![Rethinking Research Collaborative logo]

Case study: Rethinking Research Collaborative

Resource materials to support fair and equitable research partnerships

Rethinking Research Collaborative

Rethinking Research Collaborative (RRC) is an informal network of academics, civil society practitioners, international non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and research support providers from the UK and many other countries who are committed to improving research in response to global challenges. This case study reflects on the four-month research project led by the RRC and funded by UK Research and Innovation (UKRI) which resulted in the production of these resource materials to support fair and equitable research partnerships. It is based on a collective evaluation of the project.

Background and context

The research team was coordinated by the Open University (OU, a UK-based academic institution) with co-investigators from Christian Aid, INTRAC, Praxis and the UNESCO Chair Programme in Community-Based Research and Social Responsibility in Higher Education (a partnership between Participatory Research in Asia (PRIA) and the University of Victoria, Canada). In this way, the team represented a range of the core partners in fair and equitable research partnerships: UK-based international NGOs and research brokers; civil society organisations and networks from the global South; and academic institutions and networks from the global South and global North.

This case study reflects on the strengths and challenges of our efforts to model a 'fair and equitable research partnership'. It is structured around the eight principles we have identified for fair and equitable partnership[1] and therefore constitutes a retrospective reflection on applying these principles in practice.

1. Put poverty first: Constantly question how research is addressing the end goal of reducing poverty, through better design and evaluation of responsive pathways to development impact

Our research proposal was grounded in the practice-based development agendas of the research team as well as the broader RRC. It was framed by a shared commitment to improving global knowledge democracy for social justice and poverty alleviation, with implications for rethinking the role of research in support of that vision.

The strategic nature of the research offered a clear pathway to development impact

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1   These principles are discussed in the introduction and modules of the resource materials. The slight difference in wording reflects the evolution of the principles between the different workstreams described in this case study.

with five key outputs prioritised to maximize engagement with the key stakeholders: i) collection/analysis of the perceptions of three key types of 'research partner'[2] ; ii) coordination of a roundtable event to bring together representatives of the six key stakeholder groups to inform the development of targeted materials; iii) review and synthesis of existing resources on 'fair and equitable partnerships'; iv) generation of eight guiding principles for fair and equitable partnerships to inform policy and practice; and v) development of six capacity modules for the different stakeholder groups.

Given the short duration of the project, the distributed leadership across the three work streams (see Principle 3 below), and some competing interests and objectives across the partners (e.g. changing policy versus strengthening capacity for best practice within existing systems), some tensions emerged as we attempted to standardise these very different outputs. While this required careful negotiation, it was partly mitigated by the strong existing relationships between the partners and a shared commitment to honesty and willingness to engage with uncomfortable discussions and to produce several drafts of the final outputs. However, this was also extremely time consuming in a project that funded a limited number of days for each partner.

A second challenge was that funding was not included for tracking the translation of the principles into policy/practice or for monitoring the uptake and impact of the capacity modules. These activities are likely to involve additional unfunded work or exploitation of future funding opportunities (involving further unfunded work around application development, administration, reporting etc). This raises important points about the value of follow-on or impact funding as well as the need to understand impact not just in relation to a single project but as part of a longer-term research (or partnership/network) agenda which might evolve across several projects, outputs and events.

2. Critically engage with context(s): Consider the global representativeness of partnerships and governance systems and commit to strengthening research ecosystems in the global South

The project engaged with three key research and development contexts: i) the UK's funding and policy context which frames and had the potential to incentivise 'fair and equitable' research partnerships; ii) the different contexts of the three groups of research partner and especially those based in the global South; and iii) the broader national and regional research ecosystems in different development contexts.

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2   Data collection acted as an informal consultation for UKRI and chance to raise awareness about opportunities through the Global Challenges Research Fund, while also contributing to academic knowledge, and the analysis was also presented at the Development Studies Association conference in June 2018 and will be developed into a jointly authored peer-reviewed journal article.

Importantly, the RRC as a network includes representatives who work across all three of these contexts. For this particular study, a stakeholder analysis of key actors in the first two contexts was conducted as part of the collaborative proposal development and informed the identification of the three key groups of 'partners' and the six key groups of broader 'stakeholders'. These groups were well represented by the international networks of the co-investigating team (such as the UNESCO Chair programme, and the partnership networks of Christian Aid, INTRAC, Praxis and PRIA) with extensive experience in engaging communities and community-based organisations. The project also integrated further networks within the RRC (e.g. the South–South Exchange Programme for the History of Economic Development, headquartered in Brazil, and the pan-African social movement Africans Rising headquartered in Senegal/Gambia/Tanzania) to help identify respondents for the research and participate in the roundtable event. The roundtable event also included a wider range of UK-based funders, brokers and policy makers.

Over the course of the study, an additional stakeholder group was identified as critical to the third development context: regional capacity-building network organisations and research funders such as the African Academy of Sciences, the African Research Universities Alliance, and the International Association of Universities. Representatives from these networks contributed to the research and capacity resources.

However, despite the benefits of our extensive networks and conscious efforts to respond to context and identify the relevant stakeholders, some limitations included the minimal representation of responses from Latin America, from outside the Commonwealth and from the lowest income countries in the global South (a trend that mirrors the coverage of the Global Challenges Research Fund (GCRF) itself). The coordinators of the research based in the global South also identified language challenges, meaning that significant nuance was lost with the multiple translations into English. Another omission was the private sector as a stakeholder group. This was largely due to the sector's prominence in current development practice and the desire of the RRC to grant greater voice to civil society and public sector institutions. However, future research might go further to consider the potential contribution of consultancy firms and other businesses to fair and equitable research partnerships.

3. Redress evidence hierarchies: Incentivise intellectual leadership by Southern-based academics and international broker organisations, and engage communities throughout

Our proposal was designed to maximise intellectual leadership by the non-UK based academic partners. The OU played an overall coordinating role, however, INTRAC led the research work stream and Christian Aid led the capacity development work stream, while

Praxis and the UNESCO Chair were responsible for coordinating the research on the two southern partner groups (civil society and academics respectively) and took intellectual leadership of the design of the data collection/analysis instrument.

Although the project was organised to be as democratic as possible, the three UK-based organisations took a lead in developing the proposal and outputs (as the co-investigators with most experience developing UKRI funding applications and reporting to UKRI standards) while the two partners based in the global South provided comments. While these processes would have ideally been more collaborative, the proposal built on a face-to-face consortium-building event that had taken place six months earlier supported by funding from the OU to bring together members of the RRC to establish a collaborative research agenda. The proposal to UKRI was therefore able to build on the priorities voiced in a more democratic space by the Southern partners, which to some extent mitigated their lesser participation in the proposal (written quickly to respond to a tight timeframe).

Despite the purposeful commitment to redressing evidence hierarchies in the research design, several challenges emerged. The first of these related to a conflict between different approaches to research: those framed by UK academic standards (e.g. the OU's ethical review process and UKRI's data management and reporting conventions); and those based on the very different research practices of the partner organisations and informed by their very different national contexts. Reconciliation of these practices involved significant time and was one of the many hidden research activities of this project (see Principle 6 below).

A second challenge involved some conflict between the decentralised leadership structure and participation of all partners in each component of the project. This led to some confusion about roles and responsibilities with some of the co-investigators feeling they were spending too much time supporting the other work streams. In a better-funded and longer project this might have been mitigated by adequate funded time for regular whole team meetings.

4. Adapt and respond: Take an adaptive approach that is responsive to context

The proposed research design adopted an iterative model: rapid qualitative research informing the roundtable event, which (combined with a review of the existing materials) generated eight principles for fair and equitable partnerships. These principles went on to inform the development of capacity resources targeted to six key stakeholder groups. However, in practice, this iterative model did not work so well. Due to delays to the start of the project, negotiations of collaboration agreements, the inflexible date of the roundtable workshop (due to limited availability of participants), the short-term nature of the project (due to rigid funding schedules) and the limited days allocated to each co-investigator (meaning the work had to fit in with other on-going commitments)

each work stream was rushed with activities bleeding into each other and with little time to discuss the implications of one activity for the next.

These challenges reinforce the importance of taking an adaptive approach to collaborative research which is only possible when partners have already developed shared understandings, agendas and ways of working as well as deep trust. However, in the case of this project, it also required significant additional unfunded input from each organisation.

5. Respect diversity of knowledge and skills: Take time to explore the knowledge, skills and experience that each partner brings and consider different ways of representing research

We started the project with a relatively good understanding of each other's organisations, interests, agendas, knowledge and skills having all worked together in various ways in the past. At the same time, this project allowed us to explore new ways of working and experiment with collaborative technologies such as Google Drive for data storage and collaborative document development, Zoom as an alternative to Skype for remote meetings, webinar technology for data collection, and WhatsApp for on-going communication and rapid collaborative data analysis.

However, the limited funding for each organisation and conflicting schedules meant that there was insufficient time for on-going communication between the team. This resulted in a default approach in which the UK-based partners took on a lot more of the reporting responsibilities which involved translating some of the Southern-based knowledge into standard British and 'global' frameworks and modes of representation. This default position was partly a conscious effort not to exploit or over-burden the Southern-based partners and partly a reliance on additional input from trusted partners we knew would deliver rapidly above and beyond their paid involvement. It is important to recognise this type of exploitation, which is an inevitable implication of under-funded collaborative research.

6. Commit to transparency: Put in place a code of conduct or memorandum of understanding that commits to transparency in all aspects of the project administration and budgeting

Our partnership benefited from the fact that this particular grant was for strategic research, rather than an open call with specific criteria. This allowed us space to collaboratively negotiate an equitable budget through a simple spreadsheet rather than according to more complex costing criteria and the types of funding restrictions set by some UKRI and GCRF calls. Shared Intellectual Property (IP) was also negotiated through an arduous process led by the OU. Roles and responsibilities were clearly allocated with

additional time factored in for all co-investigators to participate in the roundtable event and input into the other workstreams as well as to contribute to final reporting.

However, since each process took a lot more time than previously envisaged, participation in the later workstreams was quite limited. Additional uncosted 'hidden' activities also drained significant resources and contributed to delays. These included: negotiation of collaboration agreements including IP and onward staff contracts; development of information leaflets, consent forms etc. and institutional documents to fulfil the OU's ethical commitments; data management; recruitment and supervision of a research assistant to support the review of existing resources; extensive admin around the roundtable including supporting travel and negotiating visas; and reporting. As a result, although the allocation of funded days was designed to be transparent and equitable, ensuring that each partner was rewarded equally for their participation, in practice it is much easier for larger and richer organisations to invest more time as they have more core funding and therefore more flexibility. This can, however, mean that they end up underwriting the costs, with their actual contribution becoming invisible in the process. Other issues such as lack of awareness of the complicated legislation around VAT also resulted in lengthy negotiations and a reduction in budget for some of the co-investigators.

7. Invest in relationships: Create spaces and commit funded time to establish, nurture and sustain relationships at the individual and institutional level

Our partnership benefitted from existing relationships developed through previous collaborative research as well as the OU-funded consortium-building event, which contributed to the collaborative development of a shared research agenda. Our understanding of each other as individuals, organisations and networks has continued to evolve through this current project, which granted us the opportunity to meet face-to-face, contributed to the on-going development of the RRC and identified new network members. However, the short-term and rushed nature of the project and insufficient funds significantly limited our internal communication and led at times to feelings of stress, exploitation and resentment. While such emotions (often overlooked in analyses of partnerships) can be damaging, they also offer opportunities for critical reflection and learning, especially when deep trust has been built between partners – see Principle 8.

8. Keep learning: Reflect critically within and beyond the partnership

This reflexive case study was based on a collective evaluation of the project, which raised some uncomfortable issues but also allowed each partner to air their grievances and to think through the implications for future work. We included it in our final report to UKRI (and published it in this format, as a case study in the resource materials) as part of our commitment to transparency and critical reflection and also to highlight the complex and

challenging nature of 'fair and equitable' collaborative work.

Despite the concern that sharing these challenges might undermine our findings and outputs (and the absence of space to discuss these challenges in formal reporting systems such as ResearchFish) we nonetheless believe that the learning grounded in 'weakness' or 'failure' can often offer the richest opportunities to improve practice in the future.

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).

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Collaborative partners