

*Too many academics remain rooted in a mentality that fears engaging with practitioners means reducing the credibility of their work. **Rachel Hayman***

(<http://blogs.lse.ac.uk/impactofsocialsciences/?p=7891#author>) calls for greater collaboration and an end to wasted academic work despite the considerable barriers that lie between academia and practitioners.



What's the added value of collaborating with academics? This question was posed to me at a recent meeting with NGOs working in international development. A good question; and one which highlights the often incomprehensible gulf between academics working in international development and what should be obvious NGO counterparts.

Many development NGOs have strong relationships with particular academics, and likewise many academics have strong relationships with particular NGOs; there are researchers with a foot in both types of institution. The value added should be obvious: more focused research and better use made of research findings; better evidence to inform policy, projects and advocacy.

But collaboration or even interaction doesn't happen as easily or as often as might be expected. The barriers can be considerable – from different timescales to different mind-sets to vastly different daily realities. Research moves slowly, but NGOs are looking for solutions to today's problems today. Research is often inaccessible to practitioners when it is written about in language that is dense and inaccessible, or more literally when research is only published in journals with subscription fees that are unaffordable for NGOs (another angle to the Open Access debate

(<http://blogs.lse.ac.uk/impactofsocialsciences/2012/09/12/key-questions-for-open-access-policy/>)).

Sometimes it's just a question of having time and resources to do something a bit differently, to engage with a new audience, to carry out research using alternative methods, to publish in a different way.

In many respects the time is ripe for collaboration – and here I'm really referring to co-produced research, where researchers from outside academia are fully involved in the research, not just as advisors or audiences. Academics and NGOs are under pressure to demonstrate impact, albeit in different ways but essentially for the same reason: to convince the powers-that-be (who hold the purse strings) that their work represents a good investment. I hate to look at development work and research in such monetary terms, but that is the reality. Whether that means convincing a private or public donor of the value of a project to provide bed nets to prevent malaria and thus reduce poverty, or convincing a research council of the value of research into the provision of bed nets, researchers and practitioners should in theory have something to gain from engaging with the other.

In a recent project called Cracking Collaboration (<http://www.intrac.org/pages/en/cracking-collaboration-a-new-look-at-partnerships-in-international-development-research-.html>), members of the Development Studies Association (<http://www.devstud.org.uk/>) explored the issue of collaboration in international development research. By studying several examples of collaborative research, and provoking discussion amongst academics and researchers, we confirmed much that we already knew – but also plenty of things that could be done to move collaboration forward.

Collaborative relationships in international development come in many shapes and sizes (<http://www.intrac.org/resources.php?action=resource&id=750>), and we found that relationships were often more fluid than existing models of collaboration imply. Collaboration is driven by multiple rationales: ideals, curiosity, needs and opportunism. It can be fraught with difficulties, but can be richly rewarding.

We found that the roles that we might automatically ascribe to particular actors are not necessarily clear-cut. For example, much attention is focused on how to translate research into action, (<http://www.researchtoaction.org/>) how to get researchers to communicate their work better. One might assume that NGOs should primarily be the *users* of research. However, the engagement of NGOs with development research is more complex; many large NGOs have considerable in-house research capacity; most carry out research in some form or other as part of their programming, advocacy and evaluation work; many facilitate research by providing data or access to respondents; others see an inherent value in

research for learning and knowledge production; and NGOs have often been instrumental in developing new research methods in international development. They are therefore heavily involved in the *production* of research. However, there is a role that NGOs could play better, namely in the shaping of research agendas (<http://www.intrac.org/blog.php/23/should-ngos-be-shapers-producers-or-consumers-of-research-reflections-on-academic-practitioner-resea>), in bringing key questions to the fore and engaging in the design of the research schemes that should produce knowledge for them to use.

As to the academics, there is much that could be done to improve the space for collaboration and co-production of research. Impact for academic institutions remains too much about publishing in the right places, despite pressure to shift towards demonstrating research use and value for money. Many academics remain rooted in a mentality that is worried that engaging with practitioners will somehow reduce the credibility and independence of their work. At a workshop I attended a couple of months ago even the idea of thinking through the usefulness of particular research projects and engaging stakeholders throughout the process was greeted with incomprehension by some of the academics in the room. The academics involved in the Cracking Collaboration project still felt that they were under pressure to focus their attention on peer-reviewed publications – the avenue to promotion and more research funding and prestige for their departments.

In reality, much collaboration rests on personal relationships and interest between individuals who know the value of the partnership. A concerted effort is required to promote collaboration further. That depends upon the perception of the value of working together as joint producers of research; that by working together the research will be richer and – possibly, though not necessarily – more useful. But it also requires more attention by research funders to understand the different needs and dynamics of collaborative research in international development. In a collaborative project, more resources will need to be devoted to managing the relationship and possibly to capacity building; many small NGOs that would benefit most from collaboration cannot afford to part-fund research; and academic institutions need to be encouraged to move beyond peer-reviewed publications as the primary indicator of quality.

After one year outside academia and into the NGO sector, I am completely convinced that we need more focus on collaborative research in international development. NGOs hold a huge amount of information on development, which is under-exploited and frankly wasted. They have limited resources or motivation to really use it well – working with academics would be one way to address this. And many NGOs would greatly gain from stronger research methods to enhance their own credibility and legitimacy through more careful use of evidence. And beyond the practical, both sides would gain immensely from enhancing the spaces for reflection and shared learning. I'm not advocating that all research needs to be collaborative – there's still plenty of space for research *on* NGOs, not *with* or *for* NGOs – but enough partnerships are working well to demonstrate that collaboration is a worthwhile endeavour and something that could be vastly expanded with the encouragement and engagement of academic institutions, representative bodies of development academics and NGOs, research funders, and NGOs.

Note: This article gives the views of the author, and not the position of the Impact of Social Sciences blog, nor of the London School of Economics

*More information and resources from the project can be found at: <http://www.intrac.org/pages/en/cracking-collaboration-a-new-look-at-partnerships-in-international-development-research-.html>
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