

Promoting academic-practitioner partnerships in international development research

Briefing Note, 31 August 2012

Academics and international development NGOs are under pressure to demonstrate results, evidence and impact. The emphasis on impact offers new opportunities for academics and NGO practitioners. By involving NGOs in research, academics can ensure their research is used and useful; by drawing on academic expertise, NGOs can enhance their methods for capturing results. This opens up space for something much greater, however. Through collaboration, academics and practitioners can pool skills, knowledge and experience to carry out innovative research projects that address real needs in international development. But action is required to expand opportunities and to address institutional obstacles. This briefing note captures key findings, learning and recommendations from a project funded by the Development Studies Associationⁱ aimed at reviewing the state-of-the-art in academic-NGO research collaboration in international development.

Findings

This short project, which ran from March to June 2012, explored nine case studies of collaborative research and pooled together the experiences of a range of academics and NGOs through participatory workshops and discussion forums. This very small sample revealed a more complex picture than the existing literature implies, challenging motivations behind research partnerships and conceptualisations of collaboration.

Challenging the divide between academics and practitioners

Much of the literature focuses on divides between academics and practitioners, outlining their different approaches to and understandings of research and evidence. Divergent worldviews complicate collaboration as the partners might not 'speak the same language'. Although mutual prejudices persist amongst many academics and practitioners, most of the researchers who engaged in this project had experience of both the academic environment and NGOs, and we observed considerable movement between these 'worlds'. Within our cases, there was mutual recognition of the value of different perspectives. We recognize that the divide might be more profound in the natural sciences than in social science.

Fluid and new forms of collaboration

The projects we explored rarely fitted into existing typologies of collaboration. Many of the projects straddled different forms, for example contracted research on very theoretical or formative questions. A form of collaboration which is rarely mentioned but which appears to be growing in frequency is NGOs working with students on research topics, involving a mentoring/training dimension on the part of the NGO in exchange for additional (and inexpensive) capacity to carry out small pieces of research. Collaboration is driven by multiple, often overlapping, rationales: opportunism, ideals, fashion, curiosity, needs, and credibility. A next stage in this research is to develop a new model of research co-production.

Following the money or the goal?

Funding opportunities are key drivers of collaboration and have major implications for the shape of collaborative research projects, often determining the roles that partners can play. The funding question can have both positive and negative impacts on collaborative relationships, acting as both a catalyst for innovative relationships and a constraint when funders set the agenda. Funding was not the catalyst for most of the case studies we explored,

but rather ‘greased the wheels’ of existing relationships or shaped how research was carried out. However, we also know of many potential collaborative research projects that have not taken place because of a lack of funding.

Reviewing the division of labour

The obvious roles that NGOs should play in research – for example in shaping research questions, providing access to informants, or translating results into action – with academics providing methodological rigour and expertise in carrying out the research and analysis, appear increasingly blurred. Amongst our examples, a couple of projects had a clear division of labour with the NGO standing back from the core research work. However, most had very strong involvement of NGOs throughout the process, including using action research and participatory methodologies. Many NGOs want this active involvement in the research process, as it enhances ownership, builds knowledge internally and enables NGOs and their beneficiaries to build on the results. We are seeing this type of approach used increasingly in the development of baseline studies. At the same time, a lot of NGOs do not have a sufficient in-house research capacity, and are more likely to rely on academic partners for core research skills.

The ethics of collaboration

Academic institutions have standard ethics codes of conduct for research; NGOs may not all have ethics codes for research but are likely to have ethics standards for engaging in particular environments. We are concerned that ethics reviews are often tick-box exercises. In international development research there tends to be a great deal of data extraction from local people and local organisations, and direct and even indirect benefits for those groups and people are very unclear. This is particularly the case when key outputs are aimed at academic audiences. Good collaboration should also involve clear contractual agreements between the partners, as well as clear commitments to act responsibly vis-à-vis informants. Equality and trust are crucial elements in successful collaboration.

Challenging research orthodoxy

Most research funding schemes remain embedded in a system which favours orthodox research methodologies and activities. The pressure on academics to publish in top peer-reviewed journals appears little affected by the ‘impact’ drive; and the criteria for decisions about research proposals appear little changed. This pressure negatively impacts on NGO-academic collaboration, requiring academics to make hard choices between satisfying academic demands for peer-reviewed articles and the needs of partners and informants who are more interested in user-friendly, accessible publications or innovative outputs that change lives in the real world. Alternative engagement and dissemination strategies can quickly take a back-foot. A lot more needs to be done to enhance the profile of collaborative research and to enable it to meet the different needs of the researchers involved.

Access to data and research

Despite moves towards more open-access materials, notably for academics within developing countries, most NGOs do not have access to peer-reviewed journals or data sets as the costs are prohibitive. They also often find that these publications do not meet their needs. This perpetuates prejudices within NGOs against academic research, pulling them away from collaboration. On the other hand, NGOs have a lot of information and data that is held internally and is not in the public domain, either because of sensitivity or because they have inadequate resources to process data for public use. Research collaboration would be an ideal way to make more use of data and tacit knowledge held within NGOs.

Investing in partnership

Collaboration requires more investment in relationship-building and research management. It is more costly at the outset, particularly if multiple partners are involved in writing research proposals. Institutional obstacles need to be overcome, such as different expectations, time-frames, financial administration, and management systems. Consequently, partnerships tend to be driven by the personal will of individuals, often building on existing relationships, who recognise the value of dealing with the obstacles in the interests of the research question and objectives. Brokering partnerships where relationships do not already exist is difficult, as is the transition from a personal research relationship to an institutional one. While not all collaborative projects are a success, good experiences tend to open up many more opportunities for mutual engagement, including providing openings for students, getting practitioners involved in teaching, and further research.

Collaboration within developing countries

The project was unable to explore the dynamics of collaboration between southern research institutions and NGOs, international or local, and this remains an important area for further investigation. However, we know that many NGOs turn to local universities and research institutions for in-country expertise. While these relationships can be very positive, they can also have negative effects if researchers are primarily involved in short-term contract research rather than critical enquiry which builds sustainable local academic capacity.

Institutional challenges

The project re-affirmed some known challenges for collaboration. The most common is a clash in time-frames. NGOs are often looking for immediate answers to identified problems. Academic research takes a long time from proposal development through approval to start-up and actual production of findings. Academic annual cycles are also very different to NGO cycles. Managing expectations of research is another challenge: between open research with undetermined outcomes and NGO sensitivity around criticism and unexpected or negative results. Although many NGOs are more than willing to engage in critical enquiry, many more are only looking for positive stories. Many NGOs devote very little in the way of resources to learning and research outside of specific operational programming needs. There needs to be buy-in at a senior level for collaborative research: on the academic side to understand the different requirements of collaborative research, which might include more time devoted to partnership relations and publishing in different formats; on the NGO side to understand the nature of academic research and accept the risks which come with critical enquiry.

Building on the findings of this project we offer the following recommendations:

Messages for research funders

- Provide more funding streams that focus on innovative collaborative research, encouraging research which pushes beyond traditional academic outputs and tackles burning issues arising from real needs. Collaborative research needs to be assessed using appropriate criteria, recognising challenges and needs which differ from more traditional research projects.
- Recognise that collaboration requires more time and resources for managing relationships, more capacity building, and more diversity in dissemination and publication activities.
- Consider the hidden costs. Research can be prohibitive to smaller NGOs if they are expected to contribute matched funding (e.g. for knowledge-exchange activities) and will discourage those who might need research collaboration the most from participating. The costs of in-kind support still need to be covered by organisations and risk increasing overhead costs which are viewed unfavourably by funders.
- Push for public access to research data and findings, as is already happening in some areas
- Carry out a review of collaborative research projects to ascertain their added value, challenges and weaknesses
- Challenge themselves to reflect on what constitutes 'quality' in research reviews
- Include NGO representatives on peer review panels of international development funding schemes
- Interrogate how local organisations and people benefit directly from international development research; this might include considering compensation for the time and resources they devote to providing data and feedback

Messages for international development NGO networks

- Engage with research councils and funders to expand opportunities for collaboration, and to enhance the understanding of the value of research amongst NGOs
- Demand a presence on research panels to enhance the voice of NGOs in shaping research agendas
- Encourage NGOs to highlight research gaps and questions to academics and research funders; suitable outlets are required to enable this, for example through bulletin boards, websites and conferences
- Demand open access to academic publications and datasets relevant to international development, recognising that NGO time and resources are often given freely to facilitate researchers, as is the time of local organisations and individuals in developing countries.

- Encourage NGOs to make data from their own projects, programmes and evaluations public for use in research
- Explore research ‘literacy’ and skills needs, providing capacity building to increase understanding of research methodologies to enable better engagement with research processes and findings
- Work with academic institutions and professional bodies in international development to promote research collaboration, e.g. through conferences, workshops, training, projects, etc.

Messages for international development NGOs

- Take a position on research collaboration, reflecting on institutional obstacles such as staff time for research and research skills required to participate in research
- Carry out cost-benefit analysis of collaboration with academics in order to address demands for evidence and value for money, as well as to promote innovative approaches and best practice
- Encourage staff and partners to highlight research gaps and questions to academics and research funders
- Demand open access to academic publications and datasets which have emerged from collaborative research

Messages for academic institutions involved in international development

- Review incentives for collaborative research projects, recognising the benefits of alternative forms of publication and impact in career pathways
- Provide support to promote collaboration, for example additional support with proposal design and support for secondments
- Invest in collaborative relationships through joint activities, such as teaching and seminars, and fellowships for NGO researchers involved in collaborative work
- Push for open access to research data and publications which have been generated through collaboration
- Encourage collaboration between students and NGOs, e.g. internships, placements, PhD projects, in order to build up an ethos of mutual respect between researchers in different types of institution
- Turn to NGOs for information about research gaps and questions

Messages for academic professional bodies

- Encourage heads of development studies departments to review incentives for collaborative research projects and push research funders to recognise the value of collaborative research
- Engage with research funders on funding streams for collaborative research, including encouraging an evaluation of collaborative research projects in international development
- Promote collaboration through study groups and network events
- Push for open access to research data and publications on international development which have been generated through co-production
- Develop a common code of conduct and guidelines for collaborative research
- Push for NGO representatives to be included on peer review panels of international development funding schemes

Useful Links

‘Cracking Collaboration’ project resources: <http://www.intrac.org/pages/en/dsa-ngos-in-development-study-group.html>

Collaboration in the humanitarian sector: <http://www.elrha.org/effective-partnerships-guide>

UK Collaborative on Development Sciences: <http://www.ukcds.org.uk/>

World Bank Open Knowledge Repository: <https://openknowledge.worldbank.org/>

UK Open Access Implementation Group: <http://open-access.org.uk/>

NGO networks: www.bond.org.uk/ ; www.nidos.org.uk ; www.dochas.ie

Development Studies Association UK and Ireland: www.devstud.ac.uk/; European association www.eadi.org

ⁱ ‘Cracking Collaboration: a new look at partnerships in international development research’ was funded the Development Studies Association of the UK and Ireland, under the New Ideas Initiative. See: www.devstud.ac.uk. The project involved researchers from the [International NGO Training and Research Centre \(INTRAC\)](http://www.intrac.org), [World Vision UK](http://www.worldvision.org), and the [University of Bradford](http://www.bradford.ac.uk). For more information contact Rachel Hayman (rhayman@intrac.org)