

Research Driven Dialogs: A Method for Social and Scholarly Impact

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Abstract

Research Driven Dialogs (RDDs) are a method for collective sense-making and collaborative reflection on research findings by a range of stakeholders hoping to better understand and address a complex problem. Research findings are opened up through a process of dialog; implications for practice and action are co-designed by participants in ways that are compatible with institutional and sociocultural realities. RDDs thereby coproduce knowledge in ways that maximize social impact and deepen and contextualize scholarly insights without imposing excessive time-burdens on stakeholders. We present an overview of the stages of RDDs through a development leadership project in Sri Lanka and Indonesia, outlining how these can be designed to maximize research outcomes and extraneous benefits.

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Introduction

Increasingly, academic research is assessed on its real-world impact in addition to scholarly impact (Bandola-Gill 2019; UKRI 2022). Competitive research funding, personal motivations (Dickinson et al. 2022), and ambitions to disrupt knowledge silos have led to renewed interest in methods to translate research into policy and practice-relevant knowledge, and vice-versa (Quimby and Beresford 2023; Roque et al. 2024). Stakeholder and/or community engagement is a precondition to achieve research impact (Knottnerus and Tugwell 2013). Community based participatory research (CBPR) represents an ideal, with shared decision-making with stakeholders at each stage of research design, data generation, analysis and findings (Radonic et al. 2023; Roque et al. 2024).

These lofty aims come up against two limitations, however. First, participatory methodologies require considerable time, which is incompatible with the urgent pace of academia (Radonic et al. 2023) and create significant time and resource burdens for participants (Kothari and Cooke 2001). Stakeholders can be let down when they invest in research that they believe will improve their circumstances, yet fails to do so (Vijayarasa 2024). Second, building on extant knowledge and theory to look at practice anew often starts with the identification of a scholarly, rather than a practically oriented puzzle (Huzzard 2021). The imperative remains, however, to make basic scientific research accessible and applicable to research end-users, and to seek collaborative learning opportunities.

Research driven dialogs (RDD) are workshops of limited duration that offer a way for researchers to incorporate plural knowledges, ground-test findings, and make them actionable for stakeholders within the time and capacity constraints of participants and researchers. They are similar to data-driven-dialogs (DDD), which provide evidence to assist with community analysis of a complex problem and decision-making. DDDs are particularly useful when community decision-making can benefit from data generated by methods not available to stakeholders (e.g., meteorological data on climate trends) (Butler et al. 2020). RDDs also provide evidence, but with an additional role for researchers to introduce the theoretical and conceptual tools that enrich our understanding. We are inspired by Mauksch and Rao's (2014) approach to ethnography as dialog, in which researchers ask questions not normally raised, press participants on taken-for-granted practices and beliefs, and provide new lenses to reconsider future directions. We propose RDDs as a means to achieve these aims, but in a time-bound setting in which participants from different backgrounds engage in collective sense-making.

RDDs were the final method in our project exploring women's pathways to electoral politics in Indonesia and Sri Lanka (Jakimow et al. 2023a). It was part of the Development Leadership Program research

portfolio (<https://dlprog.org/>) funded by the Department for Foreign Affairs and Trade (DFAT), with a focus on pathways to impact (Krishna 2023). Our project sought to understand why women active in grassroots leadership were not contesting elections and to offer tangible ways to mend this pathway. Field research (2020–2021) entailed interviews with women elected representatives and community leaders and focus group discussions. RDDs from three to eight hours in duration were then conducted in three locations: Jakarta and Medan in Indonesia, and Colombo in Sri Lanka.

The aim of RDDs is to inform policy and practice by becoming partners in processes of collective sense-making and reflexive learning. Humility, practicality, and valuing the process are at the center of this method, entailing acknowledging the limitations of our knowledge and our dependence on stakeholders to ground research findings; avoiding policy or practice prescriptions that cannot be realistically achieved in practice; and maximizing positive outcomes that arise from the practice of research, not only its findings. In outlining the steps of RDDs, we aim to both offer guidance for researchers to deploy this method for the first time, as well as provide a language for researchers already conducting similar practices to communicate their value to funding agencies.

Preliminary Step—Establish Relationships Early and Maintain Them

The genesis of the research puzzle arose out of FGDs in Medan and Jakarta¹ in 2019 with key stakeholders. These FGDs helped us initiate relationships and ground the theoretical questions of the project. In Sri Lanka, we built on prior relationships from earlier projects. Ongoing engagement with stakeholders proved critical. In Medan and Sri Lanka, stakeholders remained involved as research participants (interviewees and FGD participants), but no field research was conducted in Jakarta. In Jakarta, we had trouble recruiting participants for RDDs and had to spend considerable time reestablishing credentials.

Step 1—Identify the Right Mix of Stakeholders

An ambition of RDDs is to encourage a multi-pronged/multi-sectoral and multi-stage approach to addressing a complex problem. Often stakeholders develop programs of work in isolation toward discrete objectives, rather than engaging in collective thinking and collaborative actions with more ambitious goals. In Indonesia, we invited political parties, government agencies, NGOs, and elected representatives who play distinct, yet complementary roles in improving female representation. In Sri Lanka, the primary need was to build

a space for solidarity among women politicians across ethnolinguistic and regional differences. While online technologies may assist in connecting more stakeholders, having in-person RDDs was critical to their success. The number of participants ranged from 15 in Jakarta, 20 in Colombo, and 21 in Medan—the approximate number of recommended participants to ensure inclusive and active participation. Each RDD had two–four facilitators to run the session, facilitate group discussion, and take notes.

Step 2—Communicate Research Findings in Ways Meaningful to Participants

From the comparative research, we had developed an analytical framework that identified four operations crucial to understand the broken pathway from grassroots to electoral politics (Jakimow et al. 2023a; 2023b). We communicated this framework in terms accessible to the broad range of participants and in local languages. We invited collective sense-making by keeping the conceptualizations of these operations open as questions rather than pre-defined givens. Based on prior stakeholder engagement, we used PowerPoint and a printed summary that participants could refer to throughout the RDD as the most effective communicative tools in these contexts.

Step 3—Activities to Prompt Reflection

Space is then needed for collective sense-making and reflection. In large RDDs, breakout groups ensured everyone had an opportunity to reflect and discuss. A spokesperson from each group verbally relayed their insights to the whole group. Facilitators took extensive notes, and we recommended a synthesis be displayed at the conclusion of this session. We assessed the framework by how participants made sense of the four operations from their own experiences, and how they used the operations to think about these experiences in a different light. We were attentive to the language participants used to describe these operations and how local translations modified their conceptual boundaries. We also asked participants to provide examples of their experiences of these operations in practice. In this way, we expanded our own conceptual knowledge, as well as re-localized the abstract framework to each setting.

To maximize reflection, it is important to provide time between the presentation (Step 2) and discussion (Step 3). In Jakarta, time constraints rushed the transition, which led to a general discussion on the problem rather than the tools to understand it.

Step 4—Unstructured Time to Meet

The process of bringing people together can be as important as reflecting on research findings. We built in time for unstructured, free discussion through a meal break where stakeholders were able to mingle freely. In Jakarta, time constraints meant that participants consumed snack boxes while working, thereby limiting the potential for relationship-building. In Sri Lanka, participants used unstructured time to write a petition to the head of the Electoral Commission. Sharing a meal helps relationships develop that are important for collaborative action in the future.

Step 5—Collective Strategizing

The final session was a discussion on next steps. The researchers facilitated the discussion, but did not offer their own implications for action. The mix of experience and expertise in the room enabled “scaffolding” (Vygotsky 1978), with women sharing knowledge and gently challenging misperceptions. Participants had space to communicate not only what they *should* do, but also what was possible within institutional constraints. Having stakeholders together in the same room allowed them to view the problem holistically, and potential actions collaboratively. They identified gaps in how different agencies approach the problem and thought proactively about how they could be bridged. Facilitators took extensive notes of the practical and strategic actions suggested by participants, which formed the core of the research findings communicated to DFAT.

Step 6—Report Back to Participants

A report of research findings delivered to stakeholders at the time of the RDDs would be premature, detracting from the centrality of this method in refining the analytical tool, contextualizing findings, and developing implications. The Sri Lankan and Indonesian team met after the RDD to synthesize notes, reflect on how they challenged our prior assumptions or told us something new, and to incorporate the insights into our overall research findings. We relayed these findings and the practice implications into policy briefs for the funding agency. We also provided short research reports in local languages to participants (Jakimow et al. 2023b) two months after the RDDs.

Conclusion

RDDs as a process of collective sense-making are a useful method for the development and ground-truthing of analytical and theoretical models, for their re-localization into contextual specificities, and for developing realistic

recommendations for policy and practice. Careful design can also maximize the benefits of the practice beyond research outcomes, including, in this case, re-empowering a group of stakeholders disempowered by the nature of formal politics. It is a relatively time-efficient research method, with a half- or full-day workshop a realistic commitment for busy stakeholders. RDDs have also helped the research teams sustain existing relationships and build networks, with the project a vehicle to build partnerships between communities and research institutions (Austin 2004).

Author Notes

Viyanga Gunasekera and Nadine Vanniasinkam have subsequently joined the Australian National University, which is their current affiliation.

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Note

1. The FGD in Jakarta in 2019 was held at LIPI facilitated by Kurniawati Hastuti Dewi. Dr. Dewi declined an invitation to join the proposal for the resulting research project and took no further part. We have hence not included Dr. Dewi as a coauthor, but we remain grateful for this earlier collaboration.

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