



Rethinking
Research
Collaborative

Civil society organisations in the global South

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



Our understanding of CSOs in the global South

This module is aimed at CSOs in the global South with a development focus, which may be expressed in terms of poverty alleviation or human rights. There is considerable diversity in these organisations, including their institutional set-up, the scope of their remit (from local or national to regional or global), and the nature of their relationships with government and with poor and marginalised communities.

Our understanding of civil society includes both formal and less formal organisations and groups, with a range of identities – NGOs, think tanks, trade unions, faith-based organisations, activist organisations, community-based organisations (CBOs), cultural organisations, membership groups and social movements.

Within this broad definition we make several working assumptions about CSOs in the global South, for the purposes of this module:


1. CSOs are not-for-profit and non-governmental, though they may receive funding from government.
2. If the CSO has a research focus, it is clearly orientated towards social or cultural change.
3. The category is broad and we can't therefore make any sweeping assumptions about the research literacy of staff in CSOs, as some have an explicit research focus whilst others do not.

This module is designed to support CSOs in the global South to be able to engage with fair and equitable research partnerships.

What do Southern CSOs bring to research partnerships?

Civil society actors in the global South have varying motivations for engaging in international research partnerships. Where research is not a primary focus for the organisation, it may nevertheless be of interest as a way of enhancing an organisation's core work, from improved understanding of how a particular intervention is working, to greater visibility in the sector.

The specific context of the CSO will inform the kinds of research that are helpful, the



kinds of questions it is interested in answering, what methodologies are appropriate, and what outputs are most effective. It also shapes the kinds of expertise and experience that the CSO contributes to a research partnership, or the kinds of partnerships it might be looking to establish.

Civil society actors in the global South can bring some or all of the following knowledge and skills to a research partnership:

- ▶ in-depth understanding of their socio-cultural context, and an ability to navigate political spaces at different levels
- ▶ relationships with, and access to, certain stakeholder groups or constituencies – for example, local or national policy makers, or poor and marginalised groups – and in particular a capacity to feed the needs and priorities of the local people they work with into all stages of the research
- ▶ substantive experience, knowledge and insights from practice – for example, from frontline service delivery, policy and advocacy, or research
- ▶ technical expertise aligned to the organisation’s focus
- ▶ ability to assess and make informed judgements about security and safety in their context
- ▶ a long-term perspective, which means that they will still be in the area where the research is carried out, to follow it up and ensure impact.


Common challenges for Southern CSOs in research partnerships

There are structural / systemic inequalities that prevent the full and equitable participation of civil society actors from the global South in research partnerships, and these manifest in practice as partnering challenges.

Many CSOs are working in an environment where civil society space is being squeezed and there may even be government interference; in some places this is about having activities restricted, while in others it is about being arrested or imprisoned for work on issues that have become labelled as ‘political’. This in turn is affecting their sustainability.¹ With less funding available for core organisational costs, CSOs are increasingly reliant on project funding. In this context, organisations are often reluctant to turn down a (funded) partnering opportunity, even when it is not on their terms.

“We need to lead this process ... We need to be ready to say no to a partnership if it compromises our principles, puts us at risk and does not mean real sharing of power. This may mean declining an offer of resources which is very scary to many CSOs desperate for funding.” (Nicole Léotaud, CANARI)

¹ INTRAC (2018) ‘Sustaining Civil Action through Respectful Partnership and Responsible Exit: Event Summary’, <https://www.intrac.org/resources/sustaining-civil-action-respectful-partnership-responsible-exit-event-summary/> (accessed 27 July 2018)



There are also inequalities in the research funding ecosystem, centred on barriers around access to knowledge, connections, influence and strategic alignment, wherein Southern civil society actors:

- ▶ rarely have the opportunity to influence the global research agenda (and subsequent framing of research funding calls) of Northern donors such as UK Research and Innovation (UKRI)²
- ▶ may have limited ability to navigate the structures, processes and terminologies related to research funding and the expectations of academia in the UK, and so depend on Northern partners to lead on bid development; the Global Challenges Research Fund (GCRF)³ explicitly states that the Principal Investigator must be from a UK academic institution
- ▶ may have limited involvement in the framing of a multi-stakeholder research proposal, such that research questions do not necessarily tally with the questions they want answers to
- ▶ may not have the necessary connections to be able to access UK research funding opportunities, which can result in partnering with the ‘usual suspects’.
- ▶ may be obliged to work in English, instead of their own primary language(s), which affects the power dynamics across the partnership.⁴

Hierarchies of knowledge mean that practitioner knowledge and perspectives, together with deep understanding of socio-political context, are not always valued as compared to traditional academic research knowledge. In development research, poor and disadvantaged women and men – who may be members or constituents of CSOs – are more often ‘researched’ than ‘researchers’. Co-production of knowledge is a concept that is central to many research partnerships. Yet in reality there is often a disconnect between providing space for marginalised Southern voices, and the perception (in academia) of what constitutes rigorous, credible evidence.⁵

“With participatory research gaining ground, Southern voices are beginning to be valued, but they are rarely acknowledged as ‘author’. Often these ‘voices’ get subsumed as the authors’ own opinion – and lead authors are invariably from the North.” (Pradeep Narayanan, Praxis)


Typically, the roles designated to Southern CSOs in global research programmes are limited to data collection (based on the organisation’s ability to access research participants), management and coordination of research fieldwork, and/or dissemination

2 UKRI brings together the seven UK research councils, Innovate UK and a new organisation, Research England.

3 GCRF is a £1.5 billion fund announced by the UK Government in late 2015 to support cutting-edge research that addresses the challenges faced by developing countries.

4 The Arts and Humanities Research Council Community Guide (forthcoming) gives explicit recognition to the multiplicity of languages at play within any global research partnership, and the role of language as a barrier reinforcing asymmetries of power and hierarchies of knowledge.

5 AHRC Guide (forthcoming)



of research findings. By contrast, Northern academics usually take the lead on shaping research questions, and on analysis, write-up and publication. If the assumptions of partners in a research partnership are properly explored, there may be scope to challenge these typical roles. When roles and responsibilities are agreed, it is important that they are adequately resourced; in the context of weak infrastructure – from roads to electricity provision – communication with and coordination of diverse actors, for example, can be hugely time-consuming.

CSOs in the global South often find themselves the target of one-way capacity development interventions from Northern partners, rather than also being given formal opportunities to share their own skills and knowledge to educate or re-educate other members of the research partnership. Whilst research capacity varies from one country to the next, it may be important to gauge the commitment of Northern partners and funders to mutual learning throughout 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 CSO in the global South 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 are your key research priorities as an organisation and how can you get these heard by funders, academics and INGOs? ▶ What are the research priorities of the grassroots communities that you interact with, and how can you ensure that these are incorporated into the agendas of others?
Enabling and supporting research partnerships	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▶ What are you looking for in a partnership? What does good research partnership mean for your organisation? Do you have pre-existing partnerships or collaborations that you could build on for further research? ▶ What are the core ethical requirements for your work (either formal frameworks, or related to your values)? ▶ Who will own the research data? ▶ What skills and capacities would you like to develop in partnership, and what would you hope to teach others? ▶ Have you built in time and resources for building and maintaining the partnership? Have you planned for regular check-ins or reflections? ▶ How will you and the other partners work together? ▶ How will multi-lingual working be resourced? ▶ What are your expectations about appropriate capacity development opportunities and mutual learning across the partnership? ▶ Is there a conflict resolution mechanism? ▶ How will you ensure appropriate representation on the steering committee?



Research design and implementation	<ul style="list-style-type: none">▶ What does good evidence look like for you and for those stakeholders you want to influence with your research findings?▶ 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?▶ Have the budget and final proposal been shared with you?▶ Does the budget provide full cost recovery for your contribution (time and expertise) to the research process?
Research communication, access, uptake, adaptation and use	<ul style="list-style-type: none">▶ How can you work together with partners from the outset to develop and resource a research uptake/ impact strategy ?▶ Who has authorship and control of publications?▶ What is the sign-off procedure on communications outputs and event plans?
Beyond the research	<ul style="list-style-type: none">▶ Do you have an exit strategy, and/or a plan for continued collaboration?▶ How can you use learning from your partnership to feed into other initiatives such as future funding calls or teaching and curriculum development?▶ How will you reflect on the partnership?



Two tools to support reflection

Tool 1: Checking your assumptions

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

On entering research partnerships, partners often have assumptions about each other and the roles they might play in the partnership – assumptions based on previous experience, generalisations or pure stereotype. This exercise can help surface and explore these assumptions, as part of a wider session to understand motivations and expectations for the partnership, as well as individual and institutional incentives and barriers.

How

As a group, try to generate as many assumptions about research partners and partnerships as you can. You could ask other colleagues in your organisation to feed into this beforehand. We have some examples in Box 1.

Box 1. Assumptions about research partners and partnerships

To get you started, here are some examples of assumptions:

- ▶ Academics and practitioners are fundamentally different from one another.
- ▶ CSOs/ NGOs care about social change, academics care about the research question.
- ▶ Academics follow their own individual agenda, CSO/ NGO staff are collaborative.
- ▶ CSOs want to show that what they do works, academics are interested in the bigger picture.
- ▶ Northern academics want peer-reviewed publications, Southern CSOs want real-world impact.
- ▶ Theory is academic and abstract, it is totally separate from practice.
- ▶ Academics have the luxury of time, CSOs are in an endless cycle of activity.
- ▶ CSOs provide the data and universities provide the theory.
- ▶ CSOs want positive case studies of impact, academics want rigorous research methodologies.

Once you have generated the list, depending how long it is, pick a few of the most relevant statements to reflect on in more depth. Find a space and draw an imaginary line, marking one end as “agree”, and the other “disagree”. For each of the statements, get people to arrange themselves on the spectrum between agree and disagree, depending on how accurate they think the statement is. Ask a few people to reflect on their choice of where to stand.

Note that some of the assumptions generated may be quite provocative, but this is generally useful to stimulate constructive discussion and to foster better understanding. It's important to give space to the discussion that comes out of the process, as the idea is to bring the assumptions to the surface and challenge and reflect on what they mean for practice.

Tool 2: Thinking through the research process and roles

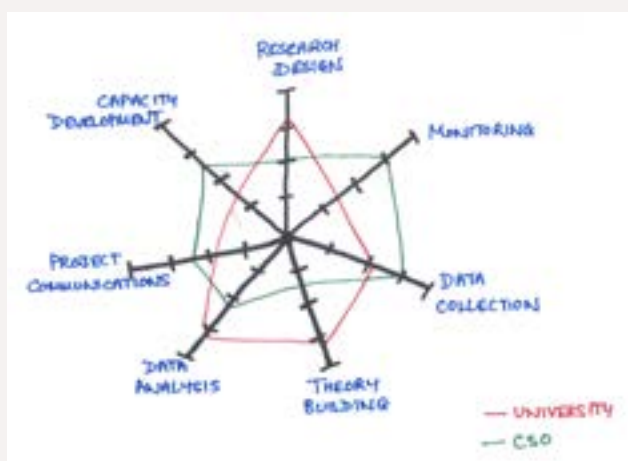
Source: Rethinking Research Partnerships (see annotated resource guide for details)

This spider web exercise can be useful both for mapping out the research process, and for thinking through the roles partners play at different stages, whilst also exploring the assumptions underpinning these choices. If you as an individual or organisation have only limited understanding of research processes, this exercise will enable you to conceptualise the key stages going forward, giving you a framing of the whole process. It can also provide the starting point for exploration of real-world impact, ahead of developing a more detailed approach to research engagement and communication.

How

Ask the group to come up with a list of 6–10 stages involved in the research project, or aspects of the research design process. Starting from a centre point, draw a line of the same length for each of the items. Label each line. Add five notches to each line to make a rough scale. Using a different colour for each partner, rank the involvement of each partner in each of the areas. Join up the dots as you go. The resulting diagram should look like a spider web, and will show the relative involvement of the different actors. Use the diagram to start a reflection on the relative roles of the different actors. Where do the lines overlap? Where is one partner more dominant? Try to explore why, and whether this is a deliberate choice, or whether you have just fallen into it.

The example below gives you an idea of what it might look like.





Annotated resource guide

There are a number of existing resources offering support and guidance to facilitate and participate in equitable research partnerships, but none are explicitly tailored for a civil society audience in the global South, and most originate in the global North. There is a clear gap in the market for further guidance produced from the global South. Those resource materials with greater relevance to Southern CSOs are listed here.

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


This discussion guide and toolkit was developed based on insights generated during a seminar series with UK INGOs and academics. The nature and impact of politics, power and institutional constraints is explicitly woven throughout the materials. Case studies are provided throughout the guide to illustrate challenges, tensions and turning points in the various research partnerships that were explored during the Rethinking Research Partnerships seminar series. The practical tools have been designed for use at different stages of the research process, and can be adapted for use by Southern civil society actors.

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

Toolkits, Guides and Case Studies (Centre for Social Justice and Community Action (CSJCA), Durham University, various dates)

CSJCA focuses on research that involves university and community partners working together for socially just change, predominantly in the UK. It specialises in participatory action research, where people who have first-hand experience of the issues being studied play a role in some or all aspects of the process of planning, doing and publicising the research, and putting the findings into practice. CSJCA has produced resources on co-production and impact in participatory action research, and guidance for community organisations on working with universities, as well as a guide to ethical principles and practice in community-based participatory research which may be of particular interest to a Southern civil society audience.

Where to find it: <https://www.dur.ac.uk/socialjustice/toolkits/>



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

This guide is a product of 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”. A key message in the guide is that equity comes through balance in a partnership, and so the politics of power dynamics underpins the entire approach and structure of the principles presented. The guide is available in English, French and German.

Where to find it: <https://11principles.org/>

Building Partnerships of Equals: The Role of Funders in Equitable and Effective International Development Collaborations (UK Collaborative on Development Sciences (UKCDS), 2017)

This publication by the UKCDS explores the role that funders can play throughout the research lifecycle to select and build partnerships of equals. Whilst not geared towards civil society in the global South, the report does provide useful insights into the perspectives of research funders. Arguably if Southern civil society actors are equipped with more knowledge of how (Northern) research funding works, they will be in a better position to negotiate fair and equitable partnerships. The report reviews a range of funding models, considering how different structural and process components could impact on equitable partnerships. Chapter 3, ‘Challenges and Learning’ offers useful insight into how some common problems – such as power and institutional dynamics – play out from the funders’ perspective.

Where to find it: <http://www.ukcdr.org.uk/resource/finding-and-building-effective-and-equitable-research-collaborations/>



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

