



Rethinking
Research
Collaborative

Research brokers

Resource materials to support fair
and equitable research partnerships

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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 research brokers, 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 South and the global North, international NGOs and research funders.



Our understanding of research brokers

This module is for what we call ‘brokers’: organisations that facilitate research partnerships by playing a brokering, technical support or capacity development role. The organisations in this stakeholder group are defined by these roles, rather than their own organisational structure – which may be non-profit, non-governmental, quasi-academic or commercial.


Traditional aspects of brokering include bid coordination, supporting contracts, matching partners and facilitating the initial relationship between them – perhaps by running inception workshops. But brokers also provide technical support during research partnerships – monitoring and evaluation, problem solving, and maintaining the partnership itself. Capacity building is also a part of this remit, and brokers provide training and mentoring so that partners can understand and work together, or specific training on a method, context or area of work such as dissemination and uptake. Whilst this is a diverse array of tasks, they are united by their orientation towards facilitating the partnership – ensuring it is an effective process – rather than focusing directly on delivering the research and findings.

In this module, we do not see brokers as organisations whose primary role is providing humanitarian or development support. And while they may have research capacity, or undertake research, this isn’t the role they play in research partnerships. Finally, our focus here is on organisations that are acting explicitly as brokers, rather than individuals in other partner organisations who take on brokering roles.

Although this module is primarily, but not exclusively, informed by the experiences of UK-based organisations, we recognise that actors based in the global South are increasingly taking on brokering and capacity development roles.

What do research brokers bring to partnerships?

In research partnerships, diverse organisations with different institutional cultures, operational contexts and sets of skills are brought together for a common goal. While bringing organisations with different strengths together has benefits, it can also present challenges. Different ways of working, jargons and day-to-day realities can lead to different assumptions about a research project and lead to misunderstandings that



throw up challenges throughout the process. Similarly, different areas of work and skills sets often mean steep learning curves – whether for an academic conducting research in an unfamiliar context, an NGO worker collaborating with researchers with a strong disciplinary focus, or a CSO worker collecting data in an unfamiliar way.

Brokers can help in the initial identification and development of the partnership, to negotiate challenges before they become problems; or they can be brought in into trouble-shoot further down the line. They usually contribute by having or developing an understanding of the different stakeholders in a research partnership – particularly their institutional structures and cultures, and their ways of communicating – and an ability to bridge between them. This ability is incentivised by their position in relation to the partnership. Bringing in brokers to facilitate, build capacity or train research partners is a way of ensuring that these essential aspects of the partnership are adequately resourced and supported, as well as harnessing the facilitation and translation skills that the partnership needs. Brokers can also offer a service to funding bodies to provide advice about how to run good stakeholder engagement events and how to make and support others to find appropriate matches between partners.


Brokers are not directly involved in the implementation of research partnerships, so they are well placed to identify the common challenges that arise – whether problems between actors, or difficulties related to the particular features of specific funding calls. They can play a role in collating this knowledge and using it to engage with and influence different actors, bringing about better possibilities for fair and equitable partnership.

Common challenges for brokers in research partnerships

In our conversations with brokers, most of the problems that arose concerned when and how they become involved in research partnerships. Timing of involvement varied, from being involved early on in a process or being brought in for a specific phase, to ad hoc involvement to deal with an emerging problem, to being involved intermittently throughout the project. The timing of involvement influences the broker's role in the partnership, and whilst a range of models can work, clear communication and a well-understood role is important to ensuring that all stakeholders are happy.

Another problem for brokers is that their areas of work can be seen by others as additional or peripheral to the core goals of the research partnership. This may lead to inadequate allocation of time or financial resources, or to the likelihood that brokers' activities will be squeezed if a timetable or budget is revised.

While the work of brokers may be essential to the success of a research partnership, it often has low visibility and as a result is given little value. It includes the use of what are often described as 'soft skills': communication, facilitation, mediation, interpretation and network building – activities where outputs are hard to measure, and therefore often under-resourced. This work is also shaped by gendered power dynamics: when it is not



taken on by broker organisations, it falls to individuals in other partner organisations, often women, whose labour is frequently associated with soft skills.

When brought into a research partnership, brokers need to assess the kinds of interventions required, and advocate for the time and resources to do them well. It is particularly important that they are adequately resourced for contexts with weak infrastructure – from roads to electricity provision – where communication with and coordination of diverse actors can be time-consuming.

Capacity building to ensure the engagement with and use of research – an important aspect of the broker’s role – is skilled work that can be resource intensive. It might include:

- ▶ capacity assessments of partnerships to identify and address weaknesses throughout the research process
- ▶ facilitating online resources, signposting research stakeholders towards tools and guidance, and learning from other partnerships
- ▶ acting as knowledge and learning brokers between the policy, practice and research arenas, including bringing together actors from these arenas to learn from the research
- ▶ acting as a ‘translator’ to support and encourage the sharing of research findings
- ▶ supporting the monitoring and evaluation of the partnership itself.

Despite this diversity, research partnerships often have a narrow understanding of capacity development, seeing it as being about technical aspects of research, and as being an intervention that flows from the global North to the global South, or from academics to CSOs. It can be a challenge to assess and push back against these assumptions, and gain recognition for the multi-directional learning that needs to take place in fair and equitable research partnerships. It is particularly challenging for those holding brokering roles in the global South.

Bids for large research partnerships need to ensure that there are adequate resources for the tasks associated with relationships between partners – whether that’s facilitation, capacity development or technical assistance in particular areas of work like monitoring or assessing the partnership, or research communication. For broker organisations, knowing that time and resource allocations are feasible for the project is key to assessing when to engage with the partnership.



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 a broker 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	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▶ What resources or conditions are needed for good partnerships? ▶ How can the voices of all partners be heard within the agenda-setting process? ▶ What roles are under-recognised and under-resourced? ▶ What is your role in research agenda-setting and governance? ▶ How can you use your networks and relationships to ensure good information flows and participation in the wider research system?
Enabling and supporting research partnerships	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▶ How much time and resources are allocated for building and maintaining the partnership? ▶ Is there a plan for regular check-ins or reflections between partners? ▶ What are the likely barriers to working in partnership – institutional culture, language, norms and expectations? How will these be overcome? ▶ Are there any conflict resolution mechanisms in place? If not, can they be created? ▶ Are there sufficient resources allocated to your role in the partnership? ▶ Is the remit of your role realistic and practical? ▶ What are the expectations within the partnership about appropriate capacity development opportunities and mutual learning?



Research design and implementation	<ul style="list-style-type: none">▶ Who is involved in each stage of the research design and implementation, how is this decided, and how is responsibility allocated for different roles?▶ What are the core capacities needed for research design and implementation? Are they present in the partnership or do they need to be built?
Research communication, access, uptake, adaptation and use	<ul style="list-style-type: none">▶ What do each of the partners need to learn and do to be able to communicate effectively about the research?▶ How is research communication, uptake and use understood by the different partners, and are there tensions or mismatches?▶ What power dynamics – for example, language, culture or research approach – need to be negotiated to be able to facilitate effective dissemination and use?
Beyond the research	<ul style="list-style-type: none">▶ How will the partnership conclude?▶ How will the partners reflect on the partnership and what role will you play in that process?▶ What learning will you capture for future partnerships?▶ What networks and connections have emerged during the partnership?



Two tools to support reflection

Tool 1: Actor maps

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

This tool can help make visible the different actors in a complex research partnership, or can be used as a planning tool to think about how to bring together different actors to respond to a funding call, and your role as broker in the picture. By mapping out the actors and the connections between them visually, you can identify where existing connections are; taking this further, you can start to map out where the power flows are, which may help in thinking through where to challenge or disrupt them. Using cards or sticky notes means that the map can be rearranged as it develops and different relationships are traced. You can either use this tool as a broker organisation, or use it collaboratively with partners or prospective partners to facilitate the early planning process.

Those in brokering roles can use this tool to map out the different actors in a complex research consortium. It can help highlight how the different actors are already connected and where those connections are weak or rely on individuals; if the partnership rests on very specific relationships, the actor map can be used to assess risk. It can also be used to identify where additional communication support or capacity building might be needed to address issues before they arise.

How?

Together with partners, think about the key actors in the partnership. These might be individuals, organisations or institutions that are involved in generating, using, regulating or influencing evidence. It is helpful to be quite specific. Write the names of actors or organisations on index cards or sticky notes, using different colours for different sectors if possible. Next, draw arrows on cards or sticky notes – draw a mix of thick and thin arrows.

Arrange the actors and arrows into a diagram, using the arrows to show the relationships between the different actors, activities, and each other. Use the thickness of the arrow to illustrate the strength of the relationship, and the direction of the arrow could show which way the power flows.

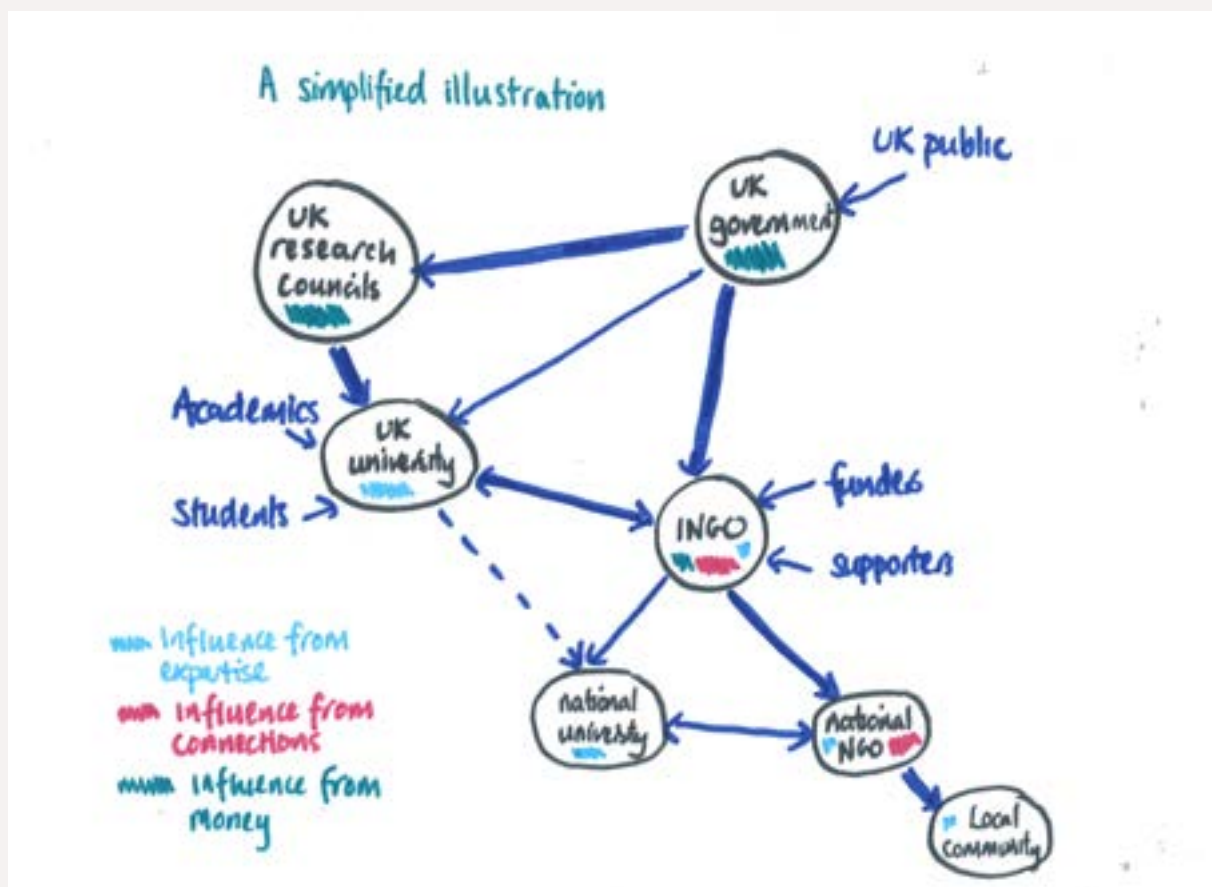
Once you have created your initial map, think about the types of power in the connections. List the different kinds of power (e.g. money, connections or

expertise). Using a different colour for each kind of power, circle actors or use coloured stickers to show where their power comes from.

Reflect on the resulting map of actors. What do you notice emerging from the mapping? Are there any obvious groupings or clusters of actors? Which actors are least connected? Are there any actors that are not linked? What 'gaps' need to be bridged?

With partners or prospective partners, you can reflect on what the map says about who influences how evidence is understood and what types of evidence are valued – and whether they are happy with this picture. Is there anything they want to change, and what do you all need to do to change it? Is there anything you think you should be doing now, given what you have identified in this picture?

It is worth reflecting that we often see ourselves as less powerful and others as more powerful, because we are used to our own restrictions. If using the map as a group, do you agree on relative power flows? Are there any tensions, opportunities or different understandings?



Tool 2: Metaphors of partnership

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

This quick exercise can be added into a partnership meeting to explore different ideas about the role or function of the partnership. If used as part of an early meeting, or when brokering the beginning stages of a partnership, it can help to get a sense of each partner's expectations of the process. Or if you've been brought in as a broker at a later stage in the partnership, it can be useful to reflect on the current partnership to better understand the dynamics, or to troubleshoot or identify any issues.

Engaging people to think visually or using tactile objects can spark a conversation about ways of relating within a partnership. This exercise works well as an icebreaker and to get people into a more reflective place.

How?

Before a meeting of partners, ask everyone attending to bring a picture or an object that represents the partners and the partnership for them.

At the meeting, ask people to talk about their picture or object and why they chose it. Ask people to reflect on where they see themselves and others in the partnership.

Reflect together on what the different objects say about what each partner brings to the partnership and how these relate. Is it a meeting of equals? Is one partner bigger or contributing more? Are the partners represented by the same kinds of objects or characters, or are they different? Are there any disagreements on how the partnership is characterised?



These images were selected as metaphors during workshops on rethinking research partnerships. The abstract image on the right reflected a partnership where a period of intense collaboration and closeness influenced both partners, but they were now taking that learning in different directions. The image on the left, a reference to cartoon family the Simpsons, symbolised a partnership perceived as messy and chaotic, but where partners had pulled together in the end.



Annotated resource guide

There are few resources available that specifically offer support and guidance to brokers and research capacity builders to facilitate equitable research partnerships. However, there are useful tools and guidance for supporting research partnerships in general that break down different power relations, even though they do not specifically tackle the organisational position and experience of brokers.

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 a research partnership. It explicitly addresses the power dynamics within the partnerships throughout the research process, and can also act as a toolkit for facilitating partnerships.

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 these will be useful for those in brokering roles that include engagement in the inception and ongoing facilitation of the partnership. One of the key contributions of the guide is to thinking critically about what each partner understands as evidence – which heavily influences methodological approach to research. Another is the tools for mapping the skills and resources available in the organisation.

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

The Brokering Guidebook (The Partnering Initiative, 2005)

Whilst this guidebook is not specifically aimed at research partnerships, it provides a good overview of the role of brokers in partnership projects with a range of useful materials for considering brokering from different angles. It imagines the partners to be public, private or civil society actors and doesn't include the academic organisations that are likely to form part of research partnerships.

Audience: The guidebook is intended for anyone acting in brokering roles in partnerships for sustainable development.



Most useful: This is a resource specifically for those in broker roles. It has a useful comparison of internal and external brokers, and breakdown of the different tasks brokers can play. Chapter Three focuses on brokering skills, most of which are highly relevant to brokers in research partnerships.

Where to find it: <https://thepartneringinitiative.org/publications/toolbook-series/the-brokering-guidebook/>


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. This resource is very aware of the role of brokers, and makes suggestions for their roles and use throughout. 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 is development practitioners (including NGOs) and researchers (including academic institutions) in Australia, but it also mentions researchers and practitioners in other countries, and 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 as a target audience, which gives a nice overview to those in brokering roles.

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. For brokers interested in differentiating 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. The guide also offers three case studies – as well as more on the RDIN website – as examples of academic-NGO research partnerships, which include bi-partner and multi-partner projects. The first case study in the guide partly explores how Plan International Australia played a brokering role between Plan International Vietnam and a research team; and the rest of the cases have relevant reflections on capacity development.

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



Development Impact and You DIY Toolkit (NESTA and Open University, no date)

This toolkit is designed to provide development practitioners with skills and techniques to be innovative in their thinking and improve the effectiveness of their programmes. It was created by NESTA and the OU with funds from the Rockefeller Foundation. The resources – written in several languages – are presented as a handbook of 30 tools covering all stages, from ideas and planning through to implementation and wrapping up.

Most useful: One of the tools is a ‘building partnerships map’. This offers a very clear 12-step process walking an organisation through what they need to consider in developing effective relationships. It is a very practical resource – identifying good partners, management and resource allocation – but it also encourages reflection on the partnership and explores opportunities for institutionalising it longer-term. While the emphasis is not explicitly on research partnerships, the DIY tool offers a very straightforward process tracing diagram to plan and continually reflect on a developing partnership, laid out with clear, easy-to-follow instructions – both written and in video format. It is embedded within a much wider suite of learning materials that could be used to support mutual capacity building around collaborative research design and implementation – offering additional ways to develop and build trust in the relationship. It’s a useful toolkit for brokers to draw from.

Where to find it: <http://diytoolkit.org/tools/building-partnerships-map-2/>



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

Christian Aid Centre of Excellence for Research, Evidence and Learning
020 7620 4444 | RELhub@christian-aid.org | www.christianaid.org.uk/research

The Open University
0300 303 5303 | Jude.Fransman@open.ac.uk | www.open.ac.uk

UK Research and Innovation
01793 444000 | communications@ukri.org | www.ukri.org



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Collaborative partners

