



Rethinking
Research
Collaborative

Case study: Dr Bhavani

Resource materials to support fair
and equitable research partnerships

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This case study explores insights from Dr Bhavani RV, of the M.S. Swaminathan Research Foundation (MSSRF), project manager for Leveraging Agriculture for Nutrition in South Asia (LANSA), an international research partnership funded by the UK Department for International Development (DFID) (2012–18). She reflects on her experience of coordinating work and navigating relationships in LANSA.

How does MSSRF define itself?

“We’re not purely a development organisation, we do action research. We’ve a focus on demonstrating models that work, and (we) engage with policymakers for upscaling/replication and sharing with other NGOs.

(We also do) scientific research in the field of biotechnology, so we’re recognised by the Department of Science and Technology, Government of India, as a research institute; and we have research fellows registering to do their PhD. Over time, having a research focus in all the activities we undertake is something we have been trying to bring into the organisation.”

How did MSSRF get involved in the LANSA programme?

LANSA is a £7.5 million research consortium programme focused on finding out how agriculture and agri-food systems can be better designed to advance nutrition. It is focused on policies, interventions and strategies that can improve the nutritional status of children in South Asia.

“From MSSRF’s perspective, it was a very good opportunity. We’ve been working in the rural development sector since 1988, and food and nutrition security is one of the core areas we’ve been working in. The grant call was something we could relate to. In the global scenario lots of people are talking about agriculture and nutrition linkages, and given our background work in food security, we were well positioned to take this on.

LANSA is a research partnership with internationally recognised institutions such as the International Food Policy Research Institute (IFPRI) and the Institute of Development Studies (IDS) – we saw it as an opportunity to build our own network and our own research capacities during the period of engagement. We came to this from the action research and development side, whilst other partners had strengths in terms of leading on research studies with large datasets. We saw it as a very good combination to merge respective strengths towards a common agenda.”

What is MSSRF's role within the consortium?

LANSA is a multi-country consortium of six partners: MSSRF in India, the Collective for Social Science Research (CSSR) in Pakistan, BRAC in Bangladesh, IDS and the Leverhulme Centre for Integrative Research on Agriculture and Health (LCIRAH) in the UK, and IFPRI in the USA.

As funder, DFID mandated that the lead agency be based in South Asia, and it was agreed at bid stage that MSSRF in India would take on this role. MSSRF hosts the CEO, project manager and research uptake manager of LANSA, and takes lead responsibility for management and coordination across the research consortium, as well responsibility for liaising with (and reporting to) DFID. Lead responsibility for research uptake sat with IDS initially, but with a planned transfer of responsibilities to MSSRF after the first two years of the programme. Responsibility for research management was shared across the consortium, with research leads identified from among the partners for the major research themes. Financial management and transfer of funds has remained the responsibility of IDS rather than the lead agency, on account of political tensions between India and Pakistan which would hinder the transfer of funds – and there is a tripartite contract between MSSRF, DFID and IDS to this effect.

What have been some of the key learning points in the research process?

Ethics and non-negotiables. Early on, MSSRF had discussions with consortium partners about a study MSSRF were due to lead on, and this required an element of negotiation to ensure the research approach aligned with their own ethical stance and organisational approach to community engagement.

“We work with rural communities, we can't be giving interventions to some, and not to others. As an organisation we've not been in favour of randomised control trials, something organisations like IFPRI and LCIRAH engage in routinely. We put across our point, discussed, agreed to have a baseline and end-line (survey) for a set of households ... We've had to address these issues and deliberate on these along the way.”

Allowing for emergence. Gender was a cross-cutting research theme right from the beginning. Following discussion, a gender lead (an academic) for the consortium was appointed by MSSRF, in the absence of requisite expertise in the field within the consortium. CSSR in Pakistan developed an exclusive strand of research on women in agriculture and nutrition, and the gender cross-cut lead initiated similar work in India. As a result, it has become a prominent strand of the research, and Dr Bhavani RV is anticipating that research findings in this area will have influence at policy level in South Asia, as well as contributing to the wider body of literature through publication of



findings.

Carving out budget for multi-lingual working. MSSRF, CSSR and BRAC engaged with communities in the local languages; English is however well accepted as the language of communication among policy makers in India, Pakistan and Bangladesh, due to the colonial heritage of these countries. In Afghanistan, the consortium had to arrange (and carve out budget) for simultaneous interpreting at stakeholder consultations in Afghanistan, as well as ensuring translation of materials into Dari and Pashto so that they were accessible to policy makers.


Adjusting the governance arrangements. Initially the steering group was made up of the research leads across the partner institutions, and fixed budgets had been allocated to partner organisations for their respective studies. It was soon recognised that a portfolio approach was required, with greater flexibility in allocation of resources across the consortium, and that having research leads on the steering group brought a conflict of interest between individual research interests and the wider consortium interests. As a result, and with encouragement from DFID, the steering group members were instead replaced by management leads of the various partner organisations, who were much better able to look at the bigger picture.

Managing a competitive fund within a grant. LANSAs launched two calls for research proposals, and funded discrete studies lasting 12–18 months, designed to contribute to the wider research portfolio. Whilst three of the small grants awarded did enable LANSAs to work with institutions in Afghanistan, India and Pakistan which may not be able to directly access international research funding, there was no explicit aim to reach these kinds of organisations or to provide capacity strengthening opportunities as part of the funding package.

“But in future it could be interesting as part of capacity strengthening, to have this kind of window available where we fund the smaller studies, and during the process also engage in capacity strengthening.”

Other grants were awarded to universities in the UK or collaborative proposals led by universities in Australia and Germany in partnership with organisations in South Asia. Dr Bhavani RV reflected that she was not convinced that this responsive grant fund for small studies provided value for money as a way of generating additional research, given the additional administrative burden of managing small grants; the process had not been thought through sufficiently.

Importance of the CEO appointment. The CEO of a DFID-funded research consortium typically has strong academic credentials, and plays a key role vis-à-vis consortium partners and funders.



“(There is an) advantage in having a CEO who is from the (South Asia) region and has an understanding of the issues, but based in the UK, (who is) respected, has worked with researchers in the UK and in academic institutions in the UK; (someone who is) able to work around the power dynamics.”

How has MSSRF contributed to and benefited from this international research partnership?

Each partner brings its own organisational capacities to an international partnership. Dr Bhavani RV reflects that MSSRF brought strengths to the LANSAs consortium, including: their grounded understanding of the rural communities and policy makers they work with, and their cultural practices; pre-existing networks and relationships, linked to their longstanding advocacy work; and project management capacities.

During the LANSAs programme, MSSRF has succeeded in strengthening staff capacities in research, through collaborative processes with academic partners at different stages of the research cycle (for example, collaborative development of conceptual frameworks, case studies, co-authoring of publications) as well as formal training workshops. Building on previous experience of dissemination and advocacy, MSSRF has also developed organisational capacity in the theory and practice of research uptake, and are now integrating this approach more systematically into the research they undertake in the organisation.

“LANSAs provided an immensely useful opportunity, having a research question for every development activity we undertake; writing it up, getting it published, that’s not something NGOs usually engage in much (there’s usually a project report, but nothing published afterwards). MSSRF has been putting more emphasis on research for visibility, recognition. And the LANSAs experience has given a major thrust in that direction. The national and regional networks that we have engaged with as a part of LANSAs are also a lasting legacy that all partners in the region will benefit from.”



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

