Rethinking Research Collaborative

Case study: Eric Gutierrez

Resource materials to support fair
and equitable research partnerships

Eric Gutierrez, Christian Aid, UK

This case study presents insights from Eric Gutierrez, Senior Adviser on Tackling Violence, Building Peace at Christian Aid. In 2016, Eric was involved in a successful application to the Global Challenges Research Fund (GCRF) for a research project to investigate how local economies can transition from war to peace, led by SOAS University of London. Christian Aid had previously worked with SOAS in 2015 to commission doctoral students to do short studies on illicit economies and entrepreneurship in five countries. In this case study, Eric reflects on the process of applying for the GCRF funding and the complexity of the relationship between international NGOs and academics in research partnerships.

What is the research project about?

The research project with SOAS intends to provide answers to the question 'how do war economies transform into peace economies?' It will develop answers to this question by doing case studies in three countries – Afghanistan, Colombia and Myanmar – focusing on drug economies in the borderlands. SOAS is partnering with researchers and academic institutions in these three countries, and in the UK.

What is Christian Aid's role in this partnership?

GCRF is not just about funding a research project. It wants policy engagement coming out of that research. So it's not just an academic exercise where you produce a paper that gets stored in some library and never sees the light of day. As well as policy engagement, they also want some capacity building in the three countries.

Our understanding when this all started was that SOAS would be focusing on the research, while we would come in as one of the other collaborators, delivering on policy engagement and capacity building.

What was the process of getting involved in the partnership?

The principal investigator from SOAS, who I knew from our previous work together, called me one morning, saying there was a possibility of making an application for a research grant, and that he would like to invite Christian Aid to be part of it. Without knowing much of what it was all about, I said that in principle, yes; we had a prior track record of working together. But actually, we were unprepared for a different type of engagement with each other.

In the beginning it was OK; we said, we're going to file an expression of interest, which was only a two-page concept note. Our expression of interest went through SOAS first

– there were four departments wanting to respond to the same call, and there was an internal competitive process, and ours was chosen. So we passed that hoop. Then we submitted to the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC),[1] and we passed that hoop. And so we were invited to prepare the long proposal.

This was in November; then I found out that the proposal had to be submitted by December 6th. So there was a big rush! We knew basically what we wanted – to answer that question, of how war economies transform into peace economies; we knew which countries we wanted to work in; we knew we wanted to look at borderlands; we knew who in each country had expertise in those areas. That was all settled. But arrangements, project management, how to sequence the workshops, who would do what – that all needed to be decided.

And there were lots more organisations involved – the London School of Economics, the London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine – more and more organisations came in. Because I was here and not at SOAS, I was peripheral to all the in-fighting that was going on, the scramble for pieces of the pie. The final proposal, an online form, was submitted two minutes before the deadline. It was a very complicated form and in the end, no-one had a clear understanding of exactly what had been submitted – it was all cut and pasted from different parts.

How were roles negotiated after the application was in?

Once our proposal had been accepted, we should have sat down and really grappled with the questions, and asked what we had committed to, who was going to do what. We should have tried to untangle the whole jumbled, complex mass of different pieces. We should have had a fresh process of clarifying exactly what everyone was going to deliver. With hindsight, there were a lot of things we could have done differently.

But by the time the proposal had been accepted, the problem of course was that we were all very busy, with so many other things on our plates. At that point SOAS hired someone to develop the log frame, and a project manager to oversee and move things forward; this was a de facto arrangement that we had to accept.

But we still haven't signed an agreement with SOAS. We made a proposal for an increase in our portion of the funding, because it was cut so many times in the writing of the proposal that we ended up with very little. We've made that proposal to SOAS, and now they have to decide what to do. The main challenge is the policy engagement that we are expected to deliver.

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1   The GCRF is a UK government fund, and its delivery partners include the UK's seven research councils. This particular GCRF grant is managed by the ESRC.

How do perspectives on policy engagement differ in the research partnership?

This is one area where there need to be more conversations between academics and policy advocates, about what's necessary to convince a donor institution like DFID or the World Bank to adopt a certain kind of understanding or a set of useful policy options.

In our proposal we've included a budget for engagement with United Nations Sustaining Peace process, an important platform for discussing how we can move towards meeting the Sustainable Development Goals in dangerous places with illicit economies. In order to do that kind of engagement, we need infrastructure. For example, the ACT Alliance – a network we're members of – has an office outside UN headquarters in New York that we can usefully take advantage of; but to do that we need to alert our colleagues in the alliance and ask them to track the process and let us know about meetings that are going on, schedules – asking them to inform us, and make spaces for our participation, in person or remotely. For successful advocacy, a lot of homework is necessary.

But I think that for many academics the idea is that you produce the research, and that is the evidence base, and you put it into a paper, and you hold a launch and there is a bit of a debate, and you put it on a website. And that's it; that frenetic activity is considered the impact. What we want is more than that: you can launch a really good report but if it's not going to be considered by the policy makers, that's not enough.

So in our new proposal we said, let's invest in engaging with policy in the UN Sustaining Peace process, in the revisions of the fragile states strategies of key donor organisations like the World Bank and DFID, and with the UK Parliament – GCRF funding is approved by the Parliament, we need to have some kind of engagement and feedback system to tell them how the research grants are being used.

How do you think perspectives about research differ in the academic and NGO sectors?

What I've noticed is that a lot of academics tend to focus on the details of a very specific point in time. So it's as if you have a river, with rushing water in it, and you come there with a high-speed camera, and you take a snapshot. And in your snapshot, you have a picture of the river, and you do an analysis: the colour of the water, the velocity, the depth – you get into so many details. But if you pull out from that scene and you look at it, that snapshot is just a very small part. You need to know what goes on in the whole flow. I know it's a simplification. But us NGOs, we tend to look at the broader picture, to step back and look at what the context is. And those are two different skill sets. I want to work with academics because I know that there is a lot of benefit: we have a lot of things we can bring to them, but we can also make a lot of use of the things they bring to us.

That's a positive way of looking at it, though. Sometimes it will create tensions, because we have different ways of doing things, and that has an impact on how resources will be spent, or how meetings will be conducted, or how what's going to be delivered is going to

be sequenced. But if you can get it right, with the two different skill sets complementing each other, you get a partnership that can produce very powerful knowledge.

There has been some disappointment about Christian Aid's status as a participant in this research partnership, because we are not an academic institution. We asked if we could be named co-investigators in the research grant – but because we don't have official status as a research institute, we couldn't do it. This brings up issues of how knowledge is produced and who is producing it.

There is so much knowledge that comes out of NGOs that is not captured in writing papers or articles – but that doesn't mean that useful knowledge is not being produced. Our contribution to the development of knowledge is through engagement with people who live on the frontlines and are exposed to poverty and conflict every day. We don't often publish this in academic journals that are seen as producing knowledge; but our activities on the ground actually produce a different kind of knowledge that is useful to people in practical ways. We want to make sure that more people can use this kind of knowledge – and that's something that we should challenge institutions like ESRC and GCRF with. It's not only academic institutions that are the producers of knowledge in all situations and at all times.

I think that funders and academics should look to us as partners who are suitable to be co-investigators – even as principal investigators. Then the NGO could be a principal investigator teaming up with an academic institution, rather than always the other way around. This would be an equalising of partnership.

What about different understandings of capacity development?

What the research councils are more inclined to look at is a formal, academic kind of capacity-building, which of course is valid. But in many of the places we are working in – especially in this partnership – there is already a lot of capacity. The problem, the reason that capacity is not being put into action or utilised, is that it is too dangerous to do it – there are no safe spaces. Doing research can create a backlash, especially if you're talking about illicit economies. If you dig deep into it, it's dangerous. There's so much collusion of powerful people, of politicians, in the corruption that goes on. But if you say that, if you publish something about it, it can create real problems. So: there is capacity, but because of the structure of power relations, people are unable to use their knowledge.

What Christian Aid pushed for in this research partnership was that if we are going to be serious about capacity building, let's look at creating safe spaces. For example, if you're thinking of holding a workshop, instead of holding it inside Myanmar, where it will be difficult for participants to say freely what they want to say, you can do it across the border in Thailand. So, capacity building is not just simply building the research skills and knowledge of those participating in this research, but also thinking of the spaces that the research is going to create, where you are going to generate some interaction between those involved; that improves capacity.

Rethinking Research Collaborative

About the collaborative

The Rethinking Research Collaborative is an informal international network of organisations – academics, civil society organisations, international non-governmental organisations and research support providers – who are committed to working together to encourage more inclusive responsive collaborations to produce useful and accessible international development research. It first came together to understand and develop principles and practice to support fair and equitable partnerships in response to global development challenges. It is planning a series of initiatives to encourage greater diversity of participation and leadership in international development research.

About these materials

These materials – an introduction, six modules and a set of case studies – provide insights and ideas to support research stakeholders to translate eight principles we have identified for fair and equitable research partnerships into practice. They were written by staff of Christian Aid's Centre of Excellence for Research, Evidence and Learning, and bring together original ideas with research carried out by the Rethinking Research Collaborative. They were funded by a grant from UK Research and Innovation (NS/A000075/1).

Contacts

Collaborative partners