



Rethinking  
Research  
Collaborative

# Introduction: Fair and equitable partnerships for international development research

Resource materials to support fair  
and equitable research partnerships

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# Fair and equitable partnerships for international development research

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## Why fair and equitable research partnerships?

International development often involves partnerships between organisations of different types, frequently working across different sectors and geographical locations. This way of working has been encouraged within the international development research sector, with an emphasis on combining different disciplines. 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 increasingly promoted the idea of ‘fair and equitable research partnerships’; and UK-based academics are encouraged to include academic partners based in the global South and civil society practitioners in their research projects.

This focus on fair and equitable partnerships recognises that different individuals and institutions bring different types of relationships, knowledges, skills and perspectives to research processes. By working together in partnership, different stakeholders can collectively develop deeper understanding of global challenges and potential responses to them, as well as new research processes, practices and products. They can generate insights and evidence to inform development practice and policy, to contribute to poverty eradication, and to bring about more just and equitable societies. However, for these partnerships to achieve these aspirations there is a need to consider what is meant by fairness and equity, and then to pay attention to how to translate these ideas into practice. These modules have been written for six different types of development research stakeholders to support them in doing this.

The modules have been prepared by the Rethinking Research Collaborative (RRC), an informal international network of organisations – academics, civil society organisations, 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. RRC first came together to understand and develop principles and practice to support fair and equitable partnerships in response to global development challenges. Going forward, the collaborative is planning a series of initiatives to encourage more diverse participation and leadership in the field of international development research.



Thanks to a strategic grant from UK Research and Innovation (UKRI), we carried out primary research to gather perspectives from ‘partners’ who had been, or had the potential to be, part of UK-funded research initiatives, and looked across the range of currently available resources on supporting research partnerships. These sources form the basis of the six modules and a set of online case studies.

## **What are fair and equitable research partnerships?**

A starting point in understanding fair and equitable research partnerships is to recognise that partnership and research are both political. Partnerships exist in specific contexts, which drive expectations of how the partnership is formed, and how the partners contribute to and benefit from it. Though often presented as a ‘neutral good’, the term ‘partnership’ conceals a tangle of complex power relations. These are embedded in institutional structures and processes; in research practices and identities; in the tools, texts and technologies of research; and in the jargon of development and research policy and funding. These structural, social, material, personal and linguistic influences will determine whose knowledge, skills, agendas and values are prioritised. All partners will have different priorities, schedules and capacities, and ignoring these differences or assuming that partnerships are built on a level playing field can obstruct ways of working and limit their transformative potential. Moreover, the way these dynamics play out in any specific partnership will shift depending on the specific time and context, as well as on the mixture of partners involved.

We have identified the following eight principles to support you to engage with the politics of partnership and work to develop fair and equitable partnerships. These principles apply equally to all those involved in research partnerships, but have different implications for practice, depending on your organisation and where you are located. Each of the modules that follow this introduction have been developed to support different stakeholder groups to engage with the principles from their different perspectives as they translate them into practice. Underpinning the translation of these principles into practice is an emphasis on attitudes and behaviours, and the need to treat each other with basic dignity and respect.


We commit to:

- 1. Put poverty first.** Official development assistance funds are intended reduce poverty. To live up to this principle, researchers and their funders and brokers need to constantly question how the process and activities of the research are addressing this end goal. This requires a consideration of whose knowledge counts, attention to research uptake, and consideration of ‘pathways to development impact’. Research governance – which includes agenda-setting and evaluation – should also reflect this



principle.

2. **Critically engage with context.** Context shapes the possibilities for partnership and the operation of partnerships. Different contexts interact to shape research governance, implementation and use. It is important to map stakeholders – to identify who needs to be involved to make change happen, and how representative partnerships are – and to explore inequalities at different levels – for example, between different sectors, disciplines, regions of the world, countries, and locations within a country.
3. **Challenge assumptions about evidence.** Funders, brokers and partners should recognise that different stakeholders (including those from different academic traditions, and other development professionals) have different expectations of ‘quality evidence’. This influences whose knowledge is valued, how research is designed and implemented, what types of research outputs are produced, and which audiences are considered. Actively seeking ways to redress evidence hierarchies is key to enabling different types of evidence to flow into international development knowledge.
4. **Adapt and respond.** International development activities rarely follow neat paths, and research is no exception. Every actor should take an adaptive approach that is responsive to context; and constantly review and renegotiate research parameters. Within partnerships, flexibility is dependent on good communication.
5. **Respect diversity.** Take time at the outset to explore the knowledges, skills and experiences that each partner brings, and which contribute to making the partnership greater than the sum of its parts. This includes understanding motivations and expectations, and each other’s institutional contexts, in addition to valuing the full range of skills – beyond academic expertise – needed for partnership. All contributions should be made explicit and be respected.
6. **Commit to transparency.** Put in place a code of conduct or memorandum of understanding that commits each partner to transparency in all aspects of the project administration and budgeting; and that sets out clearly the rights of all partners regarding acknowledgement, authorship, intellectual property and data use.
7. **Invest in the relationship.** Partnership working takes time, and this needs additional investment beyond the costs of the research itself. This means creating space for new partnerships to emerge and for existing relationships to develop; ensuring that you communicate, listen to each other and take time to understand different perspectives.
8. **Keep learning.** Taking a learning approach creates opportunities for partners to



develop new skills, and to collectively do things in new ways. It means viewing the partnership as a locus for mutual learning and exchange. This can lead to different approaches to knowledge production. It can also mean extending learning and capacity building beyond individual partners into their organisations, as well as to research funders and policy makers.

### **What are these resources, who are they for, and how should they be used?**


These resources – this introduction, six modules and a companion set of online case studies – provide insights and ideas to support six stakeholder groups to translate our principles into practice. The stakeholder groups are:

- ▶ academics based in the global South
- ▶ academics based in the global North
- ▶ civil society organisations in the global South
- ▶ international NGOs in the global North
- ▶ brokering and capacity development organisations in the global North
- ▶ research funders.

Each module is targeted at one of these groups, and contains a mixture of original content devised specifically for that stakeholder, tools and examples to support the translation of our principles into practice, and clear signposting to existing resources. Each comprises:

- ▶ an introduction to the stakeholder
- ▶ a discussion of what the stakeholder brings to research partnerships
- ▶ reflection on the common challenges the stakeholder encounters in research partnerships
- ▶ a checklist of questions and considerations designed to enable the stakeholder to think about fairness and equality in different areas of research practice
- ▶ two participatory tools designed to support that stakeholder to reflect on how they can contribute to fair and equitable partnerships
- ▶ an annotated resource guide introducing three or four existing resources with particular relevance to that stakeholder group.

We suggest that you use the module relevant to your own stakeholder group to help you think about international development research collaborations and your role in them. For some, the module will help you directly prepare for partnership, and think through what you are looking for in a research partnership. For others, the focus will be on the wider systemic issues around partnership and your contribution to these. Either way, the first three sections of the five other modules will also help you to understand broader dynamics and engage with the other stakeholders. This means it will be helpful to look at these sections to enhance your understanding of the contexts and dynamics that inform



the people you are partnering with, what they can bring to partnership, and what their constraints might be.

The resources are accompanied by a set of online case studies, in which you can listen to or read about different stakeholders discussing their own experiences of working in international development research. These individuals share reflections on specific aspects of their experiences to give further insight on some the dilemmas faced and strategies employed to enable more fair and equitable international development research.

We recognise that each partnership will present different opportunities and challenges. For example, a UK-based academic will have to work differently when engaging with an INGO than when they work with an academic based in the global South, or a research funder. We hope that by returning to our principles, and deepening your understanding of the different stakeholder groups, you will be able to use these modules to enhance fairness and equity in international development research, maximising its potential impact on global development challenges.



# 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

