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Bridging research and practice: Funders as drivers for social equity

*Funders of projects to research and reduce global inequalities increasingly look for academics and practitioners to work together, writes **Aygen Kurt-Dickson**. But how do these “AcPrac” collaborations come about? Who is funding such schemes, and what determines their success?*

Funding for a fairer world requires funding fair research collaborations between academics and practitioners. And in recent decades, the research funding landscape has been changing. Funders increasingly tend to focus on “big” outcomes framed in terms of missions, major challenges and scalable impact, rather than funding specific disciplines. It is not uncommon for funded programmes to focus on global problems that no single organisation or academic discipline can solve. Inequality is one example, alongside others such as ageing populations, climate change and global public health.

This requires researchers to be more creative in connecting their research expertise to wider issues and collaborating with other disciplines and sectors. And crucially, it requires them to consider the role of *practitioners*, broadly defined as those based in non-academic organisations (charities, government agencies, and so on) who are conducting research and/or applying research results. (In reality, this distinction is not always clear-cut, with a rising workforce in academia now carrying a mix of academic and practitioner identities.)

Practitioners and academics alike wish to see collaborative funding programmes foster equitable partnerships. But how do these “AcPrac” collaborations come about? Who is funding such schemes? How do funders encourage academics and practitioners to work together – and what motivates them to build these programmes? And do such programmes really work?

Who funds collaborations? A mapping exercise

To answer some of these questions, a group of researchers and practitioners supported by the Atlantic Fellows for Social and Economic Equity (AFSEE) programme set out to examine **the nature, dynamics and defining features of AcPrac collaborations**, with a particular focus on their potential to reduce inequalities by bringing about social and political change.

Drawing on insights from focus groups and conversations with researchers and practitioners, the project addressed two key questions: why do some academics and practitioners working on inequality choose to engage in collaborative research? And what are the outcomes when they do?

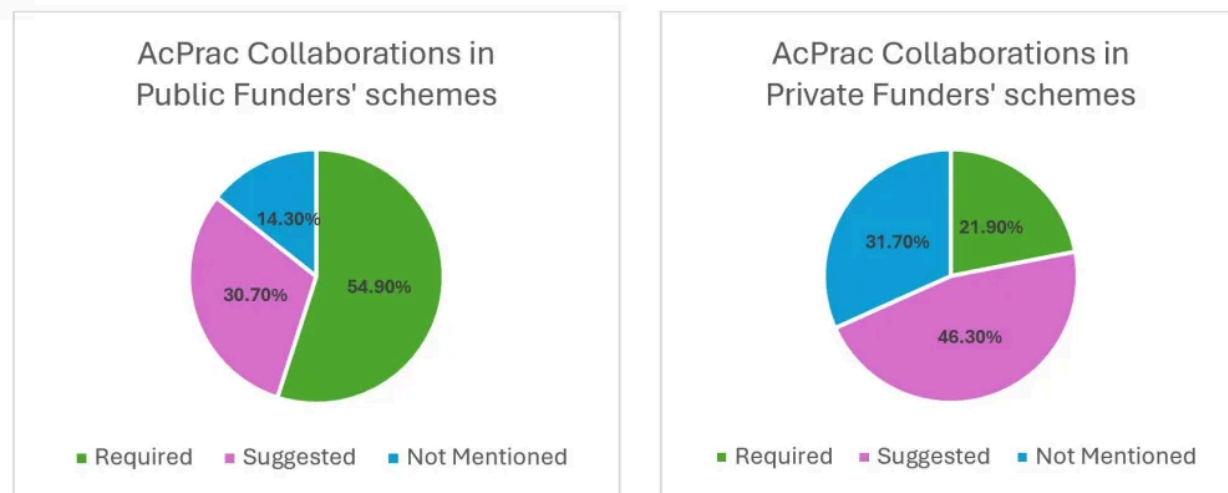
One of the standout findings was that *funding plays a crucial role*. Whether it's securing resources to support joint initiatives or navigating the complexities of donor relationships, access to funding often shapes the possibilities and outcomes of collaborative work. Accordingly, as a follow up, we carried out a **preliminary exercise** to map out the range of funding initiatives on offer that focussed on researching and/or reducing socio-economic inequalities.

In total, we identified 132 funding schemes across 16 countries from online sources. Of these, 91 were established by public funders, while the remainder were supported by private donors or charitable organisations. While the database did not cover all the funders or relevant schemes from around the world, we were able to get a snapshot of the playing field by searching for certain keywords on publicly available websites. We limited our search to schemes that were published in English and limited our time-period to the 2017-2022.

Doing this, an interesting picture emerged. 80 per cent of the schemes either required or suggested AcPrac collaboration, with 59 of the 132 schemes listing this as mandatory whilst a further 47 schemes suggested it. Crucially, public funders considered practitioners *at all stages of the research design* for equitable partnerships, and not merely as an ad hoc addition at the end of a project or for impact purposes only. This is an important step, and it encourages academics to partner with any organisation deemed relevant to their projects without major restrictions from funders as to the form that this joint work should take.

Figure 1 shows that public funding schemes invested more in AcPrac collaborations. We think this is because public sectors are typically strongly invested in deriving societal benefits from publicly funded research within universities. By contrast, non-public funders such as industry ones or charities may face more resource constraints that limit the number of collaborations they can fund and sustain over several years.

Figure 1: Distribution of AcPrac Collaborations based on type of funder (public vs private)



Source: Kurt-Dickson & Puri (2025)

What are the challenges to funding “AcPrac” collaborations?

As part of the project, we also convened a diverse group of funders, practitioners and researchers in order to explore a central question: what motivates those who fund these collaborations, and what are the challenges they face?

In the rich series of discussions and collective reflections that unfolded, the following points emerged when it comes to shaping the future of collaborative research:

- **Challenge-driven funding often aligns with national policy agendas.** Public funding programmes shaped around grand societal challenges typically reflect governmental priorities – an alignment that has both opportunities and limitations.
- **Power dynamics must be addressed.** Funders acknowledged the importance of recognising the uneven influence that academia and so-called “elite practitioners” can have within research collaborations – as well as how practitioners from historically marginalised communities often hold less power in these partnerships. The structural privilege held by academic institutions must be openly acknowledged and actively counterbalanced.
- **Early-stage support makes a difference.** Funding schemes that support pilot projects, seed funding, and networking opportunities can be essential for building trust and testing ideas in the early phases of collaboration.
- **Different clocks, different paces.** Academic and practitioner organisations often operate on different timelines, which can complicate sustained, long-term partnerships.
- **Community-led approaches offer new paths forward.** Community-focused funding schemes are shifting power by allowing communities to define the research agenda, shape methodologies, and lead the way.

Despite growing concerns around the future of funding for social change initiatives – both nationally and globally – we left these conversations with a sense of cautious optimism. Some funders are beginning to recognise the need for more inclusive, equitable ecosystems of research and practice. They're taking small but meaningful steps toward funding frameworks that prioritise real-world impact, not just academic output.

Still, the responsibility doesn't rest with funders alone. It's on *all* of us – researchers, practitioners, donors, institutions, and communities – to co-create more equitable and accountable ways of working together. If we are truly committed to transformative change, we must also transform the systems that underpin knowledge creation: from who gets funded and how, to who defines valuable knowledge, who uses it, and to what end.

Now is the time to rethink not just what we fund, but how and why we fund – so that the process of producing knowledge doesn't replicate the very inequalities we seek to dismantle.

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*For more details, see the report **Funding policy and funders' role in driving academic-practitioner collaborations** by Aygen Kurt-Dickson and Ishita Puri (2025).*

The views expressed in this post are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the position of the Atlantic Fellows for Social and Economic Equity programme, the International Inequalities Institute, or the London School of Economics and Political Science.

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About the author

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Aygen Kurt-Dickson works across research management and policy research. She has led a project for the Atlantic Fellows for Social and Economic Equity (AFSEE) in LSE, about funders driving AcPrac collaborations. She also manages the research elements of an EU-funded university alliance programme for LSE and helps LSE develop fundable research and innovation projects.

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