dsaIreland

a space for dialogue between development researchers
policy-makers and practitioners

Consultation report

Member & stakeholder feedback

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Between 16th April 2018 and 30th May 2018, DSA Ireland consulted with members and the wider development sector with the aim of understanding views on the contribution of the DSAI, areas for improvement; and ways respondents would like to participate in the organisation's ongoing work. This report summarises respondents feedbacks and the key areas for further action.

It is clear from the consultation that there is significant room for improvement in engagement around planning of the annual conference and greater effort needs to be made to engage with the current membership of DSAI. There is also a desire for more engagement and consultation on DSAI matters with members, where members feel valued and can contribute to decision-making and the further development of the organisation. There is also a desire from the broader constituency for more thought leadership, outreach, knowledge dissemination and critical engagement with development issues and the policy-making community.

Feedback can be considered under the following main themes. This summary is intended as guide only to the detail comments outlined in this report.

- Members need to be valued more, with greater say in the organisation and rotating steering committee members was one suggestion so that it does not become stale.

- Greater links between practitioners and academics with more outreach to NGO's encouraging greater involvement and broadening the development dimension through links to other organisations.

- In terms of knowledge dissemination, more short courses on research techniques, thematic workshops were suggested as well as a journal of development research.

- More use of the web, more involvement with social media, online conferences and interactive presentations. Provide for research profiles on website.

- Better planning especially in relation to the annual conference, content should be available earlier, the event should be better advertised and a greater effort made in linking various groups during the two days.

- More critical voices at events and more critique of policy and practice in the Irish sector.

- More engagement with the student sector and their involvement at all events.

- DSAI need to shape the discourse more, engage with government at local and international level in this regard, in particular with Irish Aid.

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This consultation report will be submitted to the DSAI AGM which who will then decide on the next steps and an action plan.

METHODOLOGY

Members were consulted using a questionnaire that invited feedback on 8 key questions. These questions focused on the Annual Conference, the value offered by the DSAI to the broad development sector and individual members; and how members would like to get involved in the DSAI.

The questionnaire was conducted online using Survey Monkey and was distributed to 81 members of whom 38 responded. All responses were anonymous. The responses were coded thematically and categorised by type of respondent. This helped ensure that all voices were heard and that comments specific to a stakeholder type were identified.

To encourage people to participate a draw for three €25 book vouchers was offered.

FINDINGS

Respondents

Thirty-eight responses were received to the consultation. The majority of respondents identified as being from academia, either as staff or postgraduates. The remainder of respondents identified as being from the NGO sector, or for a small minority of respondents from international governance organisations, general public or Other. Other included Researcher / consultant, author and writer and an individual from politics. No responses were received from undergraduate students, from public sector bodies or donor organisations. The consultation thus achieved its goal in reaching a wide range of stakeholders.

Annual Conference

Motivation to attend

The annual conference is a principal focus for the association and it was important to know what motivated people to attend. The majority of respondents agreed that: the conference themes, quality of research presented, the ability to network and connect with other in similar areas or research and critical and insightful keynote speakers were important. One respondent mentioned the need for connections in particular between academics and practitioners, as there can sometimes be a divide, even just in terms of knowing what academics are working on.

How the conference can be improved

Respondents were asked how the conference could generate greater impact. Rich feedback was provided on a diverse range of themes. These included suggestions on how to promote networking; inclusion; policy impact; format of the conference; balance of speakers; time and access; promotion; and continuous improvement.

With regard to inclusion, one academic in particular suggested the need for greater inclusion and outreach from the conference. For example, the DSAI could reach out groups such as students, migrant organisations; youth, BME and other organisations, agencies and academics working in the development sector.

The need for greater co-operation between academics and practitioners was also highlighted. Often it is not clear what academics are working on so bridging and improving communications between academics and practitioners is important.

Some respondents also suggested the need to develop a link between conference and policy formation. Suggestions included developing the conference to not only keep the sector informed, but also plays a role in terms of shaping the discourse (and ultimately priorities at agency/organisational level). One academic suggested that a journal or other publication could be developed from the conference. Full papers could be peer-reviewed. Also raised was the need to domesticate the Voluntary National Reviews (VNRs) and SDG agendas with greater political impact on the Irish policy agenda. It was questioned whether there should be more incentives for government officials to also take part/attend the conference.

In terms of structure of the conference, it was suggested that the conference have fewer concurrent sessions. The conference would benefit from a 'focus on strong, topical and relevant conference streams', 'string keynote speakers and participants'. In addition, there was a suggestion for more balance in the research presented with more papers from academics and practitioners and fewer from PhD students.

Some new ideas were also suggested. For example, to engage students a postgraduate student proposed a competition to involved second and third level students who could present at the conference as a prize. The presentation could take a number of creative forms including a photo display. Another proposal from a member of the public was the use of a conference app, which proved very effective for networking at another conference.

Time and access emerged as a theme also. One respond suggested that it was difficult to take two days for a conference, but a half day focused on workshops on a specific area or theme related to his/work would be possible.

Regarding communications, it was suggested by an NGO that the committee should promote the conference much earlier in the year and improve its promotion and communication. Key information and dates should be released well in advance.

Lessons learned and feedback from participants was also highlighted as a way of consistently improving the conference each year. One respondent complimented the current model. More NGO input was also suggested.

A range of specific themes for the conference were also proposed. There was a particular interest in gender and inclusion; global ecological issues; refugees and displacement; global citizenship education (dev. ed), sustainable crops, perspectives on raw materials (for example cotton), and food security; peace-building as a foundation for sustainable development.

Location

Respondents were also asked to comment on the venue for future conferences. While Our Lady's Hospice Harold's Cross was the first preference, more respondents expressed preferences overall to elsewhere in Dublin; in an NGO; in a University; rotating around the state and Other.

Value of DSA Ireland

Value

The DSAI asked respondents to outline what the DSAI does well, and how the organization could improve.

Most respondents stated that a valuable function of the DSAI is in bringing together academics and practitioners. Specifically, respondents found that personally the value in the DSAI was its role in representing and providing a space for the Irish development community, connecting people across disciplines and locations. In particular, it provides a 'broadening and connective force for different stakeholders – academic, NGO, donors' etc. The diversity of the organization was in general seen as a key strength across all types of respondent academic, NGO, Public and postgraduates. One respondent noted the value in 'raising development and human rights issues with the participation of people having "field" experience and not exclusively academics'.

Other respondents valued the regular updates on events and information from the sector. Also, the conference, study groups and quality training provided in particular through the Research Methods Summer School were seen as delivering personal value to a number of respondents. Online resources and tools were particularly valued by some NGO respondents.

In doing so, it was suggested that DSAI has contributed to building up the credibility of the Irish development sector.

However, a couple of academics felt no value from the DSAI, or hadn't experienced much value since they joined.

How the DSAI organization can improve

Respondents offered a hugely diverse and valuable range of considerations for improving the DSAI. Comments related broadly to the: substantive work on policy impact and growth of development studies in Ireland; participation & engagement; research & training; and increasing awareness and membership including through online communications and dialogue.

Some comments urged the DSAI to build on past successes and achievements to achieve its potential in growing the development studies sector in Ireland. There were three don't knows or unsure.

Critical Voices

Both academic and NGO respondents highlighted what they saw as the need for more critical engagement with development issues, specifically promoting more thought-leadership and 'critical and self-critical approaches'. In terms of developing the dialogue, it was suggested that online research and dialogue could support such voices as well as more external speakers. This could be channeled through a journal or series of books. A focus moving forward could be on emerging development issues.

Similarly, there was a call for more policy briefs, and 'better connection between policy and NGO practice' and deeper links between research and practice. The DSAI 'can do more in terms of shaping discourses and priorities' and develop more influence including with Irish Aid.

Participation & engagement of members

A strong message from the feedback was the need for more, deeper and meaningful opportunities to engage with the DSAI. This was both at member, individual and organisational levels.

At the individual level, respondents suggested more direct 'interactive opportunities' and 'more depth of involvement' in particular with students. There was also a call for the DSAI to value its members more. A user requested feedback be taken on board, particularly with regard to his/her conference feedback. One academic respondent encourage further consultations, 'I believe there should be consultations like this one on a regular basis to ensure views and activities are better captured. Small groups or committees should not decide on their own.'

At the organization level, relationships in particular were highlighted as an area for improvements. Respondents suggested building 'stronger relationships with organisations working in the development sector' and another academic called for 'more and stronger engagement with institutions and organisations around the country'; links to compatible disciplines and sectors, eg International Relations; better relationships and integrated actions with the public sector, NGOs and academia. There was also a call from the NGO sector for engagement with smaller NGOs.

There was a clear desire for expanding the membership of the DSAI both in terms of size and diversity. This is in building on what respondents see as the key strength of the DSAI, in connecting stakeholders such as academics and NGOs. Expanding the membership base and relationship building could take the form of 'co-organising events with other organisations to raise and extend profile'. This would also drive a broader geographic reach, with more DSAI events held around the country instead of being Dublin-centric.

To achieve these goals, some academics suggested that key to the future will be the organization becoming less 'closed and bureaucratic'. There was a concern that the organization has a 'technocratic' focus rather than a dynamic for critically engaging with issues. Some respondents suggest a rotating membership-based organizing committee.

Research activities & training

One NGO suggested that DSAI could do more in terms of providing training opportunities in research techniques. Another NGO suggested holding more thematic workshops, small regular events and ensuring active study groups. At these meetings it was felt there should be more time available to discuss issues. It was also felt that DSAI could do more outreach to where academic work is taking place, for example Dochas Working Groups.

Communication & social media

Academic and NGO respondents felt that DSAI communications could improve. Suggestions included better communication; online conferences; more engagement on social media such as streaming events. Through such uses of social media, it was suggested the DSAI would reach a new audience that is conscious of social responsibility and potentially find more partners. One academic suggested that the DSAI should 'bring in people who have the ability to talk to everyone.'

Value of DSAI to the broader sector

This question asked respondents to consider the wider context of the DSAI, and the value it contributes to the broad development sector. Nearly all respondents found that the DSAI does contribute to the broader development sector in Ireland, specifically in the following ways.

The DSAI is seen as the only organization providing a convening and bridging function for the sector. Its diversity is seen as its key strength and as such it provides a valuable platform for

networking and knowledge sharing. While there are other networks in Ireland, such as Dochas, the DSAI provides an additional academic/research dimension.

The DSAI is also seen to play a key role in supporting NGOs with research, promoting discussion on issues; promoting learning; and disseminating latest research and best practice to the wider sector. It was noted that sometimes best practice or evidence that is produced in universities often doesn't reach NGOs, and the DSAI plays an important bridging function in this respect.

In terms of strengthening this value, respondents suggested, more networking and activities, which can be enabled also by the online DSAI members platform.

Some respondents either didn't know about the value to the sector or did not feel connected to the DSAI because they 'were not an academic'.

Value in day-to-day work

Respondents were then asked to share their views on the value DSAI offered in terms of their work.

Academics found the DSAI helpful for students, particularly the workshops and conference. They also found the publication channels helpful. All respondent types found the DSAI useful for knowledge sharing, new ideas, connecting with other stakeholders and policy makers. The DSAI is seen as useful for gaining and understanding the development sector in Ireland and also broadening out practitioners and academics awareness of what is happening in other fields, beyond their own area of expertise.

In terms of the ways DSAI could have greater impact on respondents' day to day work, suggestions included training or practical resources on technical issues such as targeting, mainstreaming etc.

Getting involved with the DSAI

In terms of getting involved with the DSAI, the most popular ways of contributing were via the publication channels of the Working Paper and Policy Briefs, as well as getting involved in a study group. There was however, interest in joining the Steering Committee by 5 respondents.

Five respondents had either already participated by presenting at a conference or were involved in the DSAI study groups. Two respondents said they did not know how to get involved.

APPENDIX

Questionnaire

Q1

Which of the following describes your interest in the DSAI?

- Postgraduate Student
- Student
- NGO Sector
- Public sector body
- Donor organization
- International governance organisation (e.g. UN)
- Member of the public

Q2

Conference What would be key motivating factors for you to attend this year's DSAI conference (e.g. connections made; keynote speakers; quality of research presented; themes discussed etc.)

Q3

Which venue(s) would you prefer?

- Harold's Cross
- Elsewhere in Dublin
- NGO
- University
- Rotating round the state

Q4

Do you have specific suggestions or new ideas that can help the DSAI achieve a high impact conference for the Irish development sector this year?

Q5

DSAI organisation What does the DSAI do well (for you in particular)?

Q6

How could the organisation improve (try to be specific)

Q7

Value provided by DSAI In what ways do you think DSAI contributes to the wider Irish development sector? Are there ways DSAI could improve its offer to the sector and your sub sector in particular?

Q8

Thinking more generally of the DSAI, could you outline any areas in which the DSAI is of value to you specifically in work? If none, what could be of value to you?

Q9

Involvement
Would you like to get more involved in shaping the development of the DSAI over the coming year? Is so how?

- Get involved in a study group
- Get involved with the Steering Committee
- Volunteer at events
- Contribute Working Papers, Blogs or Policy Briefs