Rethinking Research Collaborative

International non-governmental organisations

Resource materials to support fair and equitable research partnerships

Introduction: Fair and equitable research partnerships

Collaborative research has become more popular in recent years, as emphasis on making research accessible and useful to different audiences has increased.

This way of working has been encouraged within the international development research sector, based on a recognition that understanding and responding to complex global development challenges necessitates knowledge held beyond the remit of a single type of actor or discipline. Academics based in universities in the global North are not only partnering with academics based in other institutions and countries, but also with actors from civil society, government and the private sector based in the global North and global South.

Recent UK-led research funding streams – specifically the Global Challenges Research Fund and the Newton Fund – have focused on making these partnerships 'fair and equitable'.

The Rethinking Research Collaborative is an informal international network of organisations – academics, civil society organisations (CSOs), international non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and research support providers – who are committed to working together to encourage more inclusive, responsive collaborations to produce useful and accessible international development research.

We have identified eight principles to guide different research stakeholders in reflecting on what is needed to make research partnerships fair and equitable; underpinning them all is an emphasis on attitudes and behaviours, and the need to treat each other with basic dignity and respect. These principles are fully discussed in the introduction to this set of modules, but in summary they are:

1. Put poverty first.
2. Critically engage with context.
3. Challenge assumptions about evidence.
4. Adapt and respond.
5. Respect diversity.
6. Commit to transparency.
7. Invest in the relationship.
8. Keep learning.

This module, written for international NGOs, provides insights and ideas for translating these principles into practice. Five companion modules are aimed at CSOs in the global South, academics based in the global North and the global South, research brokers and research funders.

Our understanding of international NGOs

We understand INGOs to be non-profit organisations performing a variety of service, humanitarian and advocacy functions, across multiple countries in a global context. We've focused here on INGOs that are engaged in development interventions, and interested in research to support that goal, rather than those with a purely research or policy focus.

Within this broad definition we make a several working assumptions about these INGOs:

1. They have a root in high-income countries; this module emerges from research and engagement with INGOs in the UK.
2. They are likely to work alongside or in partnership with smaller NGOs or CSOs in the global South with a regional or national focus.
3. They have multiple funding sources including official donors, trusts and foundations, and individual givers; this creates complex accountability pressures.

Whilst these assumptions are not the case for all INGOS, making them explicit helps make sense of the way we have framed this module.

There are multiple resources available that offer specific support and guidance to INGO staff to facilitate equitable research partnerships, and this module aims to signpost you to them. It also sets out to encourage you to consider the power dynamics and assumptions about evidence and knowledge which infuse research partnerships, and reflect on ways to resist, reshape or transform them to make partnerships more equitable and fair, in turn influencing the wider international development research arena.

What do INGOS bring to research partnerships?

International NGOs are in an interesting position in relation to research, and to research partnerships: research is of interest to them when it directly supports their core work, rather than as an end in itself. This encompasses a range of research types, from evaluation to establish what works, what doesn't and why, to studies that aim to better understand the social, political, material and cultural context of their interventions. Beyond this, research can also be used to understand how to improve programme performance, engage supporters, inform policy, strengthen or direct campaign energy, and to facilitate advocacy for change.

The context and goals of an INGO inform the kinds of research that it will find helpful,

the questions it is interested in answering, what methodologies are appropriate, and what outputs are most effective; they also shape the kinds of expertise and experience that INGOs contribute to a research partnership, and the kind of research partnership they might be looking to establish. For example, some INGOs have a strong track record of analysis and action to enable the experience of their partners based in the global South to feed into global debates and to engage in the systems and structures that keep people poor; these INGOs could make an important contribution to the transformational aspect of international development research.

Many INGOs hold research expertise themselves, although it is often dispersed within the organisation. Its character depends on the thematic focus of the organisation: some might have greater medical, engineering or action research expertise, for example. INGOs often employ people, particularly for specialist or technical roles, who have or are working towards postgraduate qualifications.

Many INGOs also have experience in brokering relationships between actors from both the global North and the global South in the same piece of work. Often, they have used their experience at working in partnership to develop tools and processes to support this, as well as accountability frameworks which support operations in a context of complex international relationships.

INGOs bring to research partnerships experience of working on the ground to deliver results. Using the monitoring and evaluation tools that contribute to programme design and management often involve considerable experience of collecting and using data. Many INGO staff are experienced in tackling the particular challenges of data collection in remote or dangerous areas, or with hard-to-reach or marginalised populations.

INGOs are likely to have worked extensively with national or sub-national NGO or CSO partners and are also likely to be the first point of contact between these organisations and academic institutions in the global North – whether initiating the partnership or responding to a search for partners. They may also have longer-term relationships with CSO partners or with research participants than academic partners are able to maintain. Finally, they may – through their advocacy work – have expertise in building the long-term relationships with policy actors that are crucial in making sure that research has impact. In the words of one INGO staff member:

> There is an invisibility to the structures necessary to affect change. For example, if want to submit research at side event in a UN meeting, you need... the interest of number of country delegations so that you can get rooms. This doesn't happen overnight. A lot of infrastructure is needed for long-term relationship building with decision makers.

Common challenges for INGOs in research partnerships

There are significant challenges facing INGOs engaging in research partnerships. These include hierarchies of knowledge and uneven power relations, and differences in priorities, schedules and capacity from other partners. INGOs often have a crucial role in negotiating these dynamics – sometimes mediating between partner organisations in Southern civil society, the people they serve and the demands of donors, funders and academics in the partnership.

Research partnerships can involve a complex array of partners and whilst their interests may align for the research process, each holds many different assumptions about what they and the others bring to the research, what role they will play and how the collaboration might work in practice. These assumptions, and how the partnership is formed and plays out, are infused with power dynamics, which enable or constrain the options available for the partnership.

INGOs are under increasing pressure to 'evidence' their work. This can extend well beyond monitoring and simple evaluations of programme interventions, to the use of complex and specialised research techniques, and outputs that meet the requirements of publication in academic journals. The desire for more 'robust' approaches to evaluation is often a motivation for INGOs to explore partnerships with academics – and this can lead to interesting innovations and deeper understandings of how or why an intervention is effective. But it can also lead to challenges. Donors, INGO staff, local partners, research participants and academics all have very different assumptions about what counts as 'robust evidence'. The research process might be fulfilling different needs for different partners; and understanding what partners understand by 'evidence' and even 'research' at the outset can help in preventing challenges further down the line.

INGOs often partner with high-ranked universities in the global North for research, and much of the guidance for research partnership has this partnership dynamic in mind. However, these partnerships can be at the expense of partnerships with researchers in lower-income contexts, reinforcing existing hierarchies in knowledge production. Increasingly INGOs are seeking out partnerships with academics or researchers in lower-income countries, for ideological or pragmatic reasons. This can come with a new set of challenges as chronic underfunding and weak higher education infrastructures, different training, skills, workloads and expectations of academics must be navigated for fair and equitable partnerships delivering quality research. The challenges faced by researchers based in the global South include substantial barriers to publishing in academic journals and, as both cause and effect, accessing research funding. INGO staff need to be aware of this when seeking partnerships – and balance the demands of donors in the global North, different ways of understanding research quality, and structural barriers to ensure they aren't reproducing damaging hierarchies.

On a more practical level there are a series of concerns that recur for INGOs – about

planning and engaging in the partnership, resourcing, and roles that they will play. All of these concerns centre on the decisions an INGO must make about whether a partnership is the best option for them to act in the interest of the people they serve. The factors that INGOs should consider include:

- **Time for partnership and planning.** Collaborative responses to funding calls take time for proper exploration and negotiation of roles, and to enable all partners to feed into the proposal design.
- **Resources consumed in speculative bids.** Engaging in research bids led by academics has high time costs for INGOs, as staff have to grapple with unfamiliar language, framing and practices, and often also have to consult with other parts of their organisation, or external partners.
- **Brokering roles.** INGOs are often positioned as facilitators or brokers in a multi-stakeholder research partnership – able to bridge the gap between different contexts and actors. This is often under-recognised and under-funded within a collaboration, providing a hidden subsidy to the project.
- **The nature of relationships.** Often an INGO will only become aware of a potential research area once an academic has decided to develop a proposal, and is looking for civil society partners to help implement it. This can mean that the INGO has a limited influence on the research framing, which can reduce the appropriateness of the research. This can lead to the INGO being used in a transactional way to enable to the academic to implement research that they have already conceptualised; this in turn has an impact on the INGO's ownership of the research.
- **Ethics and data.** Data collection is usually a routine activity for INGOs, and they have ethics and data protection procedures for their day-to-day work which may differ from those that academics apply to collecting research data. Clarifying ethics, which data procedures apply, and who will have rights to use raw and processed data are vital to fair and equitable partnerships. Further, authorship and ownership (including intellectual property rights) granted exclusively to the academic partners in the research has implications for both the onward distribution of findings and the attribution of impact.
- **Outputs and use.** Whilst all partners might be committed to the idea of producing useful research with impact, they might mean very different things by it, with different expectations of timing, type and use of outcomes from research. What INGOs need out of a partnership in order to improve their practice tends to be immediate and to take different formats than outputs that will be useful to academics; this needs to be acknowledged at the planning stage.

These considerations are not just about ensuring a smooth process, but are also important in deciding when it is productive to engage in a partnership at all. Sometimes, the balance of resource requirements against outputs may mean an INGO choosing not to engage.

Checklist

This checklist provides you with a set of questions designed to enable you to think about fair and equitable partnership in different areas of research practice – focused specifically on your role as an international NGO and your engagement in international research partnerships.

As you explore the different elements of the table you might like to consider the following three questions:

▶ What are your non-negotiables in this area?
▶ What would it be helpful to know/understand about your collaborator(s) in this area?
▶ What would you need to discuss together?

Area of practice	Key questions
Research agenda-setting and governance	▶ What are the research priorities of partners and communities you work with in the global South and how can you get these heard by funders and agencies? ▶ What are your research priorities as an organisation and how can you get these heard by funders and agencies? ▶ What structural barriers do you face in participating in agenda-setting and governance of funding? How could you collaborate with others to bring about change?
Enabling and supporting research partnerships	▶ What are you looking for from a partnership? What are the main objectives for engaging in a research partnership? ▶ How have you identified or engaged with potential partners and what criteria do you have for research partners? ▶ What are the core ethical requirements for your work (either formal frameworks, or related to your values)? ▶ Who will own and have access to the research data? ▶ Will your role include facilitating / brokering other relationships in the partnership? Have you built in time and resources for building and maintaining the partnership? Have you planned for regular check-ins or reflections? ▶ Is there a minimal level of involvement you need in the partnership to enable you to give proper time to it? ▶ How will you and the other partners work together?

Enabling and supporting research partnerships	▶ How will language differences be addressed? ▶ What are your expectations about appropriate capacity development opportunities and mutual learning across the partnership? ▶ Is there a conflict resolution mechanism?
Research design and implementation	▶ What does good evidence mean for your organisation? What kinds of evidence do you need to support the findings and use of the research? ▶ Who is involved in each stage of the research design and implementation, and who is responsible for which roles? ▶ How will you ensure mutual accountability between partners? ▶ Does the budget provide full cost recovery for your contribution (time and expertise) to the research process? ▶ What kinds of support and capacity development will you need as an organisation to engage effectively in key parts of the research process?
Research communication, access, uptake, adaptation and use	▶ How can you work together with partners from the outset to develop and resource a research uptake or impact strategy? ▶ How will you reach agreement on when research findings should be shared, who has responsibilities for communication, and to which audiences, who must agree or sign off on communications, and how and in what formats the research will be accessible? ▶ You also need to agree who will be attributed in the research, and for authorship or contributions – this can be very important for individuals or organisations. ▶ INGOs may need to act quickly on research, before a lengthy publication process is complete. This should be raised and discussed with academic partners and funders.
Beyond the research	▶ How will the partnership conclude? ▶ What space is there for future collaboration? ▶ How will you reflect on and learn from the partnership?

Two tools to support reflection

Tool 1: Research rivers

Source: Rethinking Research Partnerships (see annotated resource guide for details)

This tool uses the metaphor of a river to trace a journey taken over time, as a way of recording milestones, reflecting on their nature and the impact they might have on the overall journey, and how they fit and relate to each other. Rivers have plenty of features – wide and narrow parts, bends and rapids, supportive banks and places where the banks are crumbling, and bridges, rocks and animals. These features can all be used to explore previous experiences of research partnerships.

It can be useful for an INGO to understand its own relationship with research, and how it has been used in the organisation before. It can also be used to better understand each of the partners – each drawing their own research river, for their department, team, research centre or whole organisation – as a way of understanding each other.

How

Start with a moment of individual reflection. What do you think the key moments were in the research history of your institution, team or partnership? Note previous projects and partnerships, the types of evidence they have generated, and how that evidence has been used. Alternatively, you might want to start by thinking about a key moment – for example, when your organisation first start considering research partnerships – and then work out from that question, thinking about what was going on in the environment at the time and the event or conversations that led to it.

Leading on from this, you could start thinking about other events. When did they happen, what was their significance, and what kind of river features do they resemble? Think about when the river was widest and narrowest. Were there any obstacles, dams, pools or streams that have broken off along the way? Start drawing your river as you continue to reflect and discuss.

Once you have produced the river, discuss the past challenges encountered by your institution and how these were or might have been resolved. How does that affect how you feel about embarking on a new journey now? What assumptions are you bringing into this partnership? What do you need to put in place to

ensure you are learning from your previous experience? What was your position in the partnership in relation to other actors? How did global power dynamics impact on this partnership?
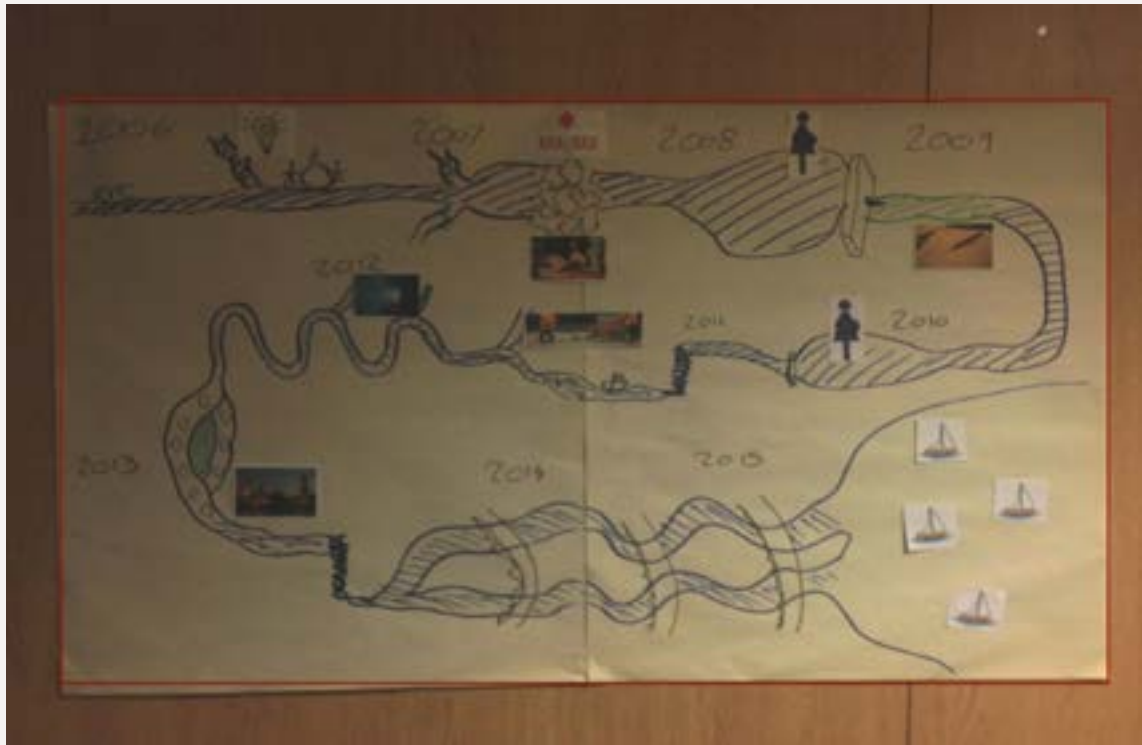
Tool 2: Actors and influence matrix

Source: Rethinking Research Partnerships (see annotated resource guide for details)

This tool helps you think about who takes on what roles within a partnership, and how influential they are in the decision making at each stage. This can be done to reflect on a partnership already underway, or in preparation for allocating roles and responsibilities.

How

Start by making a list of the key actors involved in your research partnership. This might include several institutions and the different individuals or teams within them. This list will go along the top of your matrix. Then think about the different stages of your partnership or research project and write these down the side of your matrix.

To complete the matrix, work as a group and think about who had most power or influence at each moment of the process. In the example, a five-point scale is

used, with 5 indicating the most power or influence and 1 the least. You could use a different scale, colours, or small star or dot stickers to make a visual tally.

Reflect on the matrix. Did any actors have more influence or power than others? What assumptions do different actors have about what makes good evidence? What does it mean for an actor to be very powerful at one moment, but less so at another? Did you agree on the power allocations? If different actors had been present when you did the exercise, how might it have affected the outcome? What types of skills, experience and knowledge were needed at this stage? What type of evidence was being produced? How did this impact on participation?

When the group in the Rethinking Research Partnership project completed this exercise, they came up with different types of decision-making power – enabling (power to make something happen) and restricting (power to prevent something happening). If there is time, you could use colours to highlight the different kinds of power on the matrix. This could include aspects such as financial power, or power because of relationships or expertise.

Who influences when?	INGO Management	INGO HQ	INGO Country office	National NGO	UK university Management	UK university Academic	National university	Donor institutional
Establishing partnership	3	3		1	3	3	1	2
Proposal Development	2	4	1		2	4		3
Research Design		2	1	1		5		
Data Collection			2	4			4	
Data Analysis		2	1			4	1	
Monitoring & Evaluation		4	4	2				2
Article writing		1	1	1		5	1	
Event (research findings)	3	5			1	1		2

Annotated resource guide

There are multiple resources available specifically offering support to and guidance for INGO staff to facilitate equitable research partnerships. Four stand out particularly as the most complete resources for INGOs. These engage both with partnership as a technical skillset, and with the values and principles that underpin partnerships.

Guide to Constructing Effective Partnerships (Elrha, 2012)

Elrha is a collaborative network dedicated to supporting partnerships between higher education institutions and humanitarian organisations and partners around the world. Their mission is to improve humanitarian outcomes through partnership, research and innovation. This guide responds to demands for humanitarian work to be informed by more rigorous evidence.

Most useful: The guide is practice-based, a step-by-step approach to making partnerships work. It is clearly laid out, easy to navigate and accessible either as a download or online. The seven-step approach is straightforward, offering lots of practical tips. It considers detail not found in other resources, such as different ways of formalising and sustaining partnerships, not just how to structure them – recognising that context and situations change. The six case studies show very different types of collaboration between diverse actors on both sides of the partnership, and the key learning points offer insightful material.

Audience: Primarily academics and humanitarian workers, but also of use to those working in development in general.

Where to find it: http://www.elrha.org/ep/the-online-guide-for-effective-partnerships/

Rethinking Research Partnerships (Christian Aid and Open University, 2017)

This is an applied toolkit and guide, providing reflections, case studies and participatory tools to explore and practice equitable research partnerships. The resources emerged from a research collaboration between multiple pairs of academics and INGO staff who had all been engaged in research partnerships. It explicitly addresses the power dynamics within the

partnerships throughout the research process.

Audience: The guide was developed for INGOs and academics starting, developing and maintaining research relationships. It emerged from the experiences of UK-based partnerships, and this shapes the content.

Most useful: The participatory tools set this guide apart from some of the others, providing a range of different options to critically approach the power relationships, process and practices that make up a partnership. Many of the tools can be used by individuals, reflecting on their own role in the partnership or the dynamics they see. But they can also be used at an organisational level – for example, by INGO staff, alone or in collaboration with external partners, to understand their own organisation or team and their approach to research. One of the key contributions of the guide is to thinking critically about what each partner understands as evidence – something that heavily influences methodological approach to research. Another is the tools for mapping the skills and resources available in an organisation.

Where to find it: https://rethinkingresearchpartnerships.com/

How to Partner for Development Research (RDIN, 2017)

RDIN is a network of practitioners, researchers and evaluators working in international development. This is a practical resource to guide Australia-based researchers and international development organisations, particularly NGOs, instilling good practice for research partnerships to support effective evidence generation to influence policy and practice. Although this excellent resource doesn't speak explicitly to equitable partnerships, it's very easy to use, blending the principles and politics with a practical step-by-step process. Rather than fostering values, this guide provides a step-by-step walk through of the key stages of partnership development – highlighting issues and challenges and offering hints and tools to support making equitable partnership happen.

Audience: The primary audience are development practitioners (including NGOs) and researchers (including academic institutions) in Australia – but it also mentions researchers and practitioners in other countries: 'donors, individual consultants and the private sector, who are interested in setting up or participating in research activities'. It is one of the only resources to consider consultants and private sector actors as a target audience.

Most useful: The guide is in six parts and the first three are focused on the process of establishing and managing a partnership. Part 1 helpfully tackles what is meant by the collaboration and talks about partnerships as a continuum from transactional to transformational, as a way of capturing what kind of research is being carried

out. If you are looking at different types of partnership this is a useful section. Part 3 presents a very useful partnership cycle that can be used to reflect on the different stages of partnership. Part 4 offers a very simple and useful checklist of things to consider in a partnership. The guide also offers seven case studies as examples of academic–NGO research partnerships – which include bi-partner and multi-partner projects. They are clear and well laid out, offering a range of different collaborations as potential models.

Where to find it: https://rdinetwork.org.au/resources/partnerships-in-practice/

A Guide to Transboundary Research Partnerships (KFPE, updated 2014)

The guide is a product of the Swiss Commission for Research Partnerships with Developing Countries (KFPE), funded by the Swiss Academy of Sciences. It starts from the premise that "transboundary and intercultural research in partnership is a continuous process of sound knowledge generation, building mutual trust, mutual learning and shared ownership" and in a clear and accessible way offers 11 principles that together contribute to this outcome. Each principle is presented on one page – giving a concise overview of the key steps. The guide also poses seven questions that show the key challenges to putting the principles into practice – offering practical advice to help overcome them.

Audience: This guide – available in English, German and French – explicitly states that it is intended for all actors involved in fair and equitable partnerships – from researchers and development organisations to those arranging partnerships, the funding agencies and policy makers setting the environment for partnerships, and those international organisations that are facilitating or brokering them. The guide itself is broad; it doesn't highlight what will be of most interest to each party, so each needs to reflect on all the principles and questions. For INGOs all the sections are likely to be highly relevant.

Most useful: The principles and questions are presented in a very concise manner, and it's easy to engage with all the material. There are accompanying testimonials on a dedicated YouTube channel that supplement the guide. The seven questions are particularly useful – they are clearly laid out and easy to read through, and they explore some really important issues that aren't covered by many other resources – such as dealing with conflicting aims of the partnership (innovation, capacity development and social impact) in Question 4. The testimonials on the accompanying YouTube channel provide real context to how the principles can be translated into practice, although the quality is mixed.

Where to find it: https://11principles.org/
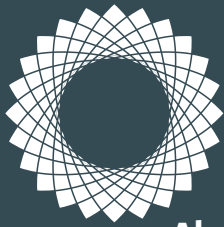
Rethinking Research Collaborative

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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