RPLC activities and outputs in the next four years have a stronger policy and practitioner focus and facilitate comparative approaches (e.g. intra- national, cross-national, between different groups, etc.) to rural research and policy.

Why Networks?

The intention is not to present a review of the vast body of literature on academic / research – policy and practitioner collaborations and networks in particular, but to assist the SC in arriving at a shared understanding and agreement of what networks might mean in an RPLC context at this stage.

It is widely recognized that although ‘teams’ and ‘networks’ have overlapping features, teams are more bounded and more likely to create ‘in-groups and ‘outgroups’ in contrast to networks which reflect a world where boundaries are ‘fluid fuzzy, or even non-existent’ (Katz and Lazer, 2003, p.89). This, however, does not mean that network members are not accountable; network members may have to fulfill certain contractual obligations and may be expected to adhere to codes of practice or particular rules, depending on the function and purpose of the networks. The term ‘network’ appears to be widely used in academic/research-policy – practitioner collaborations where there is a strong interest in spanning traditional boundaries and influencing policy and practice.

Recognizing there is no ideal definition of a network, the literature on networks has focused on a range of issues, such as nodes and links, structures, processes, different forms of social capital, the aims and focus of networks, functions that networks are expected to perform (Mendizabal, 2006)¹ to identifying networks by the stage they are at (Kristensen and Roseland, 2010)².

Networks, in the context of mobilizing research evidence to shape and influence policy in particular, are seen as particularly well suited to acting as bridges or links between research, practice and policy by facilitating ‘relational ties’ and building trust between individuals/groups to enhance the potential for member commitment on delivering desired outputs /outcomes (Perkin and Court, 2005). They are also identified as suited for ensuring information flows related to addressing questions such as “who is doing what where?” This is supported by (Katz and Lazer (2003, p.93) who suggest that, ‘An effective knowledge network is built on a combination of individuals knowing (1) how to do things and (2) who knows how to do which things.’ These two features are not exclusive to knowledge networks but also have relevance to a range of other networks, depending on the aims, functions, outputs and activities that RPLC may wish to support.

Critical Success factors

It is not suggested that networks are a panacea for the challenges that some teams have faced. Furthermore, the evidence on the effectiveness of networks in the field of knowledge/research translation and mobilization remains under researched and what exists is equivocal.³ Despite the somewhat utopian vision of networks, the literature consistently identifies broadly four factors as critical to the success or otherwise of networks which we in the RPLC will have to pay due attention to and in some instances, are doing so already:

- (i) Co-ordination, Objectives and Governance: The capacity of networks to be interactive, dynamic and flexible is dependent on an environment where:
 - there is a strong synergy and high levels of trust between members;
 - the processes of interaction and exchange actively engages all members;
 - the objectives and outputs of the network remain clear;

¹ Mendizabal (2006) identifies the following functions: Filter, amplify, invest/provide, convene, build communities and/or facilitate.

² Kristensen and Roseland (2010) identify four stages are identified, from stage one where members are engaged in very few activities which involve maintaining a website and a listserv based on little or no funding and mainly volunteers to stage four described as a highly-engaged network with members from more than one country, two paid staff and a range of activities and regular events.

³ See for example the plethora of materials produced by the ESRC (UK) *Centre for Evidence Based Policy Making* that was funded several years ago.

- the network has a working structure including strong governance and transparent decision making processes.

Good coordination is essential to ensure clearly defined policy relevant objectives and helps to ensure the most effective use of member expertise, knowledge and networks.

- (ii) Communications: An appropriate communications protocol and structures /systems for optimizing the benefits of communications technology to facilitate relationship building, connections and mobilization and translation of knowledge /research into policy outputs are seen as essential.
- (iii) Funding: A stable and adequate source of funding to provide the support network needs to function and to fund activities and outputs is a critical requirement in ensuring the sustainability and effectiveness of networks. The funding of coordinators/facilitators and a good Information Communication Technology platform are seen as vital.
- (iv) Recognized expertise based on good quality and robust evidence.

Recommendations

- (i) It is recommended that RPLC adopt the following definition of a network, adapted from Perkin and Court (2005) as a starting point for RPLC:

A network may involve formal or informal structures that link individuals, groups/organizations from the academic/research, policy and practitioner communities with a mutual interest in collaborating on developing, shaping and influencing evidence based rural policies, practice and research for the benefit of rural communities.

- (ii) A two-pronged approach to network restructuring be adopted as agreed at the SC meeting in Bologna.
 - (a) The current theme groups and the Research & Exchange Group be rebadged to networks and each be required to:
 - Deliver concrete, tangible outcomes; activities should create synergies with other RPLC activities/external activities
 - revisit and update their membership list (which at present seems no more than a listserv). This may mean a smaller number of members who are willing to engage and use their expertise, energy and connections to enhance the research-policy connections in that theme;
 - produce a strategy for actively engaging the current members who wish to be involved in a particular theme network and address gaps in policy and practitioner membership;
 - Given the relatively small budget that is likely to be available for a network, it is essential that the proposed network is realistic in terms of what it can achieve and focuses on specific activities with definable outputs – e.g. help to

shape or take forward rural policy on a specific issue, scoping activity on a particular topic, relationship building, etc.

- maintain a listserv for those not active if considered appropriate.
 - To ensure the continued participation of those who have been active RPLC members and are likely to be affected by the changes proposed we would suggest a platform be created on the RPLC website with a range of topics that individuals can sign up to. We may also wish to consider asking all current RPLC members to revisit the topics they are interested in signing up for.
- (b) RPLC puts out one call in the middle of June 2017 with a closing date at the end of August for establishing 1-2 new networks, depending on the budget available. Decision to be made by end of September. A call for proposals will go out to existing RPLC theme and KM groups and will be included in the RPLC email updates and on the RPLC website. An application form and guidance will be made available. The applications will be assessed by a panel that is convened for each call and chaired by an Executive Council (EC member). The panel will involve two Executive Council members (one will chair) and two SC members. The process will be kept under review to inform the process for future years.
- (iii) Networks (current and new) should be required to propose a series of activities and outputs that will enhance mutual understanding of their specific topic by mobilizing research and knowledge drawing on academic, practitioner and policy perspectives, expertise and connections. In addition, teams should be strongly encouraged and supported to include where possible comparative perspectives (intra -national and international) and cross –theme engagement in the RPLC context. Activities may include, but not limited to, literature including policy reviews, research and policy briefs, hosting events/symposia, exchanges, policy fellowships, journal articles exploring policy implications, initiating pilot research cases and innovations in methods of mobilizing research and knowledge translation on relevant rural policy issues (see also Annex B).
- (iv) The amount of funding provided will vary depending on the activity/ activities and outputs proposed by a network up to a maximum of CAD 20,000. The period over which funding will be provided will depend on the proposed activity and the timeline proposed. There will be flexibility to expend funds based on agreed activities and outputs and guided by SSHRC’s eligible expense policies.
- (v) Networks are strongly encouraged to use funding to support a student assistant to assist with network activities.
- (vi) Networks can re-apply for further funds in subsequent years in response to calls upon successful completion of their initial proposal.
- (vii) If possible, networks should explore opportunities to leverage the RPLC funds through both institutional and government funding support. However, there is no prerequisite for matching funding.

- (viii) The basic requirements of applications for proposing new networks will be as follows:
- A minimum of four active RPLC members drawn from the RPLC partners will be required including cross theme collaboration. Networks are also strongly encouraged to engage new individuals and organizations from outside RPLC including practitioners and those working in policy.
 - Identification of a lead and or co-leads if relevant for 2018-2019. Leads (if based in Canada) will have to belong to a SSHRC eligible institution. Leads not based in Canada will have to belong to an active partner institution. It is essential that a Lead is identified with whom RPLC will communicate regarding financial details, outputs, and progress.
 - Demonstrate the involvement of stakeholders in two of the three regions: Canada, Europe, and United States.
 - Ensure policy and /or practitioner relevance of proposed network.
 - Create opportunities for student engagement/early career professionals in their activities.
 - State clearly the outputs to be delivered each year. At a minimum, each network must generate: a policy brief targeted to policy makers and/or practitioners (Note: RPLC needs to create a template for policy briefs); a webinar; and a report on how the funding has been used and the outputs and outcomes achieved.
 - Each application should strive to create opportunities for student engagement in their network activities.
 - Funds for networks can either remain at Brandon University or be transferred to an RPLC partner institution.

References

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Annex A- RPLC Status of teams as agreed at the meeting in Bologna

Teams that this document is addressed to	Status 2017-18
Governance	Continue
Infrastructure	Continue /transition(?)
Indigenous Transformation	Continue beyond 2018
Migration	Continue towards transition: Current group to be discontinued after delivery of key commitments this year and members to be offered opportunity to propose networks thereafter .
Natural Resources	Continue to 2019
Policy	Discontinue
Publications	Discontinued – outstanding commitments will be completed with remaining Yr3 budget
Research and Exchange	Continue
FOR FURTHER DISCUSSION AND AGREEMENT	
Digital Information	
Distance Learning	
Institutes	
Social Media	

Annex B- RPLC Outputs list

- Intelligence regarding the scope of their topic (as), the key groups, networks, and people involved from national and international perspectives, and recommendations for building partnerships and initiatives among them.
- Support (e.g. partnerships, facilitating networks, cross –theme/topic working joint events, scoping /literature reviews, collaborative activities for existing groups, networks, and people who are working on issues relating to topic(s) of interest to RPLC.
- Publications (e.g. scoping reviews, briefings, peer reviewed articles, etc.).
- Policy engagement (e.g. seminars; roundtable/think tanks, webinars, etc.).
- Exchange and networking (e.g. policy, research/knowledge exchanges, conferences, etc.).
- Social media engagement.
- Regular reports and updates regarding partnerships and initiatives relating to their topic(s).