

Measuring impact of peer networks

To explore methods and metrics for measuring the effectiveness and impacts of networks

Disclaimer

This briefing is a summary of various resources. You should not take the information provided here as a given: the concepts and theories we found useful may or may not apply to your network. We also acknowledge that similar theories and concepts appear in systems change, community organising and social change literature.

If you find yourself disagreeing with or questioning some of the points in this briefing, please make a note of it, as there will be an opportunity to discuss during our online session.

How to use this resource

Reading this document front-to-back may be a bit of an information overload. It might be easier to dip in and out of it according to your interests and current network issues. If you would rather read the whole thing one go - that's also great!

This resource aims to:

- Provide background for the next session on 8th November
- Support you in learning about campaigning

Below is a table of contents that will help you navigate this briefing. Each section gives an overview of the topic and then poses some questions that you may want to think about in relation to your own network.

We hope you find this useful, happy reading!

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1 Why networks and evaluations of them are important

“Monitoring and assessing a social-impact network’s condition and performance is the basis for improving its impact”

- Connecting to Change the World

Why is it difficult to know if networks work? As your network starts making decisions and taking action, how will you know how well the network building is going? Far too many network organizers don’t ask this question until long after the network has matured, so in the early stages, as the network gets going, they don’t really know how it’s doing. They may have anecdotal evidence—a member says she likes the network; several members collaborate on a project—but the organizers have no substantial information, no baseline data, about the network.¹

It’s one thing to ask the question, how well is the network building going? It’s another to know how to answer that question. How do you demonstrate the impact the network is having? How can you attribute hard to measure outcomes, like increased confidence, to the network in any meaningful way that will help justify funding the network? Measuring social capital is exactly what the Barr Fellowship Programme evaluation set out to do.

Case study: Barr Fellowship Programme.

How an Investment in Relationships Among Social Change Leaders Is Changing Them, Their Organizations, and Their City

This is an example of practical ways to measure social capital, Table 1 below outlines the indicators that the Barr Fellowship evaluation team measured.

The Barr Fellowship is a network of nonprofit leaders created by the Barr Foundation because a series of reports showed that most leaders in the nonprofit sector in Boston were soon to retire or burnout and so the sector was about to lose strong leadership.

This network of leaders, is based on the hypothesis that recognizing talented leaders and investing in their personal growth and connections with one another will result in individual, collective, and city transformation. As a consequence they hoped to avoid the impending nonprofit leadership deficit.

In the early years (2005-07), the evaluation focused on the organizational effects of the program (e.g., tenure with the organization, distributed leadership, personal renewal (avoiding burnout) and rejuvenation of the executive director), and on the relationships that

¹ [SSIR article, Connecting to change the world](#)

developed among leaders in a cohort. In more recent years (2008-12), attention has shifted to cross-cohort and cross-sector relationships and the emergence of new collaborations, experiments in innovation, and resulting community benefit. Shifting the priorities and focus of the evaluation reflects the evolution of the learning questions and the growth of the network to 48 fellows.

Table 1 outlines the primary learning questions that guided evaluation in the fellowship’s initial and later years.

TABLE 1 Fellowship Evaluation Learning Questions

Early Years (2005-2007)	Later Years (2008-2012)
<p>Fellows</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Are fellows staying longer with their organizations and in the sector? • Are fellows renewed and more satisfied with their role? <p>Organizations</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Do interim directors have the supports they need to succeed in the leaders’ absence? • Do organizations distribute leadership and develop emerging leaders? • Do staff and board members become less reliant on the executive director? • Do organizations develop leadership transition plans? <p>Network</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Is the fellowship cohort becoming more connected? 	<p>Fellows</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Do fellows demonstrate vision and commitment to the whole community? • Do they take new risks, cross boundaries, and innovate? <p>Organizations</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Are organizations increasing capacity to work together to create more community benefit? <p>Network</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Are fellows across cohorts forming authentic and honest relationships with one another? • Is there more cross-cohort sharing of ideas, advice-seeking, personal support, and collaboration leading to innovative and breakthrough projects? • Are fellows bridging across sectors and neighborhoods? <p>Global</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Are fellows developing a global mindset and applying that perspective to Boston – an immigrant city?

Extract source: The Foundation Review, 2013, Vol. 5:1

[Read more...](#)

Q1: What do you think the evaluation questions asked by OSCA as part of the PNP will tell us about the effect of this CoP?

One of the greatest barriers to grantmaker investment in networks is showing near-term measurable returns. Investing in networks requires patience and a willingness to embrace emergent and unexpected outcomes in addition to the original target. Despite these challenges, we’re learning more and more about how to assess network impact. Although there is no easy formula, there is an emerging set of principles that can help inform network learning and impact assessment and, more generally, our understanding of efforts to change

complex systems. These principles include considering the context, assessing multiple pathways to impact and enabling ongoing learning and collaboration.²

Nine reasons to evaluate your network:

- 1) To justify spending resources on network management by **determining ROI**
- 2) To identify areas for **improvement** or gaps and focus efforts and resources where they will have the most impact
- 3) To track progress and inform **strategy** and vision for the future
- 4) To apply for **funding** for network activities
- 5) To link business outcomes with network activities
- 6) To enable ongoing learning and opportunities for collaboration
- 7) To recognise and **celebrate** success and identify strengths
- 8) To assess network weaving efforts in creating network strength and **sustainability**.
- 9) To provide an overview of network functioning in order to spot trends and make internal adjustments.

These reasons lead us to **three main uses** of network evaluation:

- 1) Ensure accountability for use of resources
- 2) Examining the extent to which networks are achieving results or impact
- 3) Using evaluation to support strategic learning and continuous improvement

Q2: What reasons would drive you to evaluate the effectiveness of your network?

² [Jim Joseph Foundation \(2012\) Catalyzing networks for social change](#)

2 What unique aspects of networks matter for evaluation?³

A [guide by Network Impact and Center for Evaluation Innovation](#) teaches us that three things matter for effective network functioning, making each an important focus for evaluation:

The three pillars of network evaluation

Network Connectivity	Network Health	Network Results
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• <i>Membership</i> or the people or organizations that participate in a network• <i>Structure</i> or how connections between members are structured and what flows through those connections	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• <i>Resources</i> or the material resources a network needs to sustain itself (e.g., external funding)• <i>Infrastructure</i> or the <i>internal systems</i> and structures that support the network (e.g., communication, rules and processes)• <i>Advantage</i> or the networks capacity for joint value creation	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• <i>Interim outcomes</i> or the results achieved as network works toward its ultimate goal or intended impact• The <i>goal or intended impact</i> itself (e.g., a policy outcome was achieved, a particular practice was spread, the community or its members changed in a certain way)

2.1 Network connectivity

Network connectivity is about measuring the effectiveness of network weaving to create connections. Connections are the essential glue in a highly decentralized network. A network map analysis (often referred to as social network analysis) is one way to demonstrate the sustainability of the network by looking the number and strength of connections (the glue) as well as who is in the network (power). The more glue and the more power in the network, the more sustainable it will be. Networks bring people together to find common cause, and it is important to know (particularly if you are a funder or network facilitator) if deliberate efforts to

³ http://www.networkimpact.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/09/NetworkEvalGuidePt1_FramingPaper.pdf

weave network members' ties to each other are resulting in efficient and effective "pathways" for shared learning and action.

Network connectivity has two dimensions that can be assessed:

- (a) membership, or the people, or organizations that participate in a network and
- (b) structure, or how connections between members are structured and what flows through those connections.

Case study: Reboot

How network maps demonstrate the strength and sustainability of a network.

This is an example of using social network analysis to measure the effect of network connectivity on sustainability. Figure 2 below shows how there are several weavers connecting different parts of the network; there is no single point of failure and this demonstrates the network strength.

Reboot is a network of individuals in the United States established in 2003. Reboot's purpose is to reinterpret Judaism/Jewishness in America so it has meaning and value for younger Jewish Americans. Its members create innovations in cultural and religious practices — new events, products (e.g., movies, books, CDs), services, and organizations.

"We fell into the notion of having an ongoing network as ideas started emerging and we saw people working together from so many creative sectors. We saw how impact was magnified and leveraged in ways we could not have imagined."

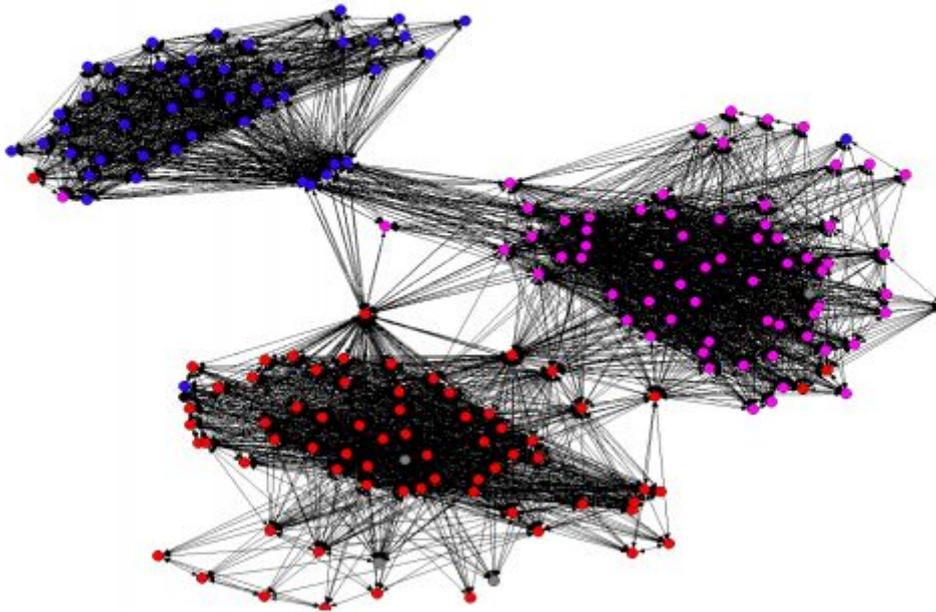
Rachel Levin, cofounder of Reboot.

In order to receive further funding from grants, the network needed to demonstrate and evaluate its effectiveness and that's where measuring network connectivity through network mapping came in.

The Reboot connectivity maps provided evidence of the network's strength, Adene Sacks of the grantmaking body (Jim Joseph Foundation) at the time said;

"It [the network maps] proved to me that the network was sustainable. It had key players—all these incredible individuals — and boundary spanners [between the major city clusters]. It had evolved cross-cohort connections. I felt hugely gratified seeing those network maps and understanding how much was happening in the network that had nothing to do with the founders or the organizational backbone [Reboot staff] for the network."

Figure 2: Reboot Connectivity Map Showing Rebooters in Three Cities
Connections between Rebooters in the three main cities: Greater New York (red), San Francisco (blue), Los Angeles (pink).



Extract source: [Network Evaluation Guide, Part 2](#)

[Read more...](#)

There's a whole host of [social network mapping tools](#) available online.

Q3: How could you use a network map to support a funding application for your network?

2.2 Network health⁴

After the connectivity of members, a crucial factor for a network's well being is its capacity to sustain the enthusiasm and commitment of voluntary members and enable their ability to work as a network to achieve shared goals. Network effectiveness depends on much more than a network's ability to assemble relevant capacities and execute network plans. It depends on a network's ability to engage its members, sustain their engagement, and adapt as needed. The results from assessing a network's health can be used by network members to promote continuous improvement of network performance.

Network health has three dimensions that can be assessed:

⁴ [Network Impact: Network Evaluation Guide, Part 1.](#)

(a) resources, or the material resources a network needs to sustain itself (e.g., external funding);

(b) infrastructure, or the internal systems and structures that support the network (e.g., communication, rules and processes); and

(c) advantage, or the network's capacity for joint value creation.

Extract 2.2 source: Network Evaluation Guide, Part 1

2.23 Characteristics of network health⁵

Characteristics which indicate network health vary, here's seven of the most important attributes of healthy networks:

- **Value.** Effective networks offer multiple doors of entry — a range of value propositions that will resonate with diverse motives for participation. They also outline clearly for participants what can be expected from the network and what will be expected of participants in return.
- **Participation.** Participants in healthy networks connect with others and engage in network activities. An environment of trust and reciprocity is nurtured through distributed leadership and an established code of conduct.
- **Form.** A network's form should reflect its purpose. For example, if its purpose is innovation, there should be a large periphery — individuals loosely connected around the edges of the network, who bring in fresh ideas.
- **Leadership.** Leadership in healthy networks is shared and distributed widely. Ideally many participants are exercising leadership by weaving connections, bridging differences and inspiring others to recognize and work toward shared goals.
- **Connection.** Connectivity throughout the network should be dense enough that the network will remain strong even if highly connected participants leave. Ample, well designed space (for online and in-person contact) and effective use of social media can facilitate these connections.
- **Capacity** to tap the network's assets. Healthy networks operate on the premise that the assets they need are resident within the network or, if they are not, someone finds what's missing and brings it in. They have systems and habits in place for revealing capacity — such as talent, resources and time — and tapping that capacity.
- **Feedback** loops and adaptation. Networks are dynamic; what is needed and works today may not be relevant tomorrow. Healthy networks have feedback loops in place that enable continuous learning about what works and what's needed, with input from across the network. Then they adapt and act based on their new knowledge.

Extract 2.23 source: The Jim Joseph Foundation (2012)

⁵ [Jim Joseph Foundation \(2012\) Catalyzing networks for social change](#)

Case study: Urban Sustainability Directors Network Assessment

How member surveys and monitoring participation demonstrate the network's ability to sustain member engagement.

This is an example of using member surveys and monitoring member participation to continuously assess member engagement and demonstrate the value of investing in the network. Figure 5 below shows the extent of participation amongst network members through their involvement in working groups, user groups or committees.

“The network is a living organism, if you don't take its temperature, how do you know how it's doing?”

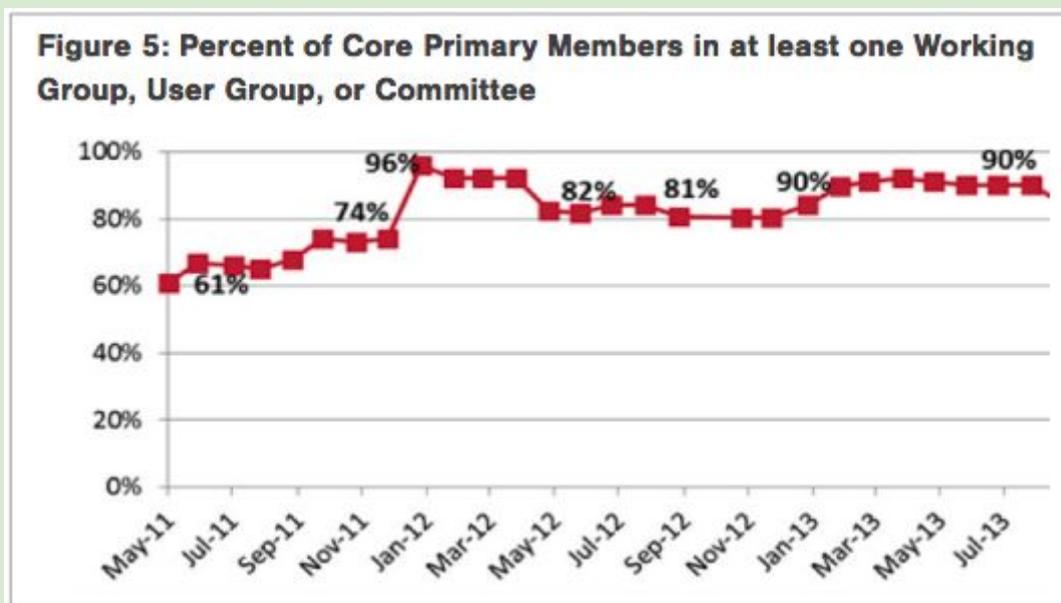
Julia Parzen, Managing Director of USDN

Through member surveys and monitoring member participation, the USDN is able to draw conclusions about member satisfaction, the creation and ending of new user groups, how many network members take on leadership roles, collaborations for grant applications and the effect of participation.

Through regular assessments, USDN identified a rise in the percentage of members who report that participating in the network had helped them to “save time,” “find a solution to a key challenge,” “make a change in policy/program/process,” and/or “avoid a problem already faced by peers.” In fact, two-thirds of members said [network] participation had helped them find a solution to a key challenge. Figure 5 demonstrates levels of participation.

“Having this data makes it easy for me to update my trustees and to reinforce—or contradict—what I already understand about the network from a ‘gut check’ standpoint.”

Darryl Young, Director at Summit Foundation, a USDN funder.



Extract Source: Network Evaluation Guide, Part 2

[Read more...](#)

Q4: As a network facilitator, to whom and when do you need to be able to demonstrate network member engagement? How do you do this currently?

2.3 Network results

Ultimately, most networks have a goal of achieving a particular type of social change. They come together for a purpose, and while network connectivity and health are important to their ability to achieve those results, it is important to know if the network itself is making a difference.

Network results have two dimensions that can be assessed:

- (a) interim outcomes, or the results achieved as the network works toward its ultimate goal or intended impact, and
- (b) the goal or intended impact itself (e.g., a policy outcome was achieved, a particular practice was spread, the community or its residents changed in a certain way).

Case study: International Land Coalition

How reviewing network results demonstrates achievements against objectives and focuses strategy for future network impact

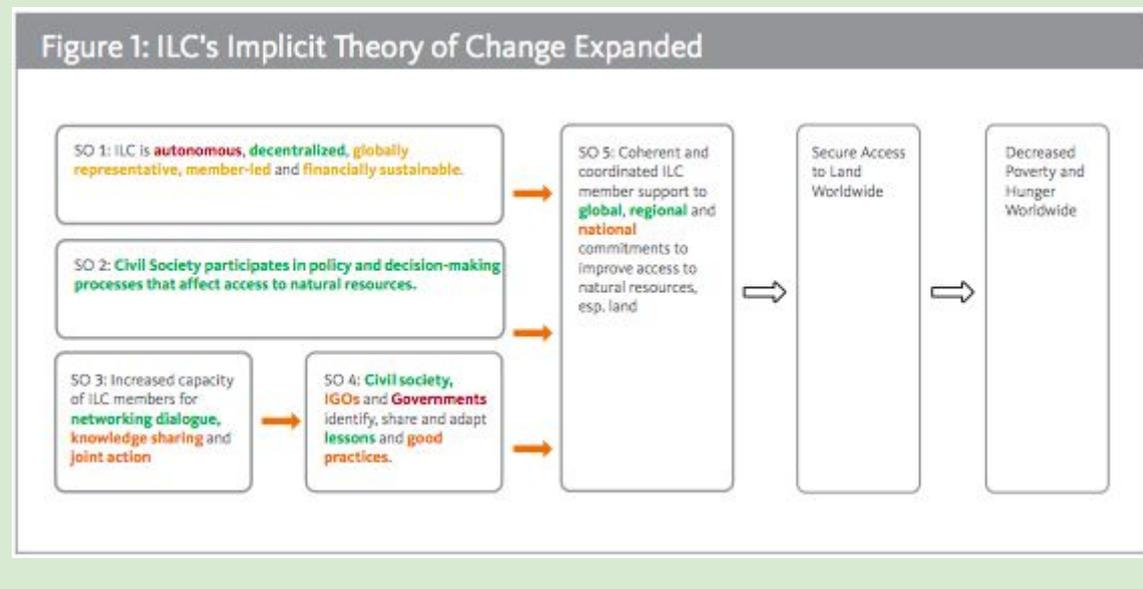
This is an example of using a strategic review to match activities and outputs to objectives within a theory of change to indicate the effectiveness of the network and inform strategy going forward. Figure 1 below shows the colour-coded theory of change objective achievement based on a review of the network outputs.

The International Land Coalition (ILC) is a global alliance of civil society and intergovernmental organizations working to promote secure and equitable access to and control over land for poor women and men through advocacy, dialogue, knowledge sharing and capacity building. In 2010, the ILC commissioned an independent assessment of ILC's influence during the period 2007-2011 as input to the development of its 2011-2015 strategy plan.

A first step in the assessment was to match activities and outputs described in ILC reports with objectives outlined in the ILC's 2007-2011 strategic framework and locate these within an implicit ILC theory of change. Evaluators then used information from multiple sources to identify key ILC achievements under each objective, for example, adoption of pro-poor perspectives in international agendas and national level policy.

Evaluators also assessed ILC network development during the 2007-2011 period; reported member satisfaction with network events and participation in forums identified increases in the quality and density of member interactions, member interviews revealed progress toward being member-led, and increased capacity for joint action was evidenced by the creation of collective research, development opportunities and regional platforms (multi-hub-and-spoke network development).

ILC Director Madiodio Niasse reported that this independent review of network performance for the period 2007-2011 led to a radical collective reflection within the ILC about the Coalition's comparative advantage and its positioning in the future.



Extract Source: [Network Evaluation Guide, Part 2](#)

[Read more...](#)

Q5: How do you capture network results and how could they be or are they used to inform your strategy?

3 How should we approach network evaluation?

Here's a summary of the practical evaluation methods used in the case studies discussed:

- Network mapping & social network analysis
- Member surveys, such as [network health survey](#)
- Participation monitoring
- Focus groups
- Member interviews
- Review of network activity documentation
- Review grant-making patterns, reports of annual meetings, and patterns of Steering Committee membership
- Review activities and outputs towards achievement of objectives

An evaluation might look at all three pillars: connectivity, health and results or it may focus on just one. This will vary depending on the resources available to complete the evaluation and can also be affected by a network's stage of development. If resources for evaluation are limited, it's usually better to complete an in-depth review of one pillar, rather than a light touch on all three. Below we explore the stages of network development and relevant evaluation methods or tools for each.

Stages of Network Development with Evaluation Questions



Evaluation Methods and Tools

Stage 1: Catalyzing

- System mapping of the focus issue or problem and/or important system players
- Interviews and/or focus groups with key stakeholders

Stage 2: Launch

- Draft network theory of change
- Network connectivity mapping
- Survey of members' initial value propositions
- Analysis of network documents (statement of purpose, budget, business plan, etc.)

Stage 3: Organize

- Network health survey
- Interviews and/or focus groups members
- Observation of network activities/meetings
- Survey members' value proposition satisfaction
- Analysis of network documents

Stage 4: Perform/Adapt

- Adapting the theory of change as needed
- Network health survey
- Survey of members' value proposition satisfaction
- Analysis of network results and impacts

Stage 5: Transition or Transform

- Survey of members value proposition satisfaction
- Interviews and/or focus groups with network members

Adapted from Monitor Institute and Grantmakers for Effective Organizations (2011) Stages of Network Development. Catalyzing Networks for Social Change: A Funder's Guide.

Source: Network Evaluation Guide Part 1

3.2 Demonstrating your findings

Awareness, understanding and action are the three goals of disseminating evaluation findings. Here's a summary of some ways to bring your findings to life and to the attention of key audiences:

- Formal Reports (e.g. [Reboot's summary report](#))
- Strategic reviews (e.g. [ICL's strategic framework](#))
- Presenting at meetings (e.g AGM, & grantee network meetings)
- Incorporating in funding applications
- Video, posters, powerpoint
- Using the local media
- Newsletters
- Static display boards
- Conferences
- Academic journals
- Specialist and professional press
- Briefings
- Performance and Role-play
- Feedback workshops

Q6: What are the most powerful ways you've seen evaluation findings shared?

4 Final note:

Network evaluation can form one part of the overall evaluation of an organisation social impact. The tools and methods discussed in this briefing are not just valuable for evaluating the network performance but can also be used to inform planning and strategy decisions which look to expand overall social impact of a given organisation.

The authors of [Connecting to Change the World](#) share their four lessons in evaluating networks:

1. Don't underestimate the need to educate funders, staff, board members and network members about network basics.
2. Anticipate and build the assessment system your network will need as it evolves.
3. Don't be funder-centric in thinking about evaluation.
4. Assess multiple dimensions of the network: the results it's producing, how it produces them (as a network), and the development of the network itself.

5 Further resources

- [Wikispaces: networks guide](#)
- Network Impact & Centre for Innovation: Guide to Network Evaluation, [Part 1 and 2](#)
- The Foundation Review (2013) [Only Connect: How an Investment in Relationships Among Social Change Leaders Is Changing Them, Their Organizations, and Their City](#)

- [Catalyzing networks for social change. A Funders Guide. \(2012\)](#)
- [Connecting to Change the World : Harnessing the Power of Networks for Social Impact \(2014\)](#)

