

# Independent Review of the Reality Check Approach

## Executive Summary

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Calder Consultants Inc.



## Acknowledgements

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Any insights in this report that help those who commission, consume and conduct research to do more rigorously and ethically surely came from those we acknowledge above. Any shortcomings in this report are those of the review team alone.

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## 1.1 Introduction

### 1.1.1 Background and purpose of the Review

The Australian Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (DFAT) has an interest in innovative research and evaluation methods to improve the quality and impact of its aid investments. The Department employs a range of methods to undertake poverty and social analysis, including a variety of qualitative research methods. One qualitative research method that has attracted particular attention in recent years, but has not been thoroughly assessed by DFAT, is the Reality Check Approach (RCA). DFAT seeks to review the experience with the RCA in the context of other comparable research methodologies in order to assess the strengths and weaknesses of RCA vis-à-vis other qualitative approaches to poverty and social assessment, the overall effectiveness in informing development programming, and its potential relevance for Australia’s broader aid program and bilateral interests. The Terms of Reference for this review are In Annex 1.

### 1.1.2 Review design and overall approach

This review has the following overarching features:

1. It is theory-based, meaning the review was informed by what is supposed to happen, i.e. a Theory of Change (ToC).
2. It is a process review, meaning that is generated evidence and insights from the unfolding ‘story’ of the RCA in Indonesia and elsewhere.
3. It employed comparative analysis both through a range of data collection and analytical methods and establishing a number of comparators that enabled us to assess the relative effectiveness of the RCA vis-à-vis other approaches to qualitative research.

Our overall review approach was designed to explore a set of Review Questions (RQs), set out in the table below.

Overarching RQ	Framing RQs
To what extent, how and why has RCA been effective in generating and using poverty and social analysis in program and policy work?	What are the strengths and weaknesses of RCA relative to its objectives?
	How does RCA compare to other approaches to qualitative poverty and social assessment?
	What is the potential relevance of RCA and similar poverty and social analysis approaches to the broader Australian aid program?

A range of sub questions were developed during inception to guide the literature review and key informant interviews.

## 1.2 Methodology

### 1.2.1 Data collection

Our three principle data collection tools were:

1. Collection of secondary data through a literature review: In total we reviewed 230 unique sources of information, of which 96 were produced by the RCA team. As this review was unable to delve deeply into all of the different RCAs that have been implemented to date (over two dozen, across multiple countries), we selected a sample of cases for which to conduct a “deep dive”.

2. Key informant interviews: These included informants who were (a) internal, those who have been directly involved in implementing the RCA process or comparator approaches; (b) connected, those who have commissioned or consumed RCA and/or comparator approaches but have not been involved directly in implementing these<sup>1</sup>; and (c) external, those not involved in commissioning or consuming RCA or comparator approaches, but with an expert view on the uses of mixed method research and evaluation research.
3. A field visit to Jakarta: We observed an RCA post-fieldwork debrief and a sensemaking workshop, conducted 2 focus group discussions with RCA researchers, and held a number of key informant interviews with commissioners and consumers of RCA studies; and a short visit to Canberra to hold discussions with key informants from within and outside of DFAT.

### 1.2.2 Data analysis

We employed 4 main analytical methods to explore the research questions; none of these were discretely applied but instead were used iteratively and to enable us to explore different angles of the question.

1. Theory of Change (ToC) analysis, which facilitated a comparison between how the RCA is intended to work in theory and how it has been applied in practice in various contexts.
2. Analysis of rigor and ethics using a framework arrived at through a literature review of international good practice in qualitative research, key informant interviews with qualitative research experts, examining how other qualitative research approaches (including comparators) interpret and apply rigor, and reviewing the RCA's own documentation on rigor.
3. Value for Money Assessment, which enabled us to explore the extent to which RCA achieves the '4Es' that are standard in VfM (economy, efficiency, effectiveness, and equity), using the expected outputs, outcomes, and impacts articulated in the ToC, as well as an understanding of comparator approaches (Human Centred Design Research, SenseMaker™, PEER, and "good standard" mixed method qualitative research).
4. Assessing utility in 2 main ways: a. through specific case studies of how RCA has been applied; and b. through discussions with DFAT staff and others commissioners and consumer who have used poverty and social analysis evidence.

### 1.2.3 Limitations and mitigating strategies

During Phase 1, the review team identified a number of important factors that we believed needed to be considered in how we framed and conducted the review. We reflected these factors in our review design, and have reviewed them at key points in order to better understand the implications of limitations and challenges as they played out in practice, and ensure that we were mitigating these as much as possible. The below is a summary of 6 main limitations and how we have sought to mitigate these.

1. The RCA's evolution over time presented a challenge in that we had to assess a moving target in terms of both theory and practice, but it also provided us with opportunities for inquiry, for example on why adaptations have been necessary and implications for the future design and implementation of RCA.

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<sup>1</sup> There are a few exceptions to this. Several of the commissioners we interviewed had taken part in the RCAs they commissioned as researchers. They provided a unique and valuable perspective. We have classified them as "connected" but they could have been classified as "internal". This would effectively increase the "internal" sample size.

2. Many different stakeholders have been involved in the process of applying the RCA. This gave us a good pool from which to draw our key informants; however it also created a challenge in terms of selecting key informants. We nearly doubled our original target of 40 KIs, which was considerably more time and labour intensive, but has yielded rich and robust results.
3. A limitation with our original 40 internal: 40 connected: 20 external split of key informants was that it had the potential to unfairly weight KII evidence towards positive findings, in that “internal” KIIs were conducted with RCA core team members and RCA researchers. We therefore reduced the proportion of “internal” key informants and expanded the number of interviews with external experts who were familiar with RCA and a broader range of research and evaluation approaches.
4. There were limited opportunities to see RCA “in action”. This created challenges in terms of understanding how RCA researchers are trained, and how debriefing, synthesis and analysis are conducted. We mitigated this to some extent by observing a day of debriefing and a day long sensemaking workshop. We also reviewed a large amount of internal RCA documentation, as well as exploring these issues in depth during KIIs with RCA core team members and RCA researchers.
5. Selecting comparators was challenging due to the relatively unbounded nature of some approaches and their varied application in different contexts. We managed this by developing a two-phase process to screen comparators. We also bolstered a literature review of comparator approaches with KIIs with practitioners and evaluators of these approaches, and have applied the same methodological frameworks for assessing them as we do for the RCA.
6. Without a full evaluation of these other approaches we are aware that there could be a slight bias towards other approaches, given the inevitable divergence in the thoroughness of the assessments for comparators vs the RCA. Recognizing this potential imbalance, we were careful to contain our findings, so that the comparators are used to situate RCA within the range of potential options that could be used in similar research contexts, and the range of likely outcomes that might be achieved.

## 1.3 About RCA

### 1.3.1 What problem is it trying to solve?

The RCA was developed to respond to the problem that the voices and perspectives of the poor are not heard by policy-makers or those involved in the development, monitoring and evaluation of programs. This problem, according to RCA practitioners, is rooted both within the wider context, as well as within methodological failings of other poverty and social analysis methodologies. Assessing the accuracy of this analysis, and the effectiveness of RCA as a “solution” to these problems, is therefore central to this review.

In terms of the wider context, the RCA is proposed as part of a response to the following root problems:

1. Policy and program officers lack the knowledge and capacity to commission and consume qualitative data and risk aversion towards non-expert data and new forms of knowledge. The result is that policy and program officers rely disproportionately on quantitative research which fails to pick up key insights into how and why change happens.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> see also Shah, 2018; and Bell and Aggleton, 2016.

2. People are unwilling or unable to voice their perspectives and experiences because there are few spaces in which to do this, and a lack of trust and self-confidence, manifested in a belief that their views will not be respected or acted upon. This results in limited opportunities for intended beneficiaries to influence policies and programs.
3. There are weak on-going feedback loops during implementation, reducing the speed with which research findings enter the public domain and opportunities for program adaptation.

RCA has also emerged and evolved as a response to perceived problems in other qualitative approaches to poverty and social analysis. These perceived root problems are:

1. Single-sector, narrow lens, linear research and evaluation approaches predominate over systems-based, open-ended, contextual approaches.
2. Inherent researcher bias at design, data gathering, and interpretation of design, monitoring and evaluation research often remains unacknowledged and/or unaddressed.

The RCA critique suggests that there is a tendency to ignore the everyday experiences in which the poor live, which misses key insights into their rationale for behavior, and/or leads to a focus on the wrong areas, with serious consequences. Approaches that are focused on “finding out” rather than “learning” are seen to be conducted in a way that limits trust-building and fails to address power imbalances or encourage open sharing of issues both directly and indirectly relevant to the issue being researched. Similarly, approaches that use etic (“outsider”) over emic (“insider”) interpretations are seen to fail to present the insights and implications that could have the most profound influence on policy and programming.

### 1.3.2 How does RCA present a solution?

The Reality Check Approach (RCA) is a 4 day and 4 night immersive ethnographic approach in which teams of researchers live with families in study communities<sup>3</sup>. Over the course of the immersion, the researchers typically engage with hundreds, and sometimes thousands, of people; while some of these conversations are brief and cursory, others (particularly those with host household members and a small number of neighboring or “focal” households), are more in-depth.

RCA combines elements of rapid ethnography (living with people, usually those who are directly experiencing poverty or any other phenomenon being researched) with 'light touch' participant observation. As with other approaches to “people centred research”, such as listening studies and beneficiary assessment, the focus of RCA is on engaging with, listening to, observing, and documenting the voices, opinions, and experiences of people, and asking questions as a curious learner as part of a relaxed conversation. Due to the shorter timeframe than most ethnographic investigations, there is necessarily a stronger emphasis on conversations than on observing behavior and the complexities of relationships.

Lewis (2012) and Masset et al (2016) write about the 4 key principles that underpin the Reality Check Approach and that they suggest sets it apart from both quantitative approaches to research, and many other qualitative approaches. These are: i. depth of findings, ii. respect for the voice of participants, iii. flexibility of fieldworkers to pursue conversations rather than follow a set question format, and iv. simplicity of the less complex (‘light touch’) compared to large-scale quantitative surveys or full long-term ethnographic studies.

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<sup>3</sup>This is generally – though not always - the case. It was true for all of the case studies for this review.

There is a strong emphasis on researchers as conduit rather than intermediaries, understanding people's lives in context and on relaxed, informal, participant-led interactions. Researchers try to pose questions in an indirect manner so that participants do not feel that researchers are trying to seek a specific answer or are being judgmental. RCA practitioners argue that by asking indirect questions, and not being overly "hooked" on a particular agenda, the biases found in some other qualitative research can be reduced. The RCA approach promotional materials make much of RCA's ability to reduce, or even eliminate, bias altogether. They claim that, while "Others have project bias or agenda bias. We don't. Our only allowable bias is to take the position of people".<sup>4</sup>

### 1.3.3 Emergence

The first RCA study was established by the Swedish Embassy in Dhaka and by Sida headquarters in Stockholm. It was conducted in Bangladesh starting in 2007 as a 5 year project, with the same researchers returning to the same households every year over the course of 5 years. Following, this RCA was introduced in Indonesia in 2009/10 to provide insights into how activities under the Australian Government-funded Indonesia Basic Education Program (BEP) had been experienced by people living in poverty. In April 2014, the DFAT-funded RCA+ plus project was launched. The project sought to build the capacity of Indonesian researchers and research organizations to undertake RCA studies and develop a tradition of quality, people-centred qualitative research. The purpose of this review is not to assess the outcomes achieved by the RCA+ Project, but rather to look at the value of the RCA itself, as a qualitative research method

### 1.3.4 Evolution and application

RCA is now far more ambitious than its first, relatively modest, beginnings as a supplementary approach, aimed at "getting an inkling" about ground realities ((KII, Qualitative Research Expert, quoting Greene, 2009). Over the past 4 years the RCA has been applied in a number of ways, including as a:

- diagnostic tool, used to inform policy formulation or the design phase or early implementation of a program or activity
- "pulse taking" situational assessment, used to gather quick feedback on the roll out of a program or policy, or to better understand the impact of policy changes or large events; and
- longitudinal evaluation method, primarily aimed at informing programming rather than policy (although these are rarer).

In addition to the above expansion in application, there have been 3 other major shifts in how the RCA is being used. First, there has been a stronger attempt at using the RCA alongside other methods – primarily quantitative approaches to poverty and social analysis, but also the use of visual methods such as participatory video and, more frequently, Digital Story telling (DST). Second, the RCA+ project has also enabled a stronger focus on policy in Indonesia, working with partners to identify policy moments where an RCA study could add value, and building relationships with key policy makers. Finally, there have been a few "experiments" in using the RCA approach to understand the lived realities of other constituencies, such as the urban poor, and university lecturers, rather than to better understand the lived realities of the rural poor (and those providing services to them).

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<sup>4</sup> <http://www.reality-check-approach.com/related-resources.html>

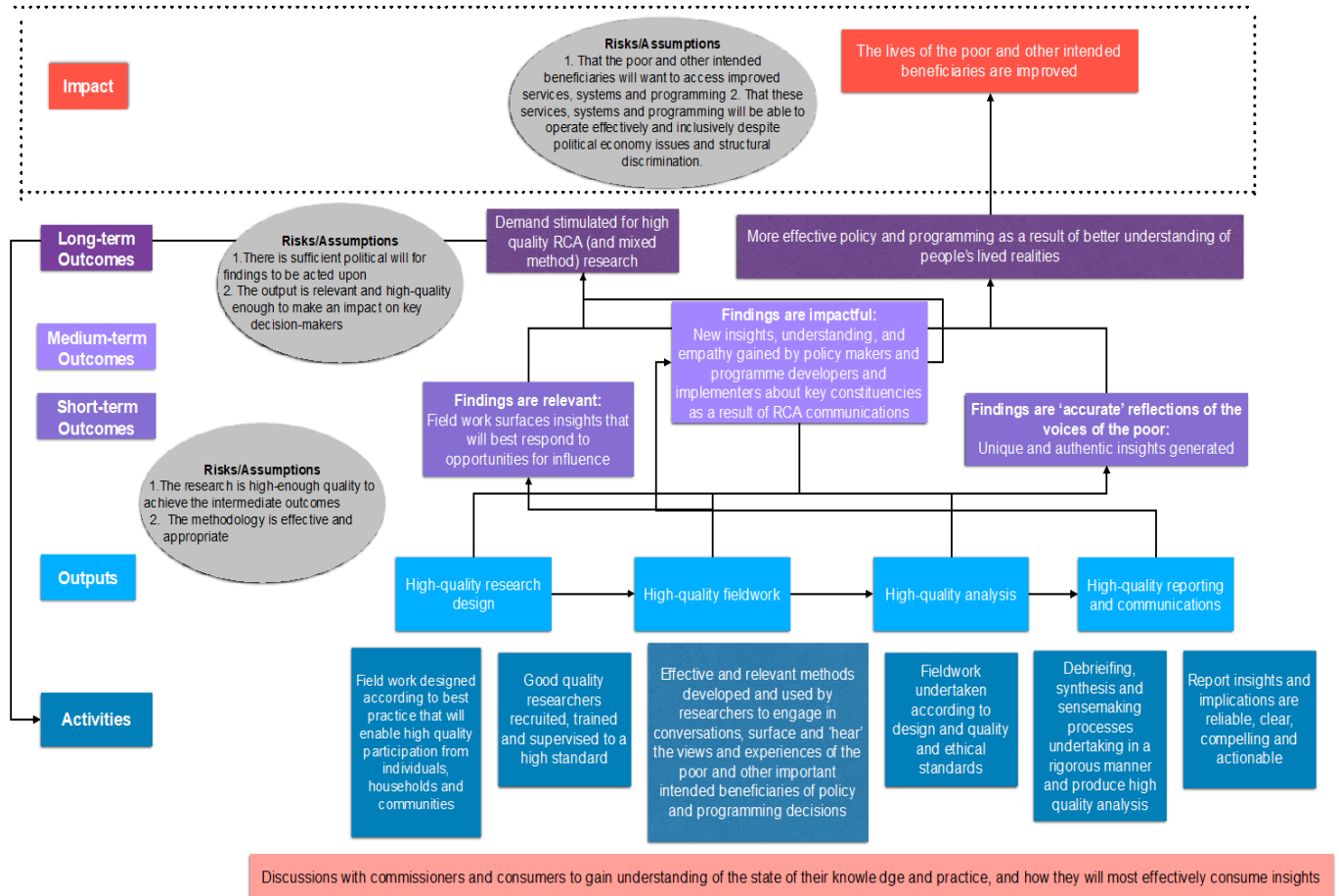
The focus here is on RCA's effectiveness as a pulse-taking, diagnostic and evaluative research approach, as well as looking at how effectively it has been combined with other research methodologies.

### **1.3.5 Theory of change**

In the context of this review, the overarching objective of RCA is to surface accurate, unique and authentic insights that will best respond to opportunities for influence and to communicate these to policy makers in a way that generates understanding, and empathy. It is theorised that this deeper understanding by policy and program stakeholders of whether and how their policies and actions translate into effective change on the ground, and how these efforts and changes are perceived, will not only inform but will influence future policy and practice so that it is better geared to local needs and context (see Masset et al., 2016 and Lewis et al., 2012). These changes (situated within the purple short-term outcome boxes in the Figure, below) we consider to be fully within the RCA's sphere of control. The medium- and longer-term outcomes are within the RCA's sphere of influence (they depend also on the actions of policy-makers), and the impact level change is within the RCA's sphere of interest (the ultimate goal, which also depends on many other external factors).



## RCA Theory of Change



As we see from the above Figure, RCA attempts to achieve short and medium-term outcomes through 4 main outputs – which correspond to 4 main stages of research - and their contributing activities:

1. High quality research design - Field work designed according to best practice that will enable high quality participation from individuals, households and communities.
2. High quality field work - Good quality researchers recruited, trained and supervised to a high standard; effective and relevant methods developed and used by researchers to engage in conversations, surface and 'hear' the views and experiences of the poor and other important intended beneficiaries of policy and programming decisions; fieldwork undertaken according to design and quality and ethical standards.
3. High quality analysis - Debriefing, synthesis and sensemaking processes undertaken in a rigorous manner and produce high quality analysis.
4. High quality reporting - Reliable, clear, compelling and actionable report insights and implications generated.

### 1.4 Our Assessment

We orient our assessment around four key questions: Is it rigorous? Is it ethical? Is it effective? Does it provide value for money?

#### 1.4.1 Is it rigorous?

As a concept, rigor is perhaps best thought of in terms of the quality of the research process; a more rigorous research process will result in findings that have more integrity, and that are more trustworthy, valid, plausible and credible (Given, 2008). Contrary to what RCA practitioners claim, we suggest that no research methodology has “intrinsic rigor” (RCA, 2017a). There are a number of features that are thought to define rigor in qualitative research (which differ from those found in quantitative research). We present our top-line assessment of the extent to which these are achieved by the RCA here.

#### Rigor in research design and preparation

There are four aspects of rigor related to research design and preparation that we assess the RCA against: i. whether there are experienced, reflexive, and well-trained researchers; ii. contextual understanding; iii. a framework to guide inquiry; and iv. a multi-disciplinary approach.

#### *Experienced, reflexive, and well-trained researchers*

There is a lack of experience and training amongst RCA researchers, and this is problematic for a number of reasons. Primary among them is that a lack of understanding of social and power dynamics limits the ability to know how to interpret what is being said, and inexperienced researchers are likely to be ill-equipped to know when and how to effectively probe issues (to ‘know what they don’t know’ and to know what is important). Similarly, while inexperienced researchers may have *different* assumptions than more seasoned researchers, there is no reason to believe that they might have *fewer* assumptions. Indeed, more experienced researchers have spent years having any assumptions they might have had being thoroughly challenged in the course of research, years developing reflexivity, and years honing deep listening and probing skills. Level 1 training materials do provide a good foundation for growth, but it is questionable whether further levels of training support this adequately. While awareness of own positionality and biases appears to be a key component of RCA Level 1 training, it does not go deep enough in relation to gender, or local contextual issues.

#### *Contextual understanding*

There is inadequate research and orientation on key sectoral and other relevant issues prior to studies being undertaken. This lack of good contextual understanding hampers the overall design of the research (from the articulation of specific research questions to research instruments to sample selection) but it also makes it difficult for individual researchers on the ground to be fully reflexive and aware of how one is interpreting things and how they should be interpreted within a particular context. This can lead to bias, especially when amplified by the lack of training and experience.

Listening to people in their own context, as RCA core team members admit, is “surprisingly hard to do well” and needs not only a keen attention to detail, curiosity, and a good memory, but also an understanding of the context in which people are sharing their thoughts and experiences, and a deep knowledge of the ways that issues such as social norms and power dynamics influence attitudes and behaviours. While RCA claims that “people who are really knowledgeable go into studies with these pre-determined biases”, we suggest that properly trained and experienced researchers are well aware of this possibility, and address it through rigorous reflective practice rather than avoidance of important contextual information.

### *A framework to guide inquiry*

RCA's method of using an "Areas of Conversation" checklist to remind researchers of the kinds of areas that might be relevant to the overall research theme is to be welcomed. It enables researchers to conduct open and exploratory conversations, led by research participants.

However, the complete lack of focus in a vast majority of these checklists leads to major gaps in the relevance of inquiry. Further, there is no reason to believe that areas of conversation contain any less bias than actual research questions or lead to richer and more meaningful conversations. It also reduces the comparability of data collected across multiple interactions and multiple sites.

Without a good conceptual framework and a set of research questions that have emerged from this, a concern is that researchers having little to no background in the context or issues being explored often fail to identify what lines of inquiry are worth pursuing and what are not; what statements might need to be challenged or probed further; and when attitudes, beliefs and behaviors conform with or challenge norms. One need not develop a rigid theoretical frame to guide research; a conceptual framework also allows linkages and relationships between issues to be explored in a more open manner (for example, exploring the relationship between formal and informal institutions related to land inheritance, or between social capital and human capital). A conceptual framework can also help to reveal and be explicit about assumptions, through a deeper pre-field discussion of how, and how well linkages and relationships within the framework are evidenced.

### *Multi-disciplinary approach*

Simply including researchers with different academic backgrounds, does not make RCA research multi-disciplinary. RCA researchers are not recruited for the disciplines they practice: indeed, this appears to be irrelevant. And, they are not expected to utilise frameworks or experience from their professional training.

### **Rigor in fieldwork**

At the fieldwork stage, rigor can be assessed in terms of: i. the unobtrusiveness of the researchers; ii. whether triangulation across people, methods, and time is done; iii. whether respondents are involved in validation; and iv. whether there is faithful and accurate recording of data.

### *Unobtrusive researchers*

Considerable time is spent preparing researchers to "fit in" while staying in local communities. This is a good practice and is to be applauded.

According to researchers, they often arrive late in the day, and sometimes in inclement weather, and have to walk some distance to reach a suitable research location far enough away from their colleagues. Most researchers actively avoid local protocols for entering communities in order to try to remain unobtrusive and to avoid being afforded "respected guest status" with village notables<sup>5</sup>. While this is a very real challenge that ethnographers face, we suggest that the "solution" of a covert one-size fits all approach is disrespectful, and ineffective and, as we discuss in the report, can do harm to households and researchers.

Indeed, part of doing ethnographic fieldwork entails time and care taken to explain to local authorities the purpose of the research, and the importance of living with basic households. Flouting these conventions is not only disrespectful, it reinforces, rather than challenges, power

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<sup>5</sup> In some cases courtesy calls to power brokers are made after households have agreed to host researchers.

dynamics by the researcher assuming that “normal” conventions don’t apply to them. The RCA core team acknowledge that there are some trade-offs between complete openness of the presence of researchers on the field with the effort to gather genuine and candid responses from study participants (RCA+ transitional Report). We suggest that the trade-off is unacceptable, and fails to meet minimum standards for informed consent, including making people aware of any potential implications stemming from how their views on a policy or program are positioned in a public document, and the implications of a commissioner’s response (or non-response) .

Suspicion, and lack of clarity concerning the purpose of the research and, potentially, host households who feel that they had to consent to researchers staying with them, all erode good feelings and trust. RCA practitioners claim the RCA enables a level of trust to be built between researcher and research participants that is absent in other approaches. While this is no doubt the case for some researchers and some RCA studies, difficulties in building trust raised in RCA documentation, and by researchers themselves, suggest that there is some over-claiming of a close and trusting relationship between researchers and household members.

#### *Triangulation across people, methods and time*

The RCA approach of using conversation, observation and participation in daily life is a much-needed approach to social research. It enables researchers to have more natural and free flowing discussions, gain empathy for research participants, and use observation to compare what people say with what they do. It also enables researchers to access types of information that cannot be gained through surveys or through other qualitative and participatory approaches.

However, despite the fact that the RCA enables researchers to speak to a large number of varied individuals, it is weak in terms of triangulation of people as the distinct voices of different research segments are often lost due to not faithfully recording conversations and aggregation in analysis.

A failure to fully integrate other qualitative and participatory approaches renders it’s triangulative power in relation to methods weak. RCA cannot claim triangulation of method through merely practicing something akin to anthropological participant observation.

#### *Respondent validation*

While clearly some of the more experienced RCA researchers do have skills in eliciting respondent validation as a natural part of conversations, respondent validation is not actively and purposively sought by RCA research teams. This has implications for both rigor and ethics. Respondent validation is an issue of rigor because when a researcher is relying heavily on emic (insider) analyses of complex issues, the researcher needs to ensure that they have fully understood the research participants. This becomes even more important when the researcher themselves know little about the issue under discussion, as they will need to check both “factual” and “interpretive” data with participants in order to ensure that their insights that they deduce and present as implication's or recommendations to policy makers are valid. Respondent validation is also an issue of ethics because it helps to ensure that participants, and their views and experiences, are not misunderstood and misrepresented, and that the research process is empowering and not extractive. An important ethical foundation for this is that research participants understand how the information will be used and with whom as this affects the context for individual decision-making on consent; people might not mind being represented in one way to one audience, but very much mind being presented in another way to another audience.

Good practice suggests that validation should be sought at a number of different levels: during the course of conversations, at the end of conversations or research exercises, and at the end of the research process or afterwards, by holding a group or community debriefing, or returning with draft analysis and interpretation to check this with respondents. But this would require that RCA researchers present themselves much more openly as researchers than is currently the practice.

#### *Faithful and accurate recording of data*

Ad hoc and inconsistent note taking practices significantly undermine RCA's claims to accurately report data collected in conversations, in particular, but also observations and experiences. Memory recall is deemed to be unreliable and unnecessarily introduces researcher bias and unsupported interpretation.

#### *Rigor in synthesis, analysis, and reporting*

The final stage is that of synthesis, analysis and reporting, and here we assess rigor in terms of i. the quality of iterative debriefing, synthesis, and analysis; ii. whether reports faithfully provide evidence in a way to demonstrate the credibility of findings; and iii. the transparency of results.

#### *Iterative debriefing, synthesis and analysis*

Iterative analysis processes when researchers are in the field are absent and this is a missed opportunity. Researchers take few notes (so are not processing information in the field as part of early analysis) and do not meet up while in the field to discuss emerging findings and other key issues.

Collective and participatory analysis processes are weak, and Team Leaders, who may not have been in the field, conduct the bulk of analysis.

Debriefing, while enabling an impressive amount of information to be "downloaded", suffers from a number of flaws. It is relatively extractive, which leads to limited and arbitrary probing, clarifying, and nuancing of information; little attention to reflection on possible biases; and overcategorization and limited exploration of different respondents' experiences and viewpoints.

The RCA's sole reliance on emic views, rather than judiciously balancing this with etic interpretation, yields descriptive data but largely fails to surface meaningful ethnographic insights. The RCA approach generates a collection of narratives, interesting, at times informative, but not analytical, and prone to bias due to a very weak understanding of power, positionality and context.

The RCA does not analyse issues of gender and social difference, rendering it unable to achieve interpretive depth. Not only that, RCA uncritically collects people's views without deeper interrogation of their positions, biases, blind spots, which can magnify researcher bias and be erroneous and misleading to policy makers who may assume, for example, that the lack of explicit reference to gender issues means that these are absent and therefore do not need to be considered.

Though RCA practitioners claim that grounded theory can emerge from RCA analysis, it is not clear how this is possible without the analytical process supporting the building, testing and evidencing of hypotheses. RCA's use of "framework analysis" appears to be useful for the purposes of organising data (particularly in relation to report writing), but does not appear to be fully utilised as an analytical tool.

### *Faithful and credible reporting*

RCA reports do capture the interest of their readers, and provide a great deal of detailed information. Without interpretation and clear recommendations, however, RCA reports do not live up to their full potential.

It is clear that recent improvements in the documentation process have been made in the last several years. With the addition of more formal archiving processes greater transparency has been achieved.

However this review found that there is still considerable room for improvement. In particular, a lack of systematic note taking and rigorous debriefing reduces transparency.

Reports do a fair job of acknowledging limitations, but there is scope for improvement in this area, particularly concerning what they methods they use can and cannot achieve, and how their approach, and their sampling, affected findings, and how far they were able to mitigate limitations.

### **1.4.2 Is it ethical?**

As with rigor, we can look at RCA's ethics throughout the research process.

#### **Ethics in research design and preparation**

While RCA's own ethical guidance is taken from the American Anthropological Association Code of Ethics (RCA, 2017), we do not consider these to be appropriate or sufficient ethical guidelines for conducting short-term research for development with large teams of researchers, many of whom have not conducted field research previously, or who's only exposure to qualitative research is through the RCA. Nor do we accept that the RCA is an inherently ethical approach, in comparison to other qualitative poverty and social analysis methods used in development.

Training and research preparation have gone some way to addressing ethical issues, but there are considerable gaps and shortcomings that render RCA design and preparation unable meet high ethical standards. The training materials and new procedures we reviewed – including several risk assessments generated by these new procedures - are inadequate to mitigate some of the risks experienced by researched populations and researchers that we discuss in this report.

The responsibility for building ethical foundations rests not only with the RCA core team, but also with the entities within which RCA is "housed", and commissioners. If ethical foundations are not laid during researcher training and research design and preparation, there is a much greater likelihood of ethical problems emerging during research execution, putting both researchers and research participants at risk.

#### **Fieldwork ethics**

The RCA pays insufficient attention to critical ethical considerations, including consent, power and positionality. The RCA's attention to ethics is neither broad enough nor deep enough, particularly considering that researchers are living in the homes of study participants, not merely meeting them in tea shops, field, or schools, or community meeting places. Nor is it nuanced enough for the wide range of different contexts in which research is conducted.

New guidelines and procedures on entering communities and obtaining informed consent are welcome. However, without prior knowledge of local dynamics and proper introductions,



researchers and the household in which they stay can be exposed to risk, during, and after the researchers have left. A less-than well thought out and executed community and host household selection process means that researchers are not familiar with local context within which the data is to be collected.

A lack of completely informed consent is not only unethical, but can result in suspicion, which reduces openness required for research participants to engage fully in research processes, as well as placing research participants at risk.

At the time of this Review, we identified training and orientation on child protection policies and procedures is extremely limited and did not equip RCA researchers to reconcile their responsibilities for child protection with RCA's quasi-anthropological non-intervention policies. RCA researchers are confused about what their responsibilities are in relation to responding to child safeguarding incidents, or indeed even what would constitute a child safeguarding incident.

Post facto note: in the latter part of this review, new policies and practices regarding child protection have been instituted. These include a full 1 day training in child protection issues, and identification of local partners on the ground who can support in such cases. These have not been assessed as part of this review.

#### **Ethical considerations in synthesis, analysis, and reporting**

Archiving processes and secure data storage are adequate to ensure privacy and confidentiality. RCA core team members are aware that preserving anonymity requires that there be no link between the data and the source, and work hard to prevent the identification of communities, households or individuals in reporting.

There is value in listening to a range of voices and presenting these authentically, but the RCA is plagued with a range of shortcomings that undermine respect for voice. An approach whereby researchers “just listen” to what people say about their situation and provide what is perceived to be a relatively unfiltered perspective is valued by many. However, there are weaknesses in terms of faithful documentation and reporting of these voices, that continue to undermine RCA in terms of respect for voice. Further, we argue that it is not ethically acceptable for an approach that claims to give primacy to local people's views and interpretations to have no process or methods for actively engaging participants with the findings and their implications.

Internal peer review processes are inadequate as they do not involve researchers with the experience and expertise necessary to challenge findings and recommendations (insights and implications).

#### **1.4.3 Is it effective?**

We assess effectiveness against the outcomes in the theory of change, namely whether there is a high-quality research output, and whether it leads to policy impact.

#### **Does it produce high-quality research outputs?**

Assessing the ‘quality’ of a research output is inherently somewhat subjective, but we can make the review as transparent as possible by setting out some objective criteria that should serve as reasonable benchmarks for determining whether the research meets a high standard of quality. These are: inclusiveness, validity, and relevance.

### *Inclusiveness*

RCA fails fairly comprehensively to deliver on one of its main claims about amplifying the voices that might otherwise be missed; not only are they systematically under-represented in the sample as a result of the (lack of) rigor in the design process, their voices are then systematically under-represented in the synthesis and analysis that appears in the report.

The sampling selection criteria are inadequate, and reflect a lack of understanding about poverty and vulnerability in general. It also doubtful whether researchers can really consistently identify the poorest, most vulnerable, and marginalised households in the field given the way RCA is currently practiced, and whether these households are always in a position to host an out-of-town guest for several nights.

There are also major concerns with the way in which the voices of different groups are synthesised and reported. Data and interpretation are jumbled and tend to be highly generalised, with little meaningful analysis across different groups.

At all stages in the research, we found there was a tendency to view ‘the poor’ as an undifferentiated group, with no nuanced understanding of class, caste, ethnicity, gender or livelihoods.

### *Validity*

RCA reports provide significant descriptive detail; however true depth, both descriptive and analytical, is largely absent. There is very little ‘thick’ description, instead quite a lot of aggregated or generalized data is provided, in a fairly unstructured way; there is no systematic presentation of findings against the key research questions. Evidence is not produced to convincingly back up the findings that are made. Instead, there is an impression of very selective use of examples, with no real analysis by group or context.

Claims to be able to collect and analyse data on sensitive topics are also not supported by the evidence.

### *Relevance*

Relevance is severely compromised by the lack of contextual research – which would help to situate findings within what is already known and therefore what value the research adds to the knowledge base – as well as the lack of a clear research framework. The RCA claims to present findings that are surprising and counter-intuitive, challenging commissioner and consumer assumptions. While it is sometimes the case that research findings are counterintuitive and surprising, and could only have been gained through immersive participant observation, some findings are simply resurfacing old knowledge.

If stronger background research were conducted in order to inform research design, these ‘findings’ should instead have been the *starting point* for the research, and then much more time and effort could have been put into the what, why, when, and how questions where the studies could have actually added value.

### **In which contexts is it more and less effective?**

This review finds that if RCA findings are used to complement data collected in other ways, and are seen to provide a view onto a broader landscape, then RCA – with the ethics and rigor caveats discussed in Chapter 6 – has the potential to provide an important contribution to conventional research and evaluation.



RCA's particular value is in its ability to provide a glimpse into people's everyday lives. In contexts where little is known and ethnographic insights are important for filling an evidence gap, there is a stronger justification for more immersive research. For example, framing security and justice issues in ways consistent with how they are understood by communities was seen to be an important contribution of the IP-SSJ RCA study.

The RCA's weakness is its inability to provide real interpretive depth, which comes from a judicious combination of emic and etic.

Shah suggests that, "RCA findings should be presented as limited, though able to provide considerable insights and triangulation when interpreted within a wider evidence-base" (2018: 23). We similarly conclude that RCA, rather than offering greater local insights than other qualitative methods, can offer different and complementary insights, in certain contexts and if implemented to a high standard.

RCA has potential in contributing to theories of change that reflect more closely local people's views and aspirations for change. However changes are need in terms of how these are used, and by whom.

#### Does it influence policy and programming?

Policy influencing is a long and convoluted process; the policy landscape is complex and determining attribution - or even contribution - is difficult. The ability to translate RCA findings into policy-relevant insights is not a simple technical linear process, but depends all three actors in the system – policy makers, commissioners, and researchers (Lewis et al., 2012).

Some commissioners reported that RCA reports can provide them with information that is not surfaced by normal monitoring and can lead to greater understanding of ground realities. While RCA is not always able to achieve depth, commissioners certainly appreciate the breadth of detail provided in RCA reports. Others – primarily those with a strong sectoral or research background - are more sceptical of the RCA's ability to provide high quality analysis of ground realities that is useful for policy makers.

Where RCA has been able to "punch above its weight" in relation to policy influence (and these instances have been relatively rare) it has been due less to RCA as a method that is able to generate knowledge and translate this into actionable evidence, only very partially to connections that RCA has been able to make with policy actors, and more to the spaces into which RCA has been invited, and the opportunity that these have afforded. There is good evidence that RCA has been most successful when i. it has strong commissioners and an institutional "home"; ii. policy-makers are engaged throughout; iii. there is a significant gap between policy makers and poor people's lived realities.

The potential for robust qualitative research to contribute to more relevant, adaptive and politically astute development is profound and should not be overlooked. In particular, qualitative research can:

- help to support the identification and engagement of local conveners, as well as foster the relationships necessary for enable design and implementation processes that draw on local knowledge, feedback and energy.

- provide understanding of risk levels associated with different solutions, so that “small bets” indeed have small local risks (i.e. avoiding a situation where what outsiders perceive to be low risk might not be perceived so by insiders).
- provide timely insights into whether “small bets” are paying off, feeding in local views on which activities have promise and which should be dropped.
- Help to build trust and empower local people through respectful participatory research that listens to local voices, including the marginalized, thus promoting sustainability.

There is reason to believe that there are significant opportunities for rigorous, ethical qualitative research to support Australia’s Indonesia program, and other development programming. If there are central incentives around doing development differently, then our arguments that qualitative research can contribute significantly to the doing development differently agenda should start to provide the justification needed to Heads of Mission to open up space for research approaches that enable a deeper understanding of local level dynamics, and provides timely insights to enable programs to learn about and adapt to what is working on the ground and what is not.

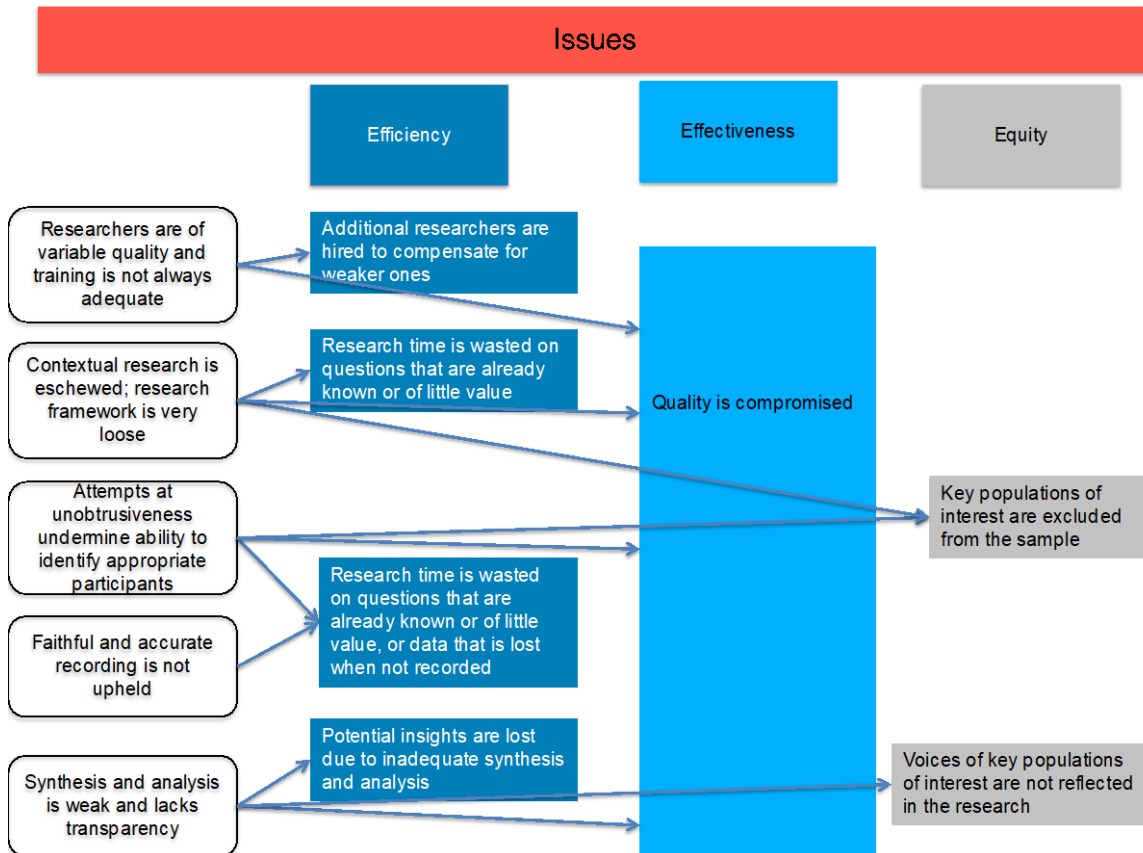
The elephant in the room, however, is the capacity and incentives in commissioning institutions such as DFAT to absorb and respond to the outcomes of research. Whilst there is no doubt that RCA practitioners do need to get better at promoting the accessibility of their research, for this to result in policy outcomes, however, attending simply to this supply side will not be sufficient. The demand side absorptive capacity of policy makers also needs to be addressed.

#### 1.4.4 Does it provide value for money?

In theory, the approach that was able to produce research for the lowest cost would be the most efficient. Across the comparators here, PEER would be the most efficient, as it is implemented at an overall very low cost, and general qualitative work can also be similarly efficient. RCA and Sensemaker are both more expensive and therefore less efficient, and HCD is very expensive indeed (over 10-20 times the cost of PEER, for example) and therefore fairly inefficient from the perspective of research alone, although this is part of a wider design phase that yields additional outputs beyond the research itself.

The key to assessing VfM in terms of effectiveness ultimately rests on the quality dimension, which is encapsulated in terms of the rigor of the exercise and, relatedly, the strength, validity and relevance of the findings. From a VfM perspective, the ideal scenario is an approach that is high quality and low cost. We find that on balance, it is the ‘general’ qualitative and PEER approaches that achieve both higher quality and lower cost. By contrast, HCD is very high cost and tends to be lower quality. Both Sensemaker and RCA are in the middle, with a range of quality in terms of research output, and also reasonably expensive.

The figure below provides a summary of how issues with rigor contribute to challenges with respect to efficiency, effectiveness, and equity. Our overall assessment with respect to VfM is that these challenges, combined with relatively high costs, undermine RCA’s ability to provide good value for money across the board.



## 1.5 Discussion

An ethnographic approach to research whereby ground realities are more deeply understood and contextualised is much needed and appreciated across a wide range of stakeholders. RCA's strength is in providing unfiltered and uninterpreted "snippets" (KII, Qualitative Research Expert) into the lives of the people (many in remote rural areas) with whom researchers live and interact over a four-day period. RCA has had a positive effect in that it has been utilised across a range of geographies on a range of issues with different donors, as one off and longitudinal exercises, more or less embedded within project MEL. It has piqued the interest of donors in the role of qualitative data as an important part of the evidence base. The fact that they are doing immersion, and that they live in remote communities and in challenging circumstances, is a well-valued contribution..

However, while RCA is able to generate detailed descriptive (though largely socially unsegmented) data, it is much less able to generate the rich explanatory data needed for greater understanding of poverty and social dynamics. Nor, in its current construction, can it surface, or analyse, the complex, heterogeneous experiences and power hierarchies that deeply shape different people's experiences, and the ways in which research must be sensitive to the gendered nature of poverty.

This is due to a number of factors related to the RCA methodology itself discussed above. Some factors are by design, as it intentionally:

- works with largely unseasoned researchers (who have little understanding of the local political economy or social norms);
- neither seeks researcher interpretation nor supports the generation of local interpretation (through, for example, testing and validating insights, and related recommendations, with participants themselves);
- does not draw on any analytical frameworks within which to make sense of what has been seen, heard or experienced by researchers.

Much of how RCA has been designed and executed focuses on the mitigation of researcher bias. While this is a crucial issue with which all good qualitative work must grapple, it is only one of many. All of the key methodological aspects of rigor need to be assessed holistically (because there may be trade-offs between them). The RCA's concerted focus on researcher bias actually undermines its ability to meet its own objectives of authentically representing the voices of the poor and marginalized.

Robust qualitative research has a long tradition (extensively documented in the literature) of grappling with these issues, and the key message from this is that bias and other inherent challenges to rigor need to be dealt with through conscious, reflexive, and careful practice, based on a solid understanding of the context. This includes the research framework (what questions to ask), the sampling strategy (who to ask), the instruments/tools to use (how to ask them), and how to then synthesize, analyze and interpret the responses.

Other factors that reduce the RCA's efficacy as an approach to poverty and social research are not by design, but relate more to implementation, such as the lack of triangulation across methods, and gaps in researcher training. There are easier to address, and we make suggestions for this in summary below (Section 1.6), and in detail in Chapter 9.

Where RCA generate findings that are useful to policy makers, it is generally through highlighting the difference between what people say, and what people actually do in the course of their daily lives - but it cannot, using the current methodological approach, credibly go much beyond this. This appears to not always be understood by commissioners, who make choices between using RCA or another qualitative research approach, or are unaware that there are other qualitative and ethnographic approaches that have a much stronger focus on analysis and interpretation to generate usable findings and actionable recommendations.

In the context of many consumers having little understanding or experience of qualitative approaches, and having little opportunity to experience ground reality themselves, they are intrigued by RCA and find that it brings a new perspective. For some donors, the RCA helps them to "tick a box" in terms of feedback from direct beneficiaries. However much a more grounded ethnographic approach is needed, the RCA needs to be viewed within a much larger field of possible qualitative research options than it currently is. Commissioners should be aware of the trade-offs between the RCA and other approaches, in terms of both rigor and ethics, as well as overall value for money. While RCA has grown under the primogeniture of some big names in qualitative research for development, there are a substantial number of other seasoned development researchers and evaluators who are extremely concerned with the method.

## 1.6 Key Recommendations

Our key recommendations in regard to the RCA approach are as follows. We have 13 key recommendations for practitioners and a further 7 key recommendations for commissioners. A full set of conclusions and recommendations against review findings can be found in Chapter 9.

### 1.6.1 Practitioners

**Recommendation 1** - Place a much stronger emphasis on recruiting RCA researchers who have some previous qualitative research experience as well as knowledge of the issues that RCA studies will explore and the geographies within which research will take place; ensure that training is of sufficient length; and revamp training materials to improve content, and ensure a stronger progression of learning and competencies is established.

**Recommendation 2** - Conduct significantly more background research to inform study design (including robust research and sampling frameworks) and execution. This should include both desk-based research and discussions with expert practitioners.

**Recommendation 3** – Immediately develop and implement a vulnerable population safeguarding plan based on accepted ethical standards of research with vulnerable populations and in particular with children; and revamp the approach for entering communities ensuring that proper protocols are followed and permission is sought prior to research

**Recommendation 4** – Develop and roll out a comprehensive standalone researcher training on child safeguarding, adequate orientation to child protection policies and procedures that guide the research<sup>6</sup>, and discussion of ethical issues related to other vulnerable populations such as women experiencing domestic violence.

**Recommendation 5** – Continue the good practice of training and orientation on how to be less obtrusive in the field, but use much deeper contextual knowledge to support this, and completely re-think the strategy for entering the community and obtaining consent

**Recommendations 6** - Integrate more standard qualitative tools such as interviews, discussions, and PRA to aid triangulation, comparison and aggregation of data collected across multiple sites by multiple researchers. Present this data alongside more immersive ethnographic data.

**Recommendation 7** - Ensure that respondent validation be more actively sought by researchers, and that it is an embedded practice with the approach.

**Recommendation 8** – Incorporate much more rigorous note taking, and sufficient training on when, and how, to do this well.

**Recommendation 9** – Reflect, rethink, and adapt to increase the ability of the RCA to do robust iterative analysis, including: experimenting with longer, punctuated immersions; drawing on

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<sup>6</sup> Post facto note: in the latter part of this review, new policies and practices regarding child protection have been instituted. These include a full 1 day training in child protection issues, and identification of local partners on the ground who can support in such cases. These have not been assessed as part of this review.

detailed and comprehensive fieldwork notes in debriefings; seeking a judicious balance between emic and etic analysis; incorporating much stronger gender, power and social analysis; longer, more structured and more collaborative debriefing and sensemaking sessions.

**Recommendation 10** - Unless the RCA evolves to become more analytically rigorous and to include expert interpretation – whether etic or emic but preferably a combination of both – it should steer away from providing conclusions or recommendations. We suggest, however, that successful policy influencing requires not only the generation of evidence, but the provision of advice, and that the RCA should adopt measure to ensure that it can provide sound advice.

**Recommendation 11** - Stand-alone RCA studies are not recommended, with the exception of high level “journalistic” pulse-taking exercises that can fill information gaps in regard to how policies are affecting local people, and highly exploratory landscaping exercises followed up by more rigorous research methods.

**Recommendation 12** - RCA studies should only ever be implemented when combined with other qualitative methods, and preferably embedded within a mixed qualitative quantitative exercise.

**Recommendation 13** – Increase political saliency and policy relevance of RCA study topics is good, this could be significantly increased by:

- ensuring sufficient knowledge of previous research on the issues to be studied, increasing contextual understanding at the local level, and engaging researchers who are experienced in formulating questions to get to complex and highly nuanced information.
- Continue to work closely with “evidence translators” that have political savvy and credibility.
- Work with commissioners to plan for and dedicate significant time and effort to policymaker engagement, relationship building and co-creation.
- Reflect on and address the relationship challenges that have plagued the RCA throughout its history.
- Continue to increase the accessibility of research and at the same time address credibility of research issues through some of the recommendations provided in other sections.

### 1.6.2 Commissioners

**Recommendation 1** - A more formal ethical review and approval process is recommended in light of the fact that RCA research – and much other qualitative research - addresses sensitive issues or topics, involves vulnerable groups, uses considerable participant time, and is largely exploratory.

**Recommendation 2** – Allocate sufficient time and budget to enable researchers to returning to the field to check draft analysis and interpretation in order to increase rigor –and adherence to ethical good practice.

**Recommendation 3** - Commissioners should demand high quality gender, social and power analysis in all of the qualitative research they commission, including evaluations. If internal capacity to assess this is insufficient, then robust quality assurance should be commissioned.

**Recommendation 4** - Make a concerted effort to address demand side absorptive capacity issues, as recommended in DFAT’s ODE Review of Research (2015).

**Recommendation 5** - Quality assurance of final report products should be carried out by qualified individuals, either as part of an internal review process or an external, commissioned, review.

**Recommendation 6** - Be clear from the outset what the whole Theory of Change (ToC) is for a research output, and commission some follow-up/monitoring of impacts to be able to assess Value for Money against the full ToC.

**Recommendation 7** - Increase understanding of the potential approaches that could be used for a particular research objective, and value for money considerations should enter at the commissioning stage. For example, rather than specifying that an exercise should necessarily use RCA, research could be tendered based on the research requirements, and then the approach offering the greatest VfM could be the one that is ultimately selected.