Rethinking
Research
Collaborative

UK research funders

Resource materials to support fair
and equitable research partnerships

Resources produced by

christian aid | Research & Evidence | The Open University

Resources funded by

UK Research and Innovation | GCRF Global Challenges Research Fund

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 UK research funders, 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 brokers.

Our understanding of UK research funders

There are a variety of different types of organisations that fund research on international development. In this module we focus on the bodies that make up UK Research and Innovation (UKRI), and specifically their remits under the Global Challenges Research Fund (GCRF) and the Newton Fund, both schemes that have development and partnership at their heart.

Although the overall aims of the GCRF and Newton Fund are clear (see Box 1), the way that these are translated into practice may vary depending on advice from external advisory bodies, and the remit and strategic priorites of the different research councils.

Box 1. The GCRF and the Newton Fund*

The GCRF is a £1.5 billion fund to support cutting-edge research that addresses the challenges faced by developing countries. It focuses on challenge-led disciplinary and interdisciplinary research; aims to strengthen capacity for research, innovation and knowledge exchange in the UK and developing countries and provide 'agile' research funding in emergency response contexts. The Newton Fund (£735m) is a joint funding stream, developed between the UK and partnering governments (generally middle-income countries in the global South). It aims to increase individual and institutional capacity in science and innovation, inspire research collaborations on development topics and create collaborative solutions to development challenges.

* The funding for these resources specified these funding streams

UKRI is made up of seven research councils, Innovate UK (a body aimed at driving science and technology innovations to grow the UK economy) and Research England (focused on university research and knowledge exchange in England). UKRI receives funds through the UK Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy, and their positioning and current formation suggests a strong alignment between research priorities and the UK government's **Industrial Strategy**. The research councils are public-funded bodies, governed by a council made up of academic and non-academic appointees; although they administer public money, their decision making is governed by the 'Haldane Principle', which states that they should be able to make decisions about research funding without political interference or pressure.

The seven research councils have traditionally been responsible for funding and coordinating research within disciplines including arts, humanities, economics and social science, sciences, medicine, environment and engineering. They have different

experiences in collaborative or engaged research and levels of involvement with international development research. The research communities they support have different epistemological assumptions, value different research approaches and use different jargon.

However, there are also similarities between them. Firstly, each council allocates public resources to research in their disciplinary remit, and has therefore evolved systems, relationships, knowledge and skills that embed them in the UK higher education (HE) sector. Their staff include academics with disciplinary expertise; funding decisions are taken by peer review panels composed of relevant experts; and their understanding of institutional infrastructures and what processes are possible responds to the realities of UK universities, research institutes and organisations, and quality assurance mechanisms such as the Research Excellence Framework.

Secondly, the councils are influenced by their context. This includes: constrained public resources for higher education; shifting understandings of 'academic impact', a growing accountability agenda in the HE sector; and a rising focus on innovation for economic impact. This context, along with public debates on the value of overseas aid, and the shift in language from aid for poverty reduction to 'aid in the national interest' – leading to differing views as to what aid money can be spent on, and how it is distributed and managed – all shape the space in which research funders operate.

What do research funders bring to research partnerships?

Funding. Many Southern countries have poorly developed research funding and infrastructure, as scarce resources are focused elsewhere. For academics and practitioners in these countries, schemes originating in the global North are a key way to access funds for their research. These researchers are therefore appreciative of the opportunities offered by UK research funding, especially when the programmes respond to priorities identified in the global South, and enable knowledge exchange, Southern leadership and journal publications.[1] Beyond these types of programme, there is also funding targeted beyond 'the usual suspects', which includes resources for networking events, flexible and responsive funding, and small pots that are accessible for those with a limited 'track record' in research. Without these types of funding many international research partnerships would not be able to happen.

Incentivising practice and setting standards. Research funders frame research

---

1   UKCDS (2017) 'Building a Partnership of Equals: The Role of Funders in Equitable and Effective Research Collaborations' http://www.ukcdr.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2017/11/Building-Partnerships-of-Equals_-REPORT-2.pdf (accessed 27 July 2018).

calls, and therefore make decisions about the type of partnerships to enable. They can use the power of money to encourage certain ways of working and understandings of research impact. Ten ways funders can support fair and equitable partnerships are summarised in Box 2. In addition to these they can also invest in a range of research uptake processes – to enable research findings to reach a wider audience, particularly in the global South.

Expanding opportunities in research governance. As well as impacting directly on the dynamics of research partnerships, funders can shape the research environment. This includes developing strategies and support for people who are not UK-based academics to participate in thinking about how research agendas are developed, including how decisions are made. It also means understanding what is needed to make their participation possible – which could include payment or capacity development (read Kate Newman's reflections on this in the online case study). This might include granting more power to regional funding initiatives such as the Alliance for Accelerating Excellence in Science in Africa and funding more national and regional networking and agenda-setting events.

Learning across councils and contexts. Although the form of GCRF funding is relatively new, some councils (for example the Arts and Humanities Research Council) have extensive experience in funding collaborative and community-driven research (for example through the **Connected Communities Programme**). Moreover, within the GCRF there have been several funding forms and different stakeholder engagement strategies. Ensuring that learning is happening between the councils, and that innovation in funding is evaluated and captured, will help strengthen the impact of these funds. The **National Coordinating Centre for Public Engagement** and other networking organisations such as the **UK Collaborative on Development Research** – both of which receive funding from UKRI – offer important support here.

Box 2. Ten ways for funders to support equitable research partnerships

1. Invest time to involve governments, funders and research communities from low- and middle-income countries in setting research agendas, and be open and honest about objectives.
2. Fund new research questions and value complementary skills and knowledge.
3. Provide guidelines for equitable partnerships and recognise the time and costs of this.
4. Reward project management and team working and specifically explore whether project leads have these skills.
5. Equity means inclusion of a wider range of roles and institutions in a collaboration.
6. Ensure funding consistency between Northern and Southern partners, and be flexible in responding to different funding needs. Additionally, directly fund national and regional institutions in the global South.
7. Provide long-term institutional capacity strengthening.
8. Proactively build research networks in low- and middle-income countries.
9. Invest in long-term research partnerships and collaborations.
10. Collaborate and communicate with other funding agencies (North and South).

Source: UKCDS 2017

Common challenges for funders in research partnerships

Funders face practical and ideological challenges in designing and disbursing funding.

Negotiating conflicting ideologies. These exist at different levels. Firstly, there are the institutional challenges, which include negotiating between government policy and priorities, the way the UK's obligations in relation to overseas development aid (ODA) as a member of the Organization for Economic Cooperation in Development are interpreted in practice, and academia as an institution. Secondly, there are different understandings and interpretations of impact, and the challenge of which is to be prioritised – is it about research excellence and reach, or development impact, or impact on UK business and economic interests? Thirdly, there are different priorities and understandings about how research should happen – with increasing pressure on academics to engage with non-academics, which is shifting the nature of research itself. These different perspectives all pull funders in different directions as they consider allocating funding.

Logistical constraints. The GCRF and Newton Fund are new forms of research funding, but they are administered through current systems, developed for different types of funding and with a UK academic audience in mind. In addition to challenges in adapting online systems to enable better accessibility across the range of applicants, there are other logistical issues – such as the need to meet ambitious annual spending commitments, the difficulties associated with scaling up to deliver large funds quickly and identification of appropriate methods and mechanisms to reach into new, non-traditional audiences. For example, INGOs and Southern-based respondents in our research all mentioned difficulty in accessing information about funding calls and reliance on UK-based academics to know about the opportunities available.

Knowledge constraints. The practice of research councils has evolved through their interaction with UK-based academics – the staff understand and have close connections with this group of stakeholders. Councils have direct links with individual academics, through their governance and external advisory structures. Members of peer review assessment panels are recruited either through an open application process or by direct invitation due to their relevant expertise. But there are challenges in promoting these opportunities to diverse groups, organisations, sectors and regions. One option for research funders is to extend their networks and understanding of non-UK based academics, working strategically with those that already have relationships with these stakeholders – including broker organisations and INGOs (for more on this, see the research broker and INGO modules). Moreover, a conscious effort to redress evidence hierarchies by incentivising intellectual leadership by academics from the global South, drawing on existing networks and organisations such as the UNESCO Chair's Knowledge for Change initiative and

Africans Rising's People's Assembly, would help here.

Managing accountability and risk. Increased upward accountability and public scrutiny both of academia and international aid could limit a funding body's willingness to take risks. This has implications for innovation and appetite for experimenting with new funding forms. However, for fair and equitable partnerships, research funders may need to be open to alternative forms of research funding where they are not directly controlling decision making, especially if they truly want to enable Southern leadership, and research agendas shaped by priorities identified in the global South. There are a few good examples of research funding decisions being devolved so that they can be taken in or nearer the countries where the research is taking place (e.g. the **DELTAS** programme in Africa); or where South–South agenda setting and leadership have been encouraged (e.g. the **South–South Tricontinental programme**).

Checklist of key issues to consider

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 UK funder facilitating and supporting fair and equitable 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?
- ▶ These might relate to your own accountability and the research standards of your organisation. 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/considerations
Research agenda-setting and governance	In setting the funding environment, key considerations include: ▶ Who is setting the research agenda? Have you included advisers from the global South or non-academics to inform your research priority setting? What systems have you got to hear about development priorities from different audiences? ▶ Who is involved in your funding assessment panels? Is their role on the panel clear? What support have you given to enable them to actively participate? ▶ How have you determined the criteria and form of your calls? What assumptions have you made about who will be responding to your calls? How could you increase the diversity of funding applicants?
Enabling and supporting research partnerships	▶ What is driving you to support research partnerships? How is this reflected in your funding processes and criteria? ▶ Do you have sight of the 'real costs' of partnership for the different organisations involved, and the types of activity they need to fund? ▶ Do you have specific assessment and reporting criteria that reinforce the principles of fair and equitable partnership?

Enabling and supporting research partnerships	▶ How open and available is your information about how to secure funding? What systems are in place to enable non-academics, or academics from the global South, to secure funding? ▶ How can you reduce complexity in your funding process and systems? ▶ Have you any mechanisms for funding early partnership development activities, to enable partners to better prepare themselves ahead of funding calls?
Research design and implementation	▶ What flexibility do your funding criteria give for innovative ways to organise or think about research design? ▶ What support has been given to assessment panel members to enable them to recognise and value different approaches to research? ▶ What could you make available and explicit about your assumptions about evidence which will enable those who have not partnered with you before to understand your perspective and preferences? ▶ How does your approach to funding provide opportunities for non-traditional actors to lead on research design?
Research communication, access, uptake, adaptation and use	▶ How are you investing in and incentivising different forms of communication? How are these alternative forms valued and captured through processes such as **Researchfish**? ▶ How is communication assessed as part of the funding process? Does this include thinking about different audiences and how they are reached, and different kinds of research impact? Do you issue guidelines about intellectual property or ownership of research findings? ▶ How is communication and research uptake supported and resourced beyond the initial project period? Does the funding lay the foundations for this?

Beyond the research	▶ How is each funding call situated within a wider funding strategy? How does your funding contribute to building or sustaining the wider ecosystem for research in developing countries?
	▶ What resources and connections do you have access to that enable iterations, longitudinal connections, or the emergence of new and different partnerships?
	▶ Is there flexibility to revisit a research partnership and assess its sustainability or impact beyond the initial research? What is your role in sharing this learning? How are you learning from participants in your research partnerships?
	▶ How can you support partnership beyond a specific research initiative?

Two tools to support reflection

Tool 1: Flow chart

What

This exercise uses a flow chart to enable funders to consider how they are allocating resources and who is involved at each stage.

Why

Many organisations do things the way that they have always done them, without really considering the implications of their practice. To support funders in contributing to fair and equitable partnership it can be helpful to make current practice visible, and then examine how different processes impact on the ability to be fair and equitable.

How

Start by selecting a specific funding call. Think about all the different stages involved in the call: from when the idea was first discussed, to when the call was developed and disseminated, to how proposals were received and evaluated, and decisions made. Put each stage on a post-it, and lay these out chronologically.

For each stage, think about who was involved, and how. Write notes on another post-it. You might also want to make notes on the nature of the process at each stage and what types of knowledge and skills were needed and valued.
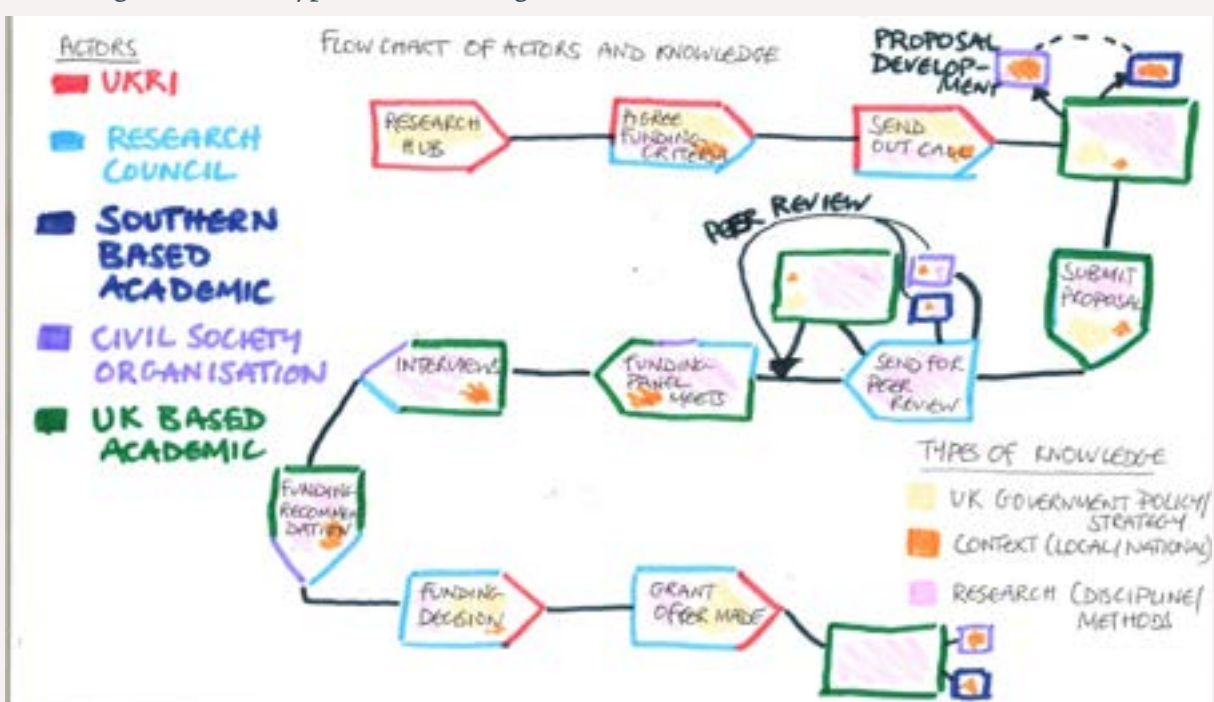
Discuss the picture you have developed, and consider:

- Where were the big decisions made in this process, and who was involved in decision-making? How transparent was it?
- How does the process you have been discussing support and enable fair and equitable partnerships? What were the obstacles or challenges? How could these be mitigated in a future funding call, what would you need to do differently?
- What were the conditions for effective participation at each stage in the process? Were different actors well supported? What kind of knowledge is accepted within the current system?

Further questions for discussion

The discussion could be extended in different ways depending on what you are hoping to achieve. For example, you might want to consider:

- Putting yourself in someone else's shoes. For example, if you were an academic based in the global South, what would you see when you entered this system? What information might help you navigate it?
- Thinking about power. What gives people power at different stages in the process? How do power relations impact on the way people can participate and have influence at different stages? What do the different power dynamics mean for the types of research, knowledge and evidence that are used in and produced by research partnerships? What does this mean for impact on development challenges?
- Capacity development and support. What could you do to increase participation of diverse actors at different points in the system, and how would this impact on the overall picture? Could you produce an infographic of this flow chart which would enable partners to understand what the different stages are in a research resource allocation process, and when they could (or should) participate?

Tool 2: Weighing scale

What

This tool uses the simple concept of a weighing scale to encourage funders to consider how they are allocating their resources to different actors in the research partnership.

Why

Who has access to the money, and which elements of their work are funded, greatly influences power in partnerships. There are certain conventions about what is funded by research councils, but involving new and different actors means these conventions need to be unpacked and considered.

How

Start by drawing a simple weighing scale. Label one side with the name of one type of actor in your research partnership (e.g. 'UK-based academics') and the other side another type of actor (e.g. academics based in the global South). It may be that you are funding a consortium, in which case you may wish to draw out multiple weighing scales! Next, brainstorm all the different elements you expect to fund as part of this scheme. This might include salaried time, institutional overheads, travel costs or publications.

Consider which actors are receiving these funds, and draw circles on the appropriate side of your weighing scale to illustrate the size of the funds you expect to allocate to each element.
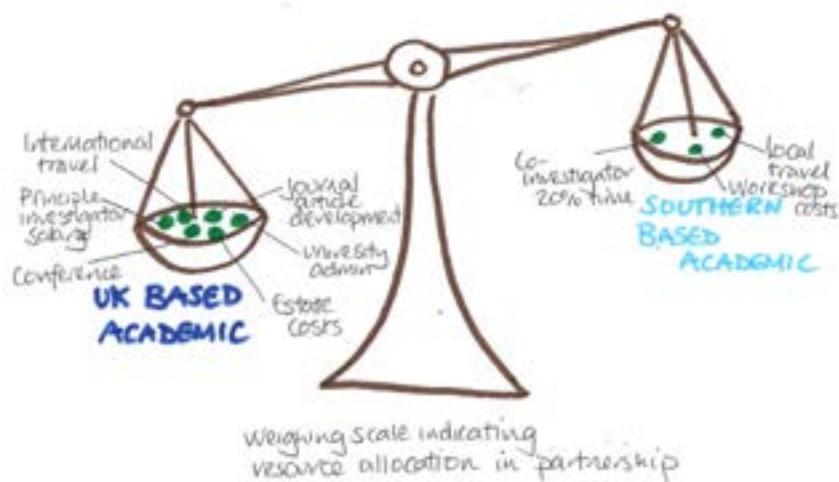
Consider your weighing scale:

▶ Is it balanced? Or is one side getting access to greater resources than the other? Why is this?
▶ Are the same types of elements being funded for both actors, or does the funding suggest very different roles in the partnership? What impact might this have?
▶ Are there unallocated resources to be distributed to the partners? How will decisions be made about these resources?

Further discussion

A second stage of discussion could consider additional resources that you are expecting will be contributed to the partnership by the partners themselves. This could include additional unpaid time (for example, for a practitioner to attend a workshop); or elements you do not usually fund which will have to be found from elsewhere (for example, UK-based international NGOs will be expected to pay VAT for services they provide to the partnership, but this is not often part of UK research grants).

Draw these in a different colour and add them to your weighing scales.

▶ What has changed in the picture? Is one partner expected to contribute additional elements for 'free'?
▶ Are there certain elements that you have never considered funding previously that you could consider?
▶ How might the pattern of resource allocation impact on the dynamics of the partnership?

Annotated resource guide

The UK Collaborative on Development Research produced the key resource for funding organisations, which is discussed above and summarised further below. Other materials which could be of relevance to funders include: the **Research Fairness Initiative**, which is still in the early stages of development, but which has hints and tips for how funders might use their resources as a tool for evaluation; the Canadian Association for the Study of International Development's **literature review** of equitable partnerships in Canadian development research, which provides a series of 'recommendations for funders'; and the **Impact Initiative**, which has tips for funders embedded in the **case studies**.

Other interesting resources include those collected and produced by the Netherlands Development Assistance Research Council (RAWOO). Before it was disbanded in 2007, RAWOO supported a programme of demand-driven and locally led research in Ghana that was supported by a North–South collaboration, and designed to reverse power dynamics and ensure that the research was developed in response to in-country demands.

We urge funding organisations to also engage with materials targeted at other stakeholder groups, and use the ideas and insights they contain to inform the design and practice of their research calls.

Building a Partnership of Equals (UK Collaborative on Development Research, 2017)

This report reviews a range of funding models, considering how different structural and process components impact on equitable partnership. Based on interviews with 30 international funding bodies, it contains case studies and detailed analysis of different funding schemes, considering issues such as geographical reach, programme goals, and the roles, approaches and management structures of funders. It looks across the entire research funding cycle, identifying challenges and making recommendations to enable fair and equitable partnership.

Most useful: This is a long and technical document, but its key principles (see Box 2 above) are useful; and the emphasis on funder roles throughout the partnership cycle is useful. Seven case studies (pp.15–21) outline different

funding models, with clear and accessible diagrams which are worth exploring. The report is also useful as it shares funder perspectives around challenges and learning for fair and equitable partnerships, detailing their response to issues such as participation, politics, capacity strengthening and focusing on how to involve researchers beyond the principal investigators in issues such as project organisation and management decisions to enhance equality in the partnership.

Audience: The main audience is research funder organisations, particularly staff working on research calls and programme design and delivery. However, other actors in the research for development community will find the analysis interesting to build understanding of funder approaches.

Where to find it: http://www.ukcdr.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2017/11/Building-Partnerships-of-Equals_-REPORT-2.pdf

A Guide to Transboundary Research Partnerships (Swiss Commission for Research Partnerships with Developing Countries (KFPE), updated 2014)

The guide is a product of the 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.

Most useful: The principles and questions are presented very concisely, and it's easy to engage with all the material. There are accompanying testimonials on a dedicated YouTube channel. 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).

Contacts

Collaborative partners