Chapter 2.8

Pathways Towards the Creation of RMA Associations

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Abstract

Curiosity is one of the main drivers in reaching out and connecting to colleagues and starting the networking – that is the foundation for establishing an association for Research Managers and Administrators (RMAs). The questions, 'Why, what, how and when', with a commitment to drive things forward, together with like-minded people, can transform curiosity into joint actions and movement of a network. While a number of success factors can be identified, alas there is no thorough literature describing how such factors interact or why. Even though all parameters are met, some associations still struggle with moving forward.

Recognising the identity as a research manager and administrator on the individual level enables reaching out to colleagues in the field, in and outside the institution, and nationally as well as abroad. Understanding the institutional environment and the structure of research support is the starting point for reaching out to colleagues.

This chapter will give an overview of the creation process of RMA associations, spanning from the rise of professional networks, as an informal organisation, to

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the establishment of legal entities, and hence a more formal association. It hopes to provide a meaningful discussion on the process of establishing professional associations despite the scarce literature on the topic (Stolle, 1998).

Keywords: Networks; professional associations; research management and administration; creation of associations; from informal to formal; recognition

Introduction

The assumption that organisations typically exist to further the common interest among groups of people is implicit in most of the literature about organisations. Even when unorganised or informal groups are discussed, such as 'pressure groups' and 'group theory' are discussed, the word 'group' is meant to refer to a number of individuals with a common interest (Olson, 1971, p. 7; Wenger, 2009).

Networks may be defined as webs of active affiliation, acting as conduits that channel the flow of ideas and information and existing only as long as a relationship endures (Powell & Oberg, 2017). In small groups, there may be some voluntary action in support of the common purpose of the individuals. As the network grows, however, some form of compulsory membership may be indispensable for its survival (Olson, 1971). That is why, after a certain period of time, RMA professional networks often evolve into formal associations, with the goal to advance research management as a profession through education and professional development programmes.

A number of success factors can be identified, and there are several consultancies and websites giving advice, for example, Coolerinsights,[1] that suggest eight parameters for success (Table 2.8.1).

Building on these, possible steps towards the creation of an informal network are shown in Fig. 2.8.1 and described in the next sections.

Professional networks can be seen as an arena in which people and/or organisations interact. The interactions enable them to create common understandings of their professional needs and to move forward, and in the case of RMAs, to the recognition of a new profession. Moreover, professional networks can act as negotiating or representative agencies, shaping, and redefining appropriate practices of interaction for their respective memberships (Greenwood et al., 2002). They are a means through which the members represent themselves to other actors and stakeholders inside and outside the field, providing information, advice, training, and pursuing strategic goals through influence. Initially, the development of collective beliefs is probably partly

Table 2.8.1. How to Build a Great Association.

Set up a sustainable framework in Governance, Talent and Operations	Position your association as a thought leader	Demonstrate value and relevance to members	Develop new initiatives and revenue streams
Constantly innovate	Extend your outreach through partnerships and alliances	Communicate	Invest in future leaders

[1] https://coolerinsights.com/2011/04/how-to-build-a-great-association/

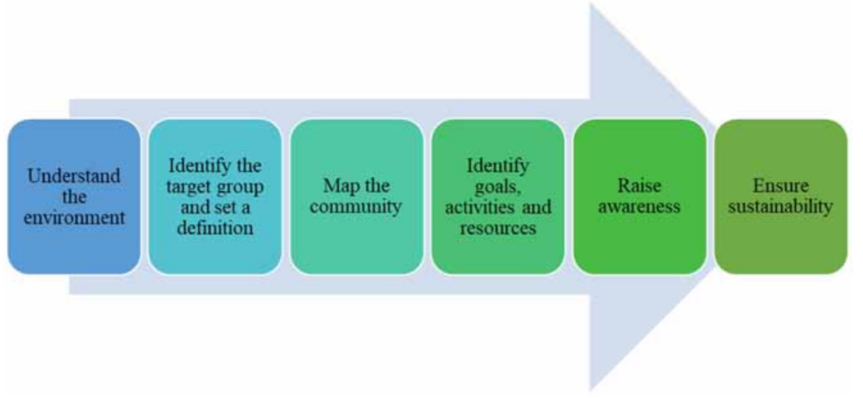

Fig. 2.8.1. The Informal Level: Understanding the Environment.

functional. Once established, these beliefs and practices can become taken for granted and reproduced through processes, such as training and education, hiring, certification, and ceremonies of celebration (Greenwood et al., 2002).

One important issue in the rise of professional networks is the analysis of the context: establishing an overall understanding of the environment within which individuals, organisations, and societies operate and interact. This includes consideration of all factors which impact upon the network to be developed, implemented, and the results to be sustained. According to UNDP (1998) guidelines it is important to build on what exists – to utilise and strengthen existing capacities, rather than to start from scratch. As there are already a large number of RMA associations today both at national and international levels, it could be useful to have a look at the existing professional networks, scrutinising their evolution in order to analyse the factors that led to the establishment of the associations. As discussed by Williamson and Dyason (2023), the movement towards the formalisation of a profession of RMA's is closely linked to the understanding of who a professional research manager and administrator is and what their skills are, highlighting and emphasising the role of soft skills. They present RMA practitioners as 'human-being' professionals and not only knowledgeable experts, and reinforce work-life integration based on what it means not only to 'know' and 'do' within a profession, but also to 'be' a professional.

Capacity development requires a comprehensive understanding of capacity at various levels:

At the individual level: is there an RMA identity among people working as research support staff at HEIs or any other institution Do RMAs feel themselves as professionals in the field?

Over the past few years, some research has looked at the development of a professional identity of RMAs within the sector, some based on surveys and interviews. Literature shows that the increased number and complexity of activities in research management and administration has led to a differentiation of staff over the years. The general trend today in the university sector is the transformation of traditional support functions, such as those of secretaries and technicians, being replaced by new professionalised administrative functions and specialists in targeted areas, for example, pre-award, post-award, and Open Science specialists (Beasley, 2006; Ryttberg & Geschwind, 2019). Individuals are interpreting their given roles more actively and are moving laterally across boundaries, creating new institutional spaces, knowledge, and relationships, particularly in a 'third space' between professional and academic domains (Whitchurch, 2008a). This can also be seen in the large number of RMA staff with an academic background, which high proportions having doctorates and many moving from research (Oliveira, Fischer, et al., 2023, Chapter 2.2)

According to the literature, RMAs seem to be aware of their identity as professionals worldwide (Kerridge, 2021a). However, in some countries and in some institutions research support staff are still not fully aware of their role as professionals.

In the process of identity construction, the process of identifying with a community is important: professional networks can function as 'sense givers' for professional support staff in their process of making sense of their roles (Ryttberg & Geschwind, 2019). Professional identity formation is a socialisation process that involves both the acquisition of specific knowledge and capabilities required for professional practice, as well as the internalisation of attitudes, dispositions, and self-identity peculiar to the community of practitioners (Borden, 2008). In countries with no formal associations, the participation in activities promoted by international networks, such as the BESTPRAC initiative (Zsár, 2023a, Chapter 1.5) could help create a sense of professional identity.

At the level of the institution: do HEIs or other institutions recognise the role and the identity of RMAs?

The framework conditions for higher education institutions are changing: the more managerial mode of steering in research has also been associated with an increase in the number of administrative staff and a demand for new competencies. Highly educated specialists and experts in specific areas of administration are required (Ryttberg & Geschwind, 2019). However, as noted by Whitchurch (2008a), professional staff are progressively constructing their credibility on a personal basis, as the higher education environment is not supporting this progressive construction of credibility on an institutional basis. Institutions (and the sector) should and must support the identity of the third space professionals. As professional staff work across and beyond boundaries, they are re-defining the nature of their work, and it may be that those institutions are able to give recognition to more extended ways of working will be the most likely to maximise the contribution of their staff, and to achieve an effective accommodation with their current and future environments (Akerman, 2020).

At the level of the broader system or enabling environment. Policy makers should be aware of the needs of society or a group of entities: is there already an existing policy framework for the development of RMAs? Is the profession understood by policy makers and decision takers?

Inputs for the creation of RMA networks could come through a bottom-up (from the RMA community itself) or top-down approach (from policy makers, such as the government), depending on factors such as country, culture, and who takes the lead or who provides funding for the initiative. A clear policy framework is then essential for the sustainability of the initiative.

In the US, research administration was born from the need to manage an increasing amount of funds for research. In the post-war period, increased support for science by federal government agencies, universities, industrial research laboratories, and private foundations through grants brought the necessity of skilled people for research support. In order to face challenges, several research administrators started seeking solutions to common problems and issues through an open friendly discussion. To this end, the first meeting of the National Conference on the Advancement of Research (NCAR) was held in 1947 (Beasley, 2006).

In Brazil, the development of RMA is being driven by the desire of moving national science and technology initiative (STI) governance to a new level. But, although institutionalisation of science and technology policy and several initiatives to boost R&D and innovation, there is a lack of governance initiatives in favour of convergence and alignment among involved actors, policies, and strategies proposed (Oliveira & Bonacelli, 2019). In other countries, initiatives have been taken by funding agencies. The India Research Management Initiative (IRMI) – a pilot aimed at building research capacity – was supported by the India Alliance[2] to enable biomedical research. But there is a need for research management to be inclusive of all areas of science, so a wider effort would require collaboration between several funders to support this across disciplines. For maximum impact, the development of RM as a profession in India would require government commitment and participation (Ayyar & Jameel, 2019).

An example of commitment by policy makers could be seen in Norway, where the Norwegian Network for Administration and Research Management was created in 2013. In 2016, a project[3] aimed at competence development for Research Administrators was established the aim of the project is to develop a collective national Professional Development Program primarily for Norwegian Research Administrators. The program was developed by actors from The Norwegian Research Council,[4] NARMA/UHR (The Norwegian Network for Research Administration, The Norwegian Association of Higher Education Institutions)[5] (The Norwegian Research Institute's cooperative body), and Innovation Norway and followed by other initiatives (Silva & Nedberg, 2023, Chapter 5.36).

Recently the European Commission also recognised the growing need for the professionalisation of research management across Europe and a lack of training or access to it. The Research Management Initiative is proposed among the priorities of the ERA policy agenda for 2022–2024 (Action 17) (European Commission, 2022b) with four priorities: upskilling, recognition, networking to support the exchange of best practice, and capacity building The development of research management as a profession is also taken into account by many European University Alliances, with dedicated tasks.

The Informal Level: Building a Professional Network

Following the analysis of the capacity development at the three above-mentioned levels, further steps towards the creation of professional networks should be undertaken:

1. Identify the target group and set a definition of professionals working as research support staff:

There is no common definition of professionals in research support. In North America, 'research administrator' is the most common term, but in other parts of the world the equivalent roles are occupied by research managers and by research managers and administrators, often referred to as RMAs (Kerridge & Scott, 2018a). The terms 'administration' and 'management' are understood differently in Australia and the USA from the way that they are understood in the UK. In Australia, professional staff refer to themselves more openly as 'managers', rather than modulating this via the use of the term 'administration'. By contrast, in the United States, the most senior institutional managers, including presidents, are referred to as 'academic administrators'. Thus, the term 'administration' is associated with institutional policy and governance, and as something that is undertaken at a higher level than 'management', whereas in the UK 'administration' has tended to become devalued in that it is

[2] DBT/Wellcome Trust India Alliance (India Alliance) is an independent, dynamic public charity that funds research in health and biomedical sciences in India (About Wellcome Trust/DBT India Alliance (wellcomeopenresearch.org)).

[3] https://www.forskningsradet.no/prognett-horisont2020/Courses_and_help_with_proposals/1254022852485

[4] https://www.forskningsradet.no/en/Home_page/1177315753906

[5] https://www.abelia.no/bransjeforeninger/ffa-forskningsinstituttenes-fellesarena

often used to refer to procedural, and even clerical, tasks (Whitchurch, 2009). In Portugal, the term 'Professionals at Interface of Science (PIoS)' was coined to define the diverse, emergent, and rapidly changing community of professionals, the term being related to the roles these professionals fulfil within every institution that performs scientific research (Agostinho et al., 2018).

The Research Administration as a Profession (RAAAP) project (Kerridge & Scott, 2018a; Oliveira, Fischer, et al., 2023, Chapter 2.2), set out to survey RMAs from around the world utilised the acronym RMA to encompass all nomenclature – that is the most commonly term used in Europe among these professionals. RMA is defined as

> A research manager and administrator (research manager in some countries, research administrators in others – research support, and research advisors are also common terms) is defined as someone whose role (or a significant part of it) is devoted to support some part of the research lifecycle, including, but not limited to: identifying funding sources and customers, preparing proposals, costing, pricing and submitting funding proposals, drafting, negotiating and accepting contracts, dealing with project finance, employing staff on research contracts, reporting to funders, advising on research impact, knowledge exchange, technology transfer, supporting short courses, postgraduate research student administration, research strategy and policy, research assessment, ethics and governance, information systems, audit, statutory returns, and research office management. It also includes research development and researcher development professionals. (Fischer et al., 2022)

The European Commission also contributed to setting a definition. In the Horizon Europe Work Programme 'Widening participation and strengthening the European Research Area' (p. 75)

> Research management can take many shapes: research policy advisers, research managers, financial support staff, data stewards, research infrastructure operators, knowledge transfer officers, business developers, knowledge brokers, innovation managers, etc. (European Commission, 2022b)

2. Map the community:

Once the definition is stipulated, mapping the RMA community will help in understanding who the RMAs are. RMAs could work in different institutions, like ministries, HEIs, public or private institutions, hospitals, and funding agencies. Depending on the policy and structure of each institution RMAs could have different roles and skills. Surveys have been recently carried out in countries where formal RMA associations have not yet been established (Portugal, Spain, and Italy). Information about profiles, qualifications, employment conditions, roles, activities, skills, motivation, and needs have been collected. Overviews of the RMA profiles in these countries have been published.[6].

One of the main concerns in countries where no professional identity has yet emerged is how to reach the right people. Surveys are likely to be distributed through

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[6] Portugal: https://sites.google.com/view/pic-pt/a-pic/organiza%C3%A7%C3%A3o?authuser=0 Spain: https://agaur.gencat.cat/web/.content/Documents/Internacionalitzacio/informe_IRMA_AGAUR_2020_final.pdf Italy: https://www.italianresearchmanagers.eu/wp-content/uploads/2022/05/caratteristiche-bisogni-formativi-RMA-italiani

personal contacts, thus leaving some professionals behind. In Portugal and Italy, where existing informal RMA networks involve mainly university central offices, financial managers in Faculties, Schools, Departments as well as RMAs working, for example, in private institutions, hospitals, or funding agencies were hardly reached.

As the RMA community grows, mapping should be repeated on a regular basis. The research environment is constantly evolving and new skills are required, therefore understanding professionals, their motivation and needs, will encourage initiatives contributing to research managers' upskilling.

Finally, community mapping could be the starting point towards the creation of professional development frameworks (PDFs). A PDF is a structure that supports, strengthens, and guides the development of a profession. It represents the point of reference for continuous education and career training for people who entered the workforce to develop new skills, stay up-to-date on current trends, and advance their career (see Romano et al., 2023, Chapter 4.4).

3. Identify goals, activities and (human) resources:

To strengthen the value for its members, the network should set its own strategy, by defining its mission, vision, and values. Objectives should be identified and a plan of activities should be drafted. It is also very important, in order to fulfil the stakeholders and members expectations, to make sure a small and motivated group will govern and drive the network formation.

4. Raising awareness:

Lewis (2012) points out that the recognition of a profession requires collective self-confidence through a professional identity, increasing visibility, and a strong and consistent voice. To raise awareness and become visible, an emerging community should actively invest in a communication strategy. Why do we exist? What do we want to achieve? A logo/brand/image and possibly a website should represent members and promote goals and activities.

Drafting a communication plan will allow the implementation of the strategy. The plan should identify: the stakeholders/target audiences, the content and objectives of the communication, the means to achieve the objectives and the indicators to measure the effectiveness. Concerning the stakeholders, it could be useful to differentiate between the primary and the secondary target audience. The primary stakeholders are those who have a robust influence on the achievement of the objectives (your colleagues, RMAs working in different institutions, and other RMA communities). The latter consists of those who can influence the primary audience (policy makers at national and international levels). The most common means of communications are: presentations at RMA-related national and international events, workshop organisation, publication in magazines or journals, networking, and best practice exchange with other professionals and associations/ platforms. Social media is nowadays the most powerful way to engage the audience. RMA communities often have dedicated groups on Facebook, LinkedIn, and actively use Twitter and Instagram to spread information. Since a key requirement for the social networks is to be active, an editorial plan should be implemented. The plan would include: communication objective, communication channels, content format, keywords, publication timing, and monitoring.

5. Sustainability:

In smaller groups, there may be voluntary action in support of the common purposes of the individuals in the group, but in most cases, this action ceases before it reaches the optimal/critical level for the members of the group. As the network grows in terms of number of members and activities a decrease in efficiency can occur (Tuckman, 1965). In order to ensure the network sustainability some actions should be considered: assess the results, revise the goals, identify a core group of highly motivated members and analyse the market needs of new or existing professionals in the country. It should also be considered if some form of compulsory membership – from informal to formal is useful to the survival of the group.

Paying attention to these aspects will play an important role in the transformation from an informal network to a professional association.

RMA Associations: From Informal to Formal

The natural step forward from having an informal network is to formalise the network into an association (or equal type of organisation). There can be reasons that an informal network is the better option, but the movement towards formalising research management societies has gained significant power over the last few decades: on the one side, due to the complexity of the research environment, science pulls the need for highly qualified professional RMA support, on the other side RMAs now have vision, leadership, and content to create their own associations (Fig. 2.8.2).

There are benefits by keeping the network informal, and balancing of advantages and disadvantages is often the first step in the discussion on formalising the network (Table 2.8.2).

Setting Up a Formal RMA Association

There is a global trend towards recognising RMA as a profession, as the number of RMAs all over the world as well as the number of RMA associations are increasing: In the RAAAP-3 survey, with over 3,500 full responses from 66 countries, 31 of which had more than 10 replies. By 2022 INORMS has 22 member associations.[7] Some associations are multicountry associations, like SARIMA covering Southern

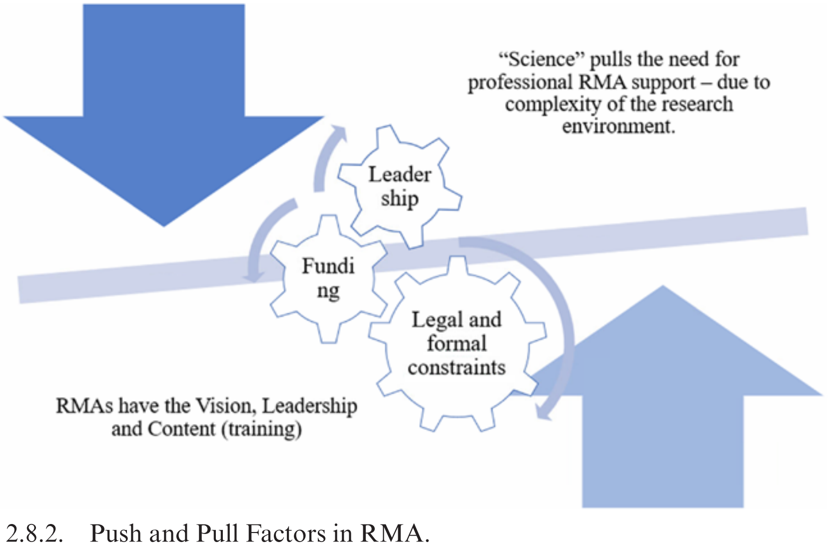

Fig. 2.8.2. Push and Pull Factors in RMA.

[7] https//www.inorms.net

Table 2.8.2. Informal Communities/Networks Versus Formal Association.

Advantages	**Disadvantages**
A. Informal Communities/Networks	
No legal and economic constraints	No funding available for the activities
Flexibility	No staff can be hired
No deadlines	No activities that require funding
No member fees	The work is done on a voluntary basis
Bottom up driven activities	Activities are extra-daily work activities
	Not all the plans are achieved (in time), and time is key for certain issues, such as policy
	Engagement
	Coordination effort rests on a small number of very motivated people
B. Formal Association	
Professionalisation of the association (sustainability, HR issues, funds)	Legal constraints
Have the decision power (statutes)	Define and monitor membership
Market and branding	Administrative procedures to be in place (opening of a bank account)
Access to stakeholders in a structured ways	Internal procedures
Financial capability to plan and develop activities	Professionalisation of the association (sustainability, HR-issues, funds)
Recognition of the profession	Bureaucratic burden
Lobbying – speaking with one voice	
Formal governance structure	

Africa, WARIMA covering Western Africa, EARMA covering Europe, and ARMS for Australasia and Singapore, but most are focused on a single country. The total number of research managers and administrators worldwide is unknown, but the collective membership of INORMS associations is around 30,000. The growth of formal RMA associations since the establishment of INORMS in 2001 shows the potential and drive towards an increased degree of formalisation.

The movement towards the formation of a formal RMA association from an informal network goes through a number of steps. Establishing an association requires support from the participants in the network, and from major stakeholders, like the management of the research institutions who are the ones enabling the research support staff to participate in such an activity. When building the association, it should consider who is represented: the institution or individuals in a society of professionals. Having institutional and/or individual membership will affect the membership structure.

In Part 2 of the book the experience presented from different countries demonstrates the huge variety in forming, timeframe, and scope of national associations and networks.

A major challenge in an environment where there is no tradition for research support or getting organised is the first mover problem (Leeson, 2010). The first mover problem says that a decision equilibrium (understood as the lack of ability to take decision) can occur in taking the decision to action because the cost or investment (risk) of the individual will only give value if all (or a majority) of the other actors join the decision. In order to remove the obstacle of the first mover problem, various strategies can be implemented, depending on the current situation. Identifying leadership, for example finding a motivated, charismatic personality in getting things started could play an important role, combined with having colleagues or hiring staff able and willing to do the operational management. Leeson (2010) also points out a roundabout for the first mover problem, to have a petition on the topic and, in this case, the petition could be a survey highlighting the size of the RMA community and main issues to be addressed (like training needs, career issues, etc.).

Setting up a leadership management is closely connected with the vision and mission of the association (Aithal, 2016). How does a new leadership make sure to deliver on the aims for the association? Bruce Tuckmann (1965) developed the notion Forming, Storming, Norming, and Performing describing the processes relating to the forming of new groups or organisations: after a period with enthusiasm and strong commitment (even conflicts), there will be a phase of normalising, often with a drop in engagement of the members of the group – this can lead to stagnation, and the leadership should be able to analyse and take appropriate steps to move the association forward. This can take several forms, like strategy development processes, member surveys, retreats, and leadership development programs or initiatives.

The leadership of the association is also responsible for succession planning (Atwood, 2020) and making sure that there is talent development in the association. Depending on the size of the association, this can be through the establishment of committees, and other groups in order to give a broader introduction to the management of the association and give members the ability to prove and develop their engagement in the association.

Draft statutes for the association, defining the purpose of the association, membership, membership fee, elections, leadership and management, budget, economy, and liability, should be put in place. In some countries, it can be difficult, due to regulations, to set up a voluntary association. Membership fee can become an issue, if stakeholders are not willing to cover membership costs, or there can be difficulties in setting up a bank account. Therefore, a thorough risk analysis and contingency plan for setting up a formal association is recommended.

Activities of the RMA association are typically:

- Upskilling, training, and career development.
- Recognition – defining skills and competencies of RMAs – policy advice.
- Networking.
- Capacity building, raising awareness, and community building.
- Networking with other associations, either on a bilateral basis or through INORMS can help the transformation process from informal to formal, be a source for exchanging best practice and learning from participating in activities.

There can also be cultural differences, making it difficult to adopt models from other countries. This can be down to details of the titles and roles in the association, for example, titles ‘President’ or ‘Chair’, ‘Board’ or ‘Board of Directors’. However, learning from the structures of other like-minded associations and determining which aspects can be translated successfully to the local context is always beneficial.

Conclusion

In this chapter, we discussed the aspects of transforming informal networks of RMA professionals into a formal association and the advantages and disadvantages in doing so. The solution to the challenges in setting up a formal RMA association is closely linked to national conditions, culture and personal commitment, and there is no 'one size fits all' model. Every community should find the right time and opportunity to act according to the options available. A thorough analysis should be the facts-based foundation, to drive the actions in realising national potentials and minimising the risk for failures, including learning from what works in other RMA associations around the world. Identifying and defining the group of RMA's is the next important step, to map the community and link it to the involved stakeholders. This will establish an understanding of the training, networking, and policies necessary for the community, and help clarify interactions with stakeholders, raising awareness about the contribution, and value of an organised RMA association.

We have presented the steps necessary to form an association, and as the country chapters will reveal, there is not a linear progression that will ensure success in achieving a successful setting up of an RMA association.

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