

# COHRED Colloquium 5

## 2018

### Towards a Global Reporting Standard for Fair Research Partnerships

Hosted in collaboration with:

**Swiss Commission for Research Partnerships with Developing Countries (KFPE)**

**12 April 2018, 10am – 4pm**

**Geneva, Switzerland**

**Venue :**

## IMPROVING THE RFI

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COHRED Colloquia aim to advance global health through intense, focused and multi-sector interactions of those key people and institutions who can shape research and innovation by viewing current challenges in a new light to create opportunities for new partnerships and finding new solutions

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The Research Fairness Initiative (RFI) hones in on the quality of partnerships in research and innovation. The starting premise is that great research requires great partnerships – and building sustainable, excellent and competitive research capacity in institutions and countries requires lots of partnerships – provided these are ‘fair’.

This applies particularly in research relationships between institutions that have very different levels of expertise and finance – as is the case in collaborative research between high and low income country institutions. But this scenario is not exhaustive – we have learned that this same scenario occurs in settings within the same country or region, between academia and business, between research funders and their implementing partners – to name just a few scenarios.

The RFI is not unique in a focus on ‘fairness’ or ‘equity’ – but the RFI is unique in going well beyond describing the problems of ‘lack of fairness’ or ‘inequity’ and beyond providing aspirational statements, guides or principles.

Through wide global consultation, the RFI has created a pragmatic framework for the management and assessment of research partnerships. It has been designed as a ‘reporting system’ – as there are few, if any, globally accepted benchmarks or standards for fair partnerships at this time. By asking institutions to report on 45 key aspects of research collaborations, the RFI encourages transparency (*“having the information on the table is the first step to improvement”*), sharing good /best practices globally through RFI Reports and RFI Web (*“seeing what others are doing already, creates a drive to change”*), and – over time – development of accepted standards or benchmarks through agreements reached by key stakeholders.

At this time, if there is any systematic assessment of research partnership management and impact, it tends to be ‘ad hoc’, geographically delineated (by country, mostly, with ‘input from partners’), not translated, rarely compared. The RFI intends to change this situation – by making scientific collaboration subject to the same global learning and analysis that has created such excellent science in the first place.

### **The question is how to do this – best ?**

The current RFI was designed as an institutional reporting system – to be updated every two years. The RFI report should become part of normal reporting of any of the key stakeholders in research, and its results published through institutional means (Annual Reports, Organisational Web Pages) AND through the RFI Web. Analyses and comparisons can then follow (we hope to share one example – from Senegal during the Colloquium), and, in the long run, new standards and benchmarks may evolve.

Note that the RFI is NOT a new guideline itself – instead, it refers to existing articles, guides, principles and practice and makes RFI Reporting Institutions aware of their existence through the RFI Evidence Base. In this manner, the RFI is an excellent compliance tool, as most institutions outside Switzerland, for example, would not be aware of the excellent KFPE guidelines, nor the similarly good Canadian or French guides or principles. Secondly, the RFI Evidence Base will show up major deficiencies or gaps in existing guides – and thus stimulate (any one) to create new or better ones for the future.

At this time, RFI Report Validation is done on the basis of compliance with reporting requirements by COHRED. One of the requirements for validation is that RFI Reports are made public through institutional web pages and RFI Web, which have to enable both anonymous and named comments. It would be expected that the potential for visible comments by partners or public will encourage RFI Reports to stay close to reality.

For now, there are no resources available to do content evaluation by the RFI team itself. There are two other ways in which more detailed analyses / comparisons can be done : firstly, by making data open, anyone anywhere can use the RFI Information Base to conduct analyses. And, secondly, ad hoc studies and specific investigations may be funded ad hoc by interested parties. We are also thinking about ‘RFI Collaborating Centres’ – given that RFI Guides are now available in French, Portuguese and Chinese (Mandarin) and soon Spanish.

Lastly, the business model of the RFI is that the basic RFI system should be self-funded through annual subscriptions (that are low enough for low income country institutions). We anticipate that it will take 3-5 years for sufficient number of institutions to join the RFI to make up this budget. Until then – start-up funding will be needed.

The RFI will improve over time – the more institutions and stakeholder groups use it. For now, we have noted the following recommendations / suggestions / weaknesses – and ask your views on these and any others you may wish to share :

#### **1. Conceptual Improvements**

So far, responses have all been positive – broadly ranging from ‘*this is a no-brainer*’ to ‘*why have you not done this 25 years ago?*’. There is an essential vacuum in science – all focus has been on metrics for the scientific outputs and virtually none focused on partnership quality as essential for producing excellent science most efficiently, and for building sustainable global research capacity, in all settings. The RFI seems to begin to fill this vacuum and is the only such tool so far.

- Although COHRED’s history gives us a strong focus on ‘health research’, the RFI itself is not specific to the health sector. We have been asked to make the RFI Guides, language, examples and questions more ‘science neutral’. The current set of Guides is trying to achieve this – but feel free to help us improve.

## 2. Reporting Improvements – Indicators

Besides grammatical improvements and better terminology, there are three recommendations on improving the current set of indicators :

- Including the communities for/with whom research is being done. The first RFI Reports from one Senegalese institutions with a rural development mandate made this clear. In the next version, we will consider how to make ‘fairness’ towards ‘communities’ part of the RFI Reporting.
- Including Research Integrity questions and build references to existing Research Integrity declarations and guides into the RFI Evidence Base. We are considering this also for the next version – in the section on “ethics review” – which is more relevant to the health sector only.
- Recommend the FAIR approach to data sharing as key tool to create equity in data ownership and in facilitating data sharing. We will have an input during the Colloquium on why this could make a major impact on fairness / equitability in research partnerships – and a reading is provided, for your interest. This will definitely appear in the next version.

## 3. Implementation / Operational Improvements

We have encountered two major operational obstacles to more rapid implementation – and are not yet sure how to handle these. Your comments here will be particularly useful:

- Perceived administrative cost related to RFI Implementation – is probably the most common obstacle noted especially by already successful institutions. The ‘what is in it for me’ question has been difficult to answer convincingly, although more openness is beginning to come.
  - With WHO/TDR’s experience and willingness to share, there is a more realistic idea of how the RFI Report can be done cost-effectively, and what direct benefits it has. Academic institutions in particular find that RFI Implementation is a fertile topic for pre- and post-docs, including from business schools.
  - Everyone realises that the first RFI Report will take much more effort than any subsequent one.
- Perceived risk of penalisation by research funders and high income country partners for ‘weaknesses’ reported in the RFI Report – is probably the major concern of research institutions in low income countries whose ability to engage in research is dependent on external funding. In fact, those funders we have spoken to all seem to agree that the opposite is more the case – if institutions flag ‘areas for institutional development’ (as opposed to ‘weaknesses’) and are willing to improve these, then research funders are likely to provide additional funding for these (pending their own funding limitations).
  - If research funders encourage institutions to write RFI Reports – they should also make it clear that ‘listing areas for institutional development’ is a positive rather than a negative.
  - In general, if research funders make it clear that they consider RFI Reporting an added value in terms of ‘due diligence’ for grantees – then this will create a serious positive momentum for the uptake of the RFI.

## 4. Business Model Improvements

None so far.

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