

A game of snakes and ladders

Setting up a research function in an international development NGO

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REL Practice Paper 3



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This is the third paper in the REL Practice Papers series:

REL Practice Paper 1: [Balancing research and practice in an international NGO: reflections on setting up a long-term study of change](#)

REL Practice Paper 2: [Understanding change and peacebuilding: tracking the organisational Theory of Change of a Colombian human rights NGO](#)

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Executive summary

This paper tells the story of setting up and developing the Centre for Excellence in Research, Evidence and Learning (REL), sharing insights and learning from four years of work to embed a culture of research and evidence in Christian Aid.

The paper describes the external and institutional contexts which led REL's founders to propose a new research, evidence and learning function, before discussing and tracing the evolution of each of REL's four workstreams: capacity development, strategic organisational learning, collaborative research and engaging with the development sector.

The paper concludes by reflecting on REL's influence, discussing four examples that illustrate how REL has had impact on Christian Aid and the wider sector. It describes shifts which suggest that REL has proved its value to the organisation, ensuring a greater level of investment in enabling strong evidence practice.

Finally, it identifies a set of lessons about the dynamics of setting up a research function and embedding a culture of research into a practice-based organisation.

First, the decision to favour an emergent process of strategic evolution over a formal strategy – and take a broad-based approach to multiple workstreams – was an important factor in allowing REL to thrive, adapting to a shifting organisational context that included two restructures, new leadership and a new organisational strategy.

Second, those working on research within Christian Aid have different needs, rhythms of work, expectations, processes of analysis, and priorities. It was important to meet people at the place where their interest in evidence lay, even where this did not align with REL's own priorities. It was also important to work in spaces where change was possible, paying attention to building understanding and relationships, alongside developing research-based activity.

Third, it is not enough to engage with individuals and their research skills. Equally important is a consideration of the operating environment provided by the organisation, and how this enables or constrains the use of those skills.

Introduction

This paper tells the story of our work to embed a culture of research and evidence in Christian Aid, an international development NGO. As co-heads of Christian Aid's Research, Evidence and Learning (REL) Centre for Excellence, we describe how we set up and developed the centre as a research function between 2016 and 2020, and share our insights and learning from the experience.

We start by describing the external and institutional contexts which led us to propose a new research, evidence and learning function in Christian Aid. We outline our first steps in creating a viable team, and discuss some of our initial considerations about REL's strategic positioning within the wider organisation. Then we hone in on our rationale and the approaches we took to our four strands of work: capacity development, strategic organisational learning, collaborative research, and engagement with the development research sector. We conclude by reflecting on implications and impact.

This paper draws on our own reflections and those of Hilary Cornish and Kas Sempere, REL's first two research advisors.¹ As a function focused on embedding research and learning in Christian Aid, we believed that it was important to model being reflective practitioners, capturing our insights and experiences to inform our own development and strategic direction as a team. We fostered a learning ethos, making space for regular review and reflection. We each periodically wrote up and shared our personal reflections on what we called 'the REL journey', endeavouring to be systematic in our learning, and referring to this process as auto-ethnography. These reflections are the basis of this practice paper.

A window of opportunity

The last decade has seen a strong emphasis in the international development sector on the importance of high-quality evidence to show value for money from aid expenditure, and debate about exactly what comprises 'quality' and 'evidence'.² In particular, the UK Department for International Development (DFID)'s definition of randomised controlled trials as a gold standard for producing evidence of development impact³ catalysed renewed discussion of the validity of different kinds of knowledge and evidence in understanding change. Against this backdrop, international NGOs (INGOs) have developed a variety of different approaches to generating, communicating and using research and evidence, and have established a range of institutional structures for using these in their development, humanitarian, policy and campaigning portfolios.⁴

In 2015, we recognised that as an INGO engaged in programming in nearly 40 countries, Christian Aid was sitting on a pool of data about its programmes and participants in different places. Whilst the quality of this data was variable, Christian Aid was not fully harnessing the opportunity to gain deeper insights into its work, or to understand its impact across the geographical extent of its international portfolio, or to inform its policy and advocacy positions on issues like climate change and economic justice.

Policy and advocacy staff are building evidence based on literature reviews rather than on programme realities. So - the treasure is there, but it is not used.

Kas Sempere, July 2017

I have been shocked and surprised by the sheer level of data held about beneficiaries and programmes that we collect as an organisation, and in the wider sector. The problem is not one of quantity, it's one of quality. The data we have is scattered, disconnected, hard to access, and insecure.

Hilary Cornish, July 2017

Amongst Christian Aid staff, there was limited understanding of what constitutes a high-quality research process and output; or how to systematically review and make judgements about evidence quality. The only staff recruited to Christian Aid for their research skills were market researchers in the Insight team who focused on fundraising, engagement with faith actors and campaigning in the UK; and policy analysts who were responsible for identifying literature to help Christian Aid define policy positions, and gathering evidence to substantiate them. Programme-related processes of research and impact evaluation tended to over-emphasise data collection, paying relatively little attention to existing literature, study design, data management, data analysis or ethics. Often, consideration of potential audiences or research users was very limited, and almost completely absent at the research design stage.

REL was set up to address the challenges around the quality of evidence and research in Christian Aid, as shown in Box 1. Initial considerations over the form and function of REL responded to the organisational debates and priorities of the time. Faced with a challenging funding environment, we had to ensure that the business case included a clear financial model. We envisioned a Centre of Excellence, evolving with 'one foot inside and one foot outside' the organisation, with the potential to spin off as an independent entity in the future through collaborative partnerships and consultancy work. Analysis suggested that there would be appetite in the sector for the kind of services REL might offer, and there was precedent for such spin-offs from other organisations. Set-up required only minimal resources, with reallocation of existing senior leadership and advisory capacity and resources, and REL was given the green light to recruit its two research advisors in February 2016.

The Centre for Excellence in Research, Evidence and Learning

The Centre for Excellence in Research, Evidence and Learning finally came into being in June 2016. Both the two co-heads and the two new research advisors had hybrid identities, having spent some time working in academia (as researchers, evaluators and lecturers) and as development practitioners (in a variety of different roles). We all believed in the value and importance of research and had strong applied research skills. We were also all driven by our commitment

Box 1: Making the case for REL

The business case for REL, presented in October 2015, argued that better research would lead to better programme and policy work, and improve Christian Aid's ability to integrate the two, increasing potential for impact and change.

At this early stage, support to the initiative from senior managers - such as the head of programme funding and the chief development economist - was pivotal.

The head of programme funding argued that "INGOs like Christian Aid need to work even harder to demonstrate their impact, added value and value for money offer – this is wholly dependent on the credibility of their evidence base. Learning through rigorous research also improves future programme design and adaptive programming of existing contracted programmes".

to social justice, to participating actively in social change, and working as practitioners to support this. These values, discussed more in the two reflections below, were the foundations of REL.

Coming back to Christian Aid in 2014 after working at a research institute, I could see so many ways we could combine research rigour with our work: piloting and learning from initiatives and approaches to inform our practice, developing a deeper understanding of what works and how, and evaluating the impact of our work. The REL venture was a bold initiative championed by two directors at a time of organisational restructure and budget cuts. It was a collaborative endeavour that evolved from the philosophy Kate Newman and I shared. It was an exciting opportunity for a start-up, developing vision and strategy, designing a core team and recruiting to new posts, whilst also considering a sustainable business model for the future. I welcomed this more focused remit, closely aligned to my experience and interests, which had potential to add significant value to Christian Aid.

Kate Bingley, September 2020

Throughout my whole career I have been interested in how we can better listen and learn from the voices, perspectives, experiences and knowledges of people living in poverty, and draw on these insights to shape our own positions and understanding of what good development looks like. However, I am also aware that local knowledge should not be romanticised, and that working with multiple knowledges can be the best way to understand issues and work out how to respond to them. When I joined Christian Aid in 2013, I was excited by explicit references to power and partnership in the organisational strategy. But our systems didn't seem to be designed to enable us to listen and learn from people living in poverty, and much of the evidence we produced was of variable quality and tied to monitoring and evaluation (M&E) processes. When Kate Bingley joined, I had found a colleague with a shared vision and understanding of development. It was so exciting to be part of the early discussions, to think through the politics of evidence, the role of an INGO in research, and finally to work through how to enable learning and perspectives from our programmes to be gathered in good quality evidence which could influence our practice.

Kate Newman, September 2020

Each REL co-head reported to the director of a different department – one to international programming, the other to policy and public affairs. This enabled the team to be rooted in and respond to the remits, relationships, staff profile and operating cultures of the two departments, enabling the development of a cross-organisational mandate and voice. Straddling departments facilitated our access to different information and perspectives, the development of wide organisational relationships, and the potential for strategic influence within the organisation. Underpinning the team location and remit was an ambition to make better use of programmatic evidence – for

programme learning and evidence of impact, but also to inform the development of policy and advocacy positions, and Christian Aid's broader thinking and understanding.

Fransman⁵ notes that most INGO research functions are either located within policy departments (to enable research to support policy and advocacy), programme departments (with a focus on evaluation), or organisational development departments (with a focus on learning).

REL's position and remit included all three of these focuses – as well as an explicit ambition to focus on influencing the wider development research sector, advocating to shift power, include excluded voices and knowledges, and champion space for practitioner research (defined in Box 2).

This broad focus translated into four workstreams:

- The **capacity development** workstream aimed to build a research culture and enhance the quality of research and evidence gathering across Christian Aid, and was achieved through training, research advisory services, and production of diverse learning resources.
- The **strategic organisational learning** workstream aimed to bring critical skills and knowledge of context to analysing Christian Aid's practice, and was achieved through a series of learning reviews.
- The **collaborative research** workstream aimed to embed research in practice in the programme and policy departments by modelling best practice, and was achieved through several diverse research projects.
- The **engaging with the development sector** workstream aimed to build Christian Aid's reputation as a thought leader on practitioner research, and was achieved through engaging in collaborative partnerships, participating in various debates around practitioner research and the politics of evidence, and producing publications.

Delivering these workstreams demanded a particular mix of qualities. The research advisor roles we created were not only new for Christian Aid, but also quite different from existing research roles in the sector. As Hilary Cornish later commented, "it feels like we need a very diversified skill set". We sought people with extensive experience in applied research, who could operate as researchers within a practice-based organisation, working alongside staff who might not be familiar with concepts of research design, and with limited time to engage with new ideas. They needed strong interpersonal skills, and the ability to identify and co-create useful applied research. We also needed advisors who shared our critical perspective on evidence, as well as a commitment to our understanding of practitioner research, and to learning.

An evolving research function

With a full REL team in place, we were in a position to develop a strategy and programme of work, and build our profile and network

Box 2. What is practitioner research?

REL's understanding of practitioner research is both technical and political.

We believe that practitioner knowledge and academic knowledge are both valid, and that both have a contribution to make to development.

We challenge the frequent exclusion of the experiences, knowledge and voices of Southern practitioners from research processes, and aspire to value and build from local knowledge and framing of development challenges.

For us, practitioner research in development is a process of systematic investigation using any appropriate research method, which:

- is conceptualised, developed and led by development professionals
- is carried out to generate evidence, deepen understanding or document new or excluded perspectives on an issue relevant to development practice
- intends to be useful by having impact on development thinking, practice or policies – either through the way the research is done or by producing useful, accessible outputs
- is aware of power, and deliberately designed to be aware of and potentially shift accepted views of who researchers are and whose knowledge counts in research.

within the organisation. We were a new and different function, working in an organisation of practitioners who were not necessarily convinced of the value of research, and there was some concern and confusion about why REL had been set up. We needed to win hearts and minds, and prove our worth in a practice-based organisation.

We spent the first few months developing an organisational profile, and invited staff across Christian Aid to contact us for advice and support in their work or to undertake collaborative research. We also set up a small advisory board from across Christian Aid's operating structure, to support REL's strategic development and champion our work, whilst ensuring we were rooted in and responding to organisational needs.

Within REL, we debated the extent to which we should balance responsiveness to the organisation with space for our own proactive strategic agenda. Responsiveness was essential for deepening relationships and developing buy-in, while a proactive agenda was essential to developing our external profile and fundraising opportunities, and driving forward changes in practice.

As we made progress and clarified our thinking, we developed a set of practices, condensed by October 2017 into a set of guiding principles and behaviours, shown in Box 3 (following page).

Guided by these principles, we progressed each of our four workstreams in the subsequent two years. By mid-2018, we recruited a research communications advisor, recognising that the lack of this capacity had limited the impact of Christian Aid's research and evaluations. The new research communications advisor straddled REL and the policy team, with a view to bringing the two closer together. The postholder stimulated demand for advisory support in this area across the organisation, and raised the internal and external profiles of both REL and the policy team.

Box 3: REL principles and behaviours

1. We believe in applied research that is robust, practical and appropriate to context, and has the potential to achieve impact – either through the research process, or through research outputs.
2. We focus on collaborative research and take a capacity development approach in our collaborations – whether this is with non-REL colleagues or other agencies.
3. We seek to improve the production and use of high-quality evidence in the development sector. We encourage actors to engage critically with notions of evidence, to consider questions of appropriateness and usefulness, and to be aware of evidence needs and perceptions across the sector.
4. We aim to open up new spaces and innovative ways for diverse actors to engage with research – whether these are research participants or end-users – to bring out alternative perspectives, and enhance the ownership and impact of research.
5. We are curious, inclusive, power aware, participatory and value-driven in our engagement with others. We do not favour a specific type of evidence, although we position ourselves to invest in research processes that contribute to shifting power.
6. We work to collaborate with, complement and strengthen, not displace, actors (individuals and organisations) with relevant experience in the global South.
7. We contribute to strengthening Christian Aid's reputation overall and as an organisation that values and produces good quality evidence. In our role as a critical friend to Christian Aid we communicate our findings in an open and transparent way within the sector – to enhance the credibility of REL as a research and evidence hub – while ensuring we do not undermine Christian Aid's reputation.
8. We play a convening role, brokering relationships at every level, aiming to increase diversity in research. This includes how communities and participants engage in research; how civil society actors engage with communities, and with academics; and how actors (academics and NGOs) in the global North and global South interact and collaborate: North-South, South-South, South-North and North-North.

Source: Centre of Excellence for Research, Evidence and Learning: Strategic direction and business options, October 2017.

Developing capacity for evidence literacy

In setting up REL, we observed that people involved at different stages of the data value chain – from programme staff based in different countries to UK-facing communications and fundraising staff – had widely varying capacities to assess the quality of evidence they generated or used. Technical advice and accompaniment provided by advisors on discrete pieces of work in the first few months of operation gave REL an opportunity to better understand attitudes and practice towards research and evidence across Christian Aid. We decided that we wanted to improve the 'evidence literacy' of staff in roles that required them to engage with research and evidence.

We took a multi-faceted approach to meeting the different needs we identified. Over time, we produced a series of one-page 'how to' guides for staff on a number of basic topics, for example, guidance on developing terms of reference for research or evaluation. We also developed a suite of two-hour virtual workshops on topics such as how to assess the quality of evidence and use it to make appropriate claims, and approaches to sampling. Alongside, the REL team

sought to engage staff and promote good practice through its 'Tuesday Tips', weekly research advice shared on internal social media platforms and in newsletters; and by writing and promoting blogs. We also briefly organised monthly 'research picnics', providing a space for staff to table a research interest or challenge for informal discussion.

Our flagship capacity development intervention consisted of a more substantial training course, Evidence for Development Professionals (E4D), which was developed in late 2016 and piloted in early 2017. This started as an interactive ten-week distance learning course⁶ delivered by the research advisors; the 90-minute sessions included presentations and discussions, and also incorporated quizzes and polls. The course required participants to do homework each week, and to apply their learning in a personal project related to their area of work (for example, keeping a journal to reflect on daily practice, or developing terms of reference for a research or evaluation study).

E4D was rolled out to 75 participants across Christian Aid in three cycles, and was a trailblazer in effectively harnessing Skype for Business as a learning and communication platform; as shown in Box 4, it was well-received.

REL's focus on capacity development in the first three years was with Christian Aid staff, with only occasional and ad hoc engagement with partner organisations. In 2019 we started a process to expand this engagement, and in early 2020 we piloted a tailored version of E4D with partners and Christian Aid staff in Myanmar and Nigeria, in collaboration with the Open University.

While E4D was positively received, there were also challenges. Course participants were much more likely to seek out support from REL, as they became more confident to effectively scope and commission or conduct research and evaluations. But while participants now had a clearer idea of what was needed, their ability to apply their knowledge and carry out research was limited.

While the REL advisors continued to provide a technical advisory function, less time was spent responding to ad hoc requests and their activities became more focused to optimise use of limited resources. In 2018 we began to embed accompaniment in thematic teams working on health and violence/peace, where there was already an appetite to develop research. Allocating a proportion of a research advisor's time to each thematic team for a year meant a more systematic engagement with staff in these areas.

In addition to responding to support requests and embedded advisory activities, REL also identified two important 'evidence spaces' in the organisation where we engaged proactively around evidence quality – the corporate annual report, and reports produced by the policy department.

In 2017, REL reviewed the quality of evidence in the previous year's corporate annual report, making six recommendations for improvement. In subsequent years, a REL advisor used this as a basis to provide training to those collating evidence of country-level impact, as well as reviewing the final draft of each year's report.

Box 4: Impact of the Evidence for Development course

Following the third iteration of E4D, Loughborough University reviewed the course, interviewing participants on their experiences, and the impact of the course on their day-to-day work.

They found that taking the course had increased participants' awareness of research and evaluation best practices. For programme staff, this had led to the increased likelihood that they would focus on research design at the outset of their programmes, considering at the start how to build in any data collection. The course had also enabled management staff to make better sense of reports and evaluation data coming in.

Other wider impacts included: the development of a shared language about research and evaluation; increased use of REL's existing toolkits; and better ability to respond to external pressures from funding agencies on research and the measurement of impact.

This positive external evaluation reinforced the feedback REL had previously gathered from participants, identifying how much they had benefitted from the facilitation and learning approach, the topics and skills covered, the space to meet colleagues and discuss evidence, and the opportunity to apply their learning to their personal projects.

In 2018, REL carried out a similar analysis of a set of reports produced by the policy department; this led to a clear identification of challenges and a set of recommendations to resolve them.

Subsequently, REL was formally incorporated into the review group charged with assessing policy, advocacy and research reports ahead of publication. Through participation in this group, we have found that our input is most useful when research is being scoped, rather than at the stage of comments on a draft research report.

In both these examples it was important to have support from a director to open up the space, to take on board REL's analysis, and to find a way of incorporating recommendations.

Critical reviews for organisational learning

In the first three years of operation, several opportunities arose to undertake learning reviews of internal funding mechanisms, programming approaches, operational models and aspects of organisational development – all of which had strategic importance for senior decision-makers at Christian Aid.

An early learning review, of Christian Aid's cookstoves programming, was described as a "game changer" by the international programme director, and was a turning point in establishing REL's legitimacy. A discrete ten-day assignment, the review was conducted with reference to international standards for improved cookstoves, and provided tailored insights into the options available to Christian Aid in this programming area. It was the first time that the organisation had systematically analysed its own programme interventions in relation to a wider body of knowledge.

In most cases, senior managers identified the need for reviews, and commissioned REL to design and conduct them. REL brought a good understanding of the research cycle to the review process, from review design to considering how to engage internal stakeholders to embed findings in organisational policy and practice.

These reviews proved to be an excellent entry point for providing Christian Aid with timely, relevant critical analysis and insight, informed by REL's understanding of the organisation and the wider sector. They raised our internal profile, and represented a virtuous cycle, as one review led to another. They were also a good way of engaging senior leadership and the Board, thus encouraging stronger organisational support for our work which had a knock-on effect elsewhere – shown, for example, in how directors lent direct support to encouraging participation in the E4D course.

Writing in 2017, Hilary Cornish reflected that "it feels like REL is a team of insiders-outsiders, and that REL itself hovers on the inside/outside boundary of Christian Aid". The learning reviews showed how this 'insider-outsider' status was intrinsic to our value for Christian Aid – providing us with a comparative advantage over external consultants. Whilst our 'insider' status enabled us to identify and access the right informants, and to tailor our findings and recommendations, we were also 'outsiders,' one step removed from implementation of programmes and policy work, which allowed us to act as a critical friend.

Modelling collaborative practitioner research

For REL to be successful, it needed to engage with research as it was currently practised across the organisation. This meant understanding what people were already doing and illustrating how thinking about research differently could complement and strengthen work across the organisation.

Hilary Cornish, reflecting on her first year as Research Advisor, observed:

I love theory that helps explain the world, and feel theory developments are undervalued within Christian Aid and in the sector, and as a result we don't contribute to theorising. To generalise, people tend to speak of doing research, as doing data collection. You can introduce more data collection, but what is missing seems to be the design of the study and the analysis. These are deprioritised. Research is either performative, or very localised.

Box 5 shares further reflections on the varied character of research across the organisation.

While much of our work to increase the relevance and meaningfulness of research to colleagues in different parts of the organisation was done through the capacity development workstream already discussed, our collaborative research workstream explored ways of developing and modelling this kind of research with different parts of the organisation. Three examples illustrate this.

First, REL wanted to show that research could complement programming, and that the evidence generated could both strengthen practice and inform understanding in other areas. We initiated 'Ten Years', a long-term study intended to illustrate how research could complement programming. The study was developed, initially working alongside colleagues in three country programmes (Colombia, Kenya and the UK), with one overarching research question: how are community members and supporters being influenced by, and influencing, processes of social change? We designed a study to capture complex and non-linear change processes and to provide a perspective that went beyond the limitations of the relatively short-term project management cycle.⁷ The study was intended to exist independently of Christian Aid's development and humanitarian programming, but to be integrated with and inform it. Our study design needed to be flexible and emergent, and responsive to changes in programming and organisational strategy.

Second, as discussed in the capacity development section, we explored a structured approach of embedded accompaniment to thematic teams. For example, Hilary Cornish worked with health advisors and the internal health community of practice to identify emerging, practice-relevant research questions as they reflected on their work. One of these research questions explored models of universal health coverage and led to the production of a literature review to help focus further thinking in the organisation and identify

Box 5. Characterising research in Christian Aid

Research in different parts of the organisation had different tendencies, characteristics, strengths and weaknesses.

For example, staff working in policy functions were highly research literate, many with postgraduate degrees, including PhDs. However, the nature of policy research in Christian Aid aligns with the "Death-star research" described by Fransman (2019): research to find evidence to support a policy position. While this is an effective approach to advocacy, it is quite different both from primary research focused on exploring an issue and deepening understanding, for example on the relationship between women's economic empowerment and health; and from conceptual or theoretical research.

Likewise, research carried out in the process of implementing programmes also had its limitations. For example, formal M&E processes had the potential to be harnessed for research purposes, but M&E was often carried out by staff recruited for their project management and reporting skills, rather than their understanding of research methods or design. Whilst there were pockets of well-resourced M&E systems and processes, the quality of the data collected through these systems was variable, and the potential of the data to be used to answer any broader research.

knowledge gaps; these included the need for better understanding of the links between women's economic empowerment, health and wellbeing.

This led to a piece of original applied programmatic research. In the research design, REL partnered with the London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine (LSHTM), Christian Aid Sierra Leone and Njala University (in Bo, Sierra Leone), also involving Christian Aid's Sierra Leonean partner organisations. Going through the ethics approval process (with both the LSHTM and Sierra Leone government ethics committees) pushed Christian Aid staff (including REL) to think through the research design more fully and make explicit choices about selecting respondents for the study and how data would be gathered. It also ensured that proper time was allocated for collective analysis, and that outputs would be developed for both academic and practitioner audiences. The rigour of the process was challenging, but resulted in a high-quality piece of research which contributed learning to Christian Aid's broader work on health, was subsequently published in an academic journal,⁸ and was promoted on internal and external communication platforms to enable practitioner and academic engagement with the findings.

Third, we worked to integrate research into programme design. An opportunity for this arose when Christian Aid put together a consortium proposal for UK Aid Connect funding. REL led on the development of the overall research approach and brokered relationships with external researchers; this helped us identify how Christian Aid could be positioned in research coordination as well as research delivery roles, developing partnerships and facilitating learning across the consortium. We drew out lessons on the benefits and challenges of engaging with academics, recognising that while they can help us focus our research questions, bring rigour to our methodological approach and reach different audiences, their incentives for research are different, and the bureaucratic processes they need to follow are sometimes constraining. This proposal led to the Evidence and Collaboration for Inclusive Development (ECID) programme,⁹ which focuses on increasing access to essential services for people who feel marginalised in Myanmar, Nigeria and Zimbabwe, seeking to understand the ways in which data can be used to inform better decision-making. REL, alongside the Open University, continues to lead ECID's research and learning component.

Advocating for practitioner research in the development sector

As already discussed, our engagement with the wider development sector had multiple objectives. At a strategic level, while REL had been set up within Christian Aid, we were asked to explore and develop the potential to spin off as an independent entity. To do this we needed an external profile, and we needed to understand our potential niche in the sector to inform our business planning; external engagement was central to this. Three other objectives concerned using our knowledge, evidence and learning more effectively.

First, we wanted to strengthen Christian Aid's reputation as an organisation that produced good quality research and learning based on our programming. Often, INGO research is dismissed by academics and policy makers as lacking rigour and being biased in support of organisational positions. We wanted to raise the standard of our research so that our programme learning would be taken seriously and be influential in the sector, as we believed that this would contribute to greater impact on poverty.

Second, we wanted to shift the role of practitioners in knowledge generation, and raise the profile and influence of practitioners and researchers based in the global South, to enable them to inform and shape development research agendas, participate in development research governance and access development research funding. This aim grew out of our core beliefs about the value of practitioner research, and the fact that practitioners have a huge wealth of experience and knowledge that should be recognised and valued by other people thinking and writing about development, and should equally inform development policy. This was about more than building an audience for Christian Aid's research: it was also about emphasising the importance of practitioner-academic research partnerships.

Third, we wanted to be active participants in debates about evidence and its influence on NGO programme design and management. In the INGO/development sector there is often a reluctance to acknowledge the political nature of evidence, who is producing it, and what makes some evidence useful and renders some meaningless. We participated in debates about the politics of evidence through blogging, contributing to co-authored journal articles and making presentations at workshops and conferences.

All three of these objectives lay behind our convening a community of practice in 2017. The Research Advisors Network brought together peers from INGOs to create space to share experiences of research in a practice-based organisation, and to explore issues such as the role of a research advisor, developing organisational research strategies, and research ethics.

Christian Aid was also the initiator and co-convenor of the Rethinking Research Partnerships project, which explored the dynamics of university-INGO research partnerships and the politics of evidence. A network of INGOs and UK-based universities were funded to carry out the research, with REL producing the final project output, a discussion guide and toolkit¹⁰ to support practitioners and academics to develop research partnerships.

Towards the end of this work, in 2016, DFID announced an increase in the investment of overseas development aid in research.¹¹ This was an opportune moment for REL to position itself as a 'go-to' practitioner research body, supporting the value of academic-NGO research partnerships, at the same time as emphasising the need for these partnerships to be equitable, impactful, inclusive of diverse knowledge and responsive to the needs of practitioners. A series of opportunities enabled REL to consolidate this position:

- Winning funding from UK Research and Innovation, oversight body for the UK's research councils, to explore how practitioners and academics in the global North and global South participate in development research partnerships, and how to make research partnerships more inclusive, diverse and useful. This resulted in the co-creation and publication of a set of resources for fair and equitable research partnerships.¹²
- Being invited to join the Arts and Humanities Research Council Peer Review College for International Development, and participating in funding panels which make decisions on the allocation of UK research funding.
- Receiving requests from UK academics and academic bodies, such as the National Coordinating Committee on Public Engagement, the Development Studies Association, the Impact Initiative, and the International University Society, to run workshops and events exploring academic-NGO and North-South research collaboration.
- Winning a prize for best research collaboration from the Open University, for the Rethinking Research Collaborative, signalling further recognition for our approach to development research and partnerships.

The challenge was to remain active in these networks and respond to opportunities, while also ensuring that our external engagement did not overshadow the need to develop capacity and legitimacy inside Christian Aid.

Impact, learning points, unresolved questions and future directions

Calling this paper 'Snakes and Ladders' gives a sense of the ups and downs involved in REL's evolution. Reflecting back, there have been tipping points along the way, moments when others recognised how we added value, which have moved us forward. These have had a positive influence on REL getting established and gaining legitimacy within Christian Aid. But there have also been ongoing challenges, which have held us back, even caused reversals in progress: challenges of balancing different priorities, navigating organisational space, and ensuring that we were making strategic decisions in response to different demands on our time.

In 2020, an organisational restructure resulted in significant changes for REL: the number of posts in the team, the range of specialisms and its internal mandate all expanded. Furthermore, 'evidence' is now one of three pillars of the policy department, and 'improving evidence' is one of ten corporate priorities identified in 2021. These changes are indicative of REL's impact on Christian Aid, reflecting the way we have gradually expanded support for high-quality research and evidence, and how the organisation has increasingly valued our role. Other notable indications of the influence REL has had on Christian Aid, as well as the in-roads it has made into the wider sector, include:

- **Ongoing evolution and scale-up of E4D:** Following the successful pilot in 2020, the course is being offered beyond

Christian Aid. It will run three times in 2021, reaching around 100 participants, and bringing in income to enable further course development. The Open University are viewing E4D as an entry point for a wider suite of professional development courses for NGO staff, and Christian Aid are looking at a 'train-the-trainer' model to enable context-specific adaptation to expand the reach of the course. We are also exploring new modules on decolonising research, developing an evidence-based theory of change, planning for impact, and applied research in conflict-affected societies.

- **Investment in seeking research funding:** Christian Aid is increasingly applying for research funding, both from academic and development sector funders. REL has contributed to successful applications which have raised resources for research in Bangladesh, Brazil and Myanmar.
- **Integrating learning based on findings from strategic reviews:** Several of the strategic reviews have had direct impact on institutional practices. For example, the relaunch of Christian Aid's major donor funding mechanism incorporated recommendations from a review, and learning from another review now underpins new partnership principles, and a set of criteria for evaluating partnership. REL has now been given authority to lead on a set of annual strategic reviews and – crucially – resources to translate learning into practice.
- **Sustained profile in the sector:** REL continues to receive many requests to participate in events, processes and networks to share insight and learning. This has included peer reviews of academic funding proposals, ongoing support to the Rethinking Research Collaborative and its critical engagement with the UK academic funding sector, and peer-to-peer working with other INGOs. Three Christian Aid related papers will be presented at the Development Studies Association conference in 2021.

Although there is much to celebrate looking back over the past five years – especially in terms of impact on the organisation itself – there is also much to acknowledge and learn. We still find that we are invited into research processes too late in the day to create as much impact as we believe we could have; staff across Christian Aid still pose research questions that are far too broad to hope to answer; research design frequently still focuses only on data collection, with little time set aside for analysis or developing communications strategies to ensure the research process has greater impact; and all too often Christian Aid studies still begin without proper analysis of external bodies of evidence, their findings not situated in wider knowledge of practice or theory.

In our game of snakes and ladders we have learnt a lot about the dynamics of and strategies for setting up a research function and embedding a culture of research in a practice-oriented organisation. This learning can be grouped into three broad areas:

- **Understanding and responding to a shifting organisational context:** During the first five years of REL, Christian Aid has undergone two restructures, had a new leader, and developed a new global strategy, all of which have shifted organisational priorities. REL has also moved department and reporting lines.

By taking a broad-based approach with multiple workstreams, and favouring an emergent process of strategic evolution over a formal strategy, we have been able to navigate this context by exploring different options and seizing opportunities as they have arisen. Being anticipatory and adaptive has enabled us to remain focused on REL's overall objectives, although it is also important to acknowledge that this has at times caused frustration within the team.

- **Adapting research within a practice-based organisation:** There is a growing body of evidence, to which we have contributed, that identifies the challenges of academic-NGO research partnerships, given different incentives, motivations and approaches to work. We have learnt that even within an INGO, such differences are also important: those working on research have different needs, rhythms of work, expectations, processes of analysis, and priorities. We have learned that it is important to meet people at the place where their interest in evidence lies, even if it does not align with our own priorities; and to work in spaces where change is possible, paying as much attention to building understanding and developing relationships as developing any research-based activity. It has also been important to recognise that our own ideals about research approaches, especially regarding whose voices count, need to be actively engaged with and negotiated in practice, and we need to work flexibly within our principles.
- **Multi-dimensional approach to capacity development:** It is not enough to engage with people and their individual skills around research and evidence; we also need to consider the operating environment provided by the organisation, and how this enables or constrains the use of those skills. For us, this has meant paying more attention to engaging with Christian Aid's partner organisations, and ongoing integration with systems that use evidence in different parts of the organisation. It has triggered us to shift from expecting that any staff member could become a researcher, to a more varied approach spanning critical engagement with evidence, research and evaluation, and commissioning and supporting direct implementation of research if appropriate. We are also continually considering how to create space for critical conversations, analysis and interaction – as part of building the critical mindset needed to engage in research.

Beyond this, there are still a set of questions that we are grappling with, particularly in relation to our wider ambition of shifting power in development research. These include clarifying the extent of our ambition. To date, for example, we have focused on strengthening the research skills of practitioners so that they can be more influential in setting research agendas, and shaping development theory and practice. But should our focus stop here, or should we also be actively engaging with the knowledge of those living in poverty? If so, how would this change who we work with, and the types of research we prioritise? Likewise, will we have a greater impact in shifting power through active engagement and influence in the global North – where most of the research funding sits – or in the global South, where building the capacity of our staff and partners could enable a direct improvement in the quality of the evidence we

produce? As we work through these questions, we are mindful of the wider system in which Christian Aid exists, and the need to constantly pay attention to shifts and changes that could open up new possibilities, or limit existing ones.

As a small team with a distinctive skillset, REL always punched above its weight. Whilst a culture of research and evidence is by no means yet hardwired into Christian Aid, and resourcing for research remains modest, research and research communications are at least firmly on the Christian Aid map, better understood and valued.

As we look forward to the next five years, we anticipate that the latest restructure may result in the erosion of REL's distinctive identity. It has ended our vision of spinning off and becoming completely autonomous, but it may also mean losing our freedom to manage our strategic direction, our intellectual independence, and the 'outsider' perspective that has enabled us to be a truth barometer and critical friend.

We hope, however, that as REL embarks on the next stage of its development, the new streamlined structure will facilitate closer working, coherence and synergies with other advisors in key areas of organisational strategy; more effective championing of the REL agenda at directorate level; and greater recognition of REL's role and contribution to Christian Aid's strategy implementation. Finally, we still aspire to an even greater ability to shift and improve the way that Christian Aid evidences its work across country programmes, thus strengthening the case for the value of practitioner research in the international development arena.

End notes

- ¹ Hilary Cornish and Kas Sempere were research advisors in REL from June 2016 until January 2019 and September 2020 respectively.
- ² Eyben, R., Guijt, I., Roche, C. and Shutt, C. (2015) *The Politics of Evidence and Results in International Development: Playing the Game to Change the Rules?* Practical Action: Rugby
- ³ DFID (2014) 'Assessing the strength of evidence', DFID How-to Note, March. https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/291982/HTN-strength-evidence-march2014.pdf
- ⁴ Fransman, J. (2019) 'Engaging with research for real impact: The state of research in the INGO sector and ways forward for better practice', British Organisation of NGOs in Development: London. https://www.bond.org.uk/sites/default/files/resource-documents/bond_engaging_with_research_for_real_impact.pdf. REL was one of three case studies featured in Fransman's research
- ⁵ Fransman 2019:10
- ⁶ This was reduced to nine weeks in subsequent iterations.
- ⁷ Detailed reflections on our aspirations and the challenges we encountered in setting up this study are available in REL Practice Paper 1 (March 2020) <https://www.christianaid.org.uk/resources/about-us/balancing-research-and-practice-international-ngo>
- ⁸ Cornish, H., Walls, H., Ndirangu, R., Ogbureke, N., Bah, O.M., Tom-Kargbo, J.F., Dimoh, M. & Ranganathan, M. (2020) 'Women's economic empowerment and health related decision-making in rural Sierra Leone', *Culture, Health & Sexuality*, 23:1, 19-36, DOI: 10.1080/13691058.2019.1683229
- ⁹ <https://evidenceforinclusion.org/>
- ¹⁰ Rethinking Research Partnerships: a discussion guide and toolkit <https://www.christianaid.org.uk/resources/about-us/rethinking-research-partnerships>
- ¹¹ Through the Global Challenges Research Fund (a £1.6 billion fund focused on applied partnership research responding to complex development challenges) and the £735 million Newton Fund (co-funded by the UK and research councils in participating countries in the global South).
- ¹² Fair and equitable partnerships for international development research: learning resources <https://www.christianaid.org.uk/about-us/programme-policy-practice/resources-fair-and-equitable-development-research-partnerships>