



North-South Research Partnerships: *A Guidance Note on the Partnering Process*

May 2005

This note is aimed at those involved in formulating research partnerships between organisations in the developed and developing world. This includes individuals delegated to negotiate on behalf of their research institute, donor agency, government ministry or non-governmental organisation (NGO). It also includes key decision-makers within these organisations – those authorised to approve research funding, sign contracts, disburse funds, make research staff appointments, review research quality and policy impact, and assess staff performance. The note draws on the results of formal enquiries into good practices in research partnerships,¹ as well as the experience of practitioners engaged directly in negotiations or facilitation around research partnerships.

The note contains the following guidance:

- ➔ different models of research partnership and collaboration;
- ➔ funding arrangements and their consequences;
- ➔ checklists for successful research partnerships; and
- ➔ do's and don'ts during partnership negotiations.

Background

Bi-lateral and multi-lateral development assistance agencies spend around US\$3 billion a year on development research.² The benefits of research institutes in OECD countries collaborating more directly with universities, independent institutes and NGOs in the developing world is increasingly recognised. For example, the intention of the UK Department for International Development (DFID) to spend £100million on research in the period 2006/2007 includes an explicit intention to 'give more effort to building developing country research capacity'.³ Further

DFID currently supports eight Development Research Centre (DRC) programmes, each carrying the mandate for 'northern' research institutes to collaborate with 'southern' partners.



Lilongwe workshop, 2005

Moreover, the research community now appreciates the need to comprehend the social, political and international contexts in which new technologies and ideas are deployed to reduce poverty and promote development. Achieving this requires both an interdisciplinary approach, and the pooling of expertise from both the country level and international perspectives. With the current focus of donors on attainment of the Millennium Development Goals, there is also growing emphasis on 'getting research into use', ie. linking the design and execution of research programmes to the policy formulation needs of both in-country public agencies and international development agencies.

The Issue

In realising these objectives, not only do northern and southern research institutions need to work together, but this collaboration needs to include government agencies (such as statistical analysis units and ministries responsible for economic planning, poverty alleviation and health care) and, in certain circumstances, the private sector (such as companies specialising in vaccine trials or production).

The transaction costs of negotiating these complex, multi-stakeholder, arrangements is high. For example, one moderately sized north-south research partnership known to the authors took two and half years to reach the funding decision stage, at a cost of around \$120,000 and 150 dedicated person days.

International donors or philanthropic companies who fund research around development issues want to see a ‘bankable’ research proposal prior to the release of funds. This means that during the planning phases of the partnership many of the potential partners are either accommodating an institutional opportunity cost, or cross-subsidising their involvement with other income. Better management of the transactions costs involved in developing north-south research partnerships seems essential.

High transactions costs can be justified if the synergies — the added value — of the partnership is also high. For example, if the specific composition of a partnership arrangement leads to more policy-relevant research, then this might justify protracted and costly negotiations. But this added value must be realised in practice, and not just theoretically. This requires the ‘right’ partners coming together, with competencies that genuinely complement one another, be that in the form of funding flexibility, local knowledge, technical capabilities, communication skills, project

management or risk mitigation.

The remainder of this note provides guidance on how to reduce transaction costs and capture added value in north-south research partnerships.

Models of Research Partnership

Table 1 describes five models for configuring north-south research partnerships. The advantages and disadvantages of each are summarised.

Table 1. Models of North-South Research Partnerships²

Model	Comments
1. The southern research institute is a subcontractor, appointed and managed by the northern research institute to carry out research activities as instructed.	The northern research institute has substantial influence over both the research agenda and output quality, eg by setting a tight Terms of Reference for the research programme, and linking output milestones and quality performance to disbursements.
2. A competitive research fund managed by the northern research institute, accessible by southern research institutions on the basis of competitive funding proposals submitted against a series of research priorities.	As above, but the competitive nature of the bidding process encourages greater influence by the southern research institute in the research design.
3. Franchisees which draw on financial resources from the northern research institute and abide by its quality standards, but then implement the research within the context of a broader ‘jointly agreed’ workplan and governance structure.	The northern research institute has less influence over how the research agenda and programme activities might shift as the programme unfolds, but retains control of output quality, eg by linking quality performance to disbursements
4. Franchisees which abide by quality standards of the northern research institute, but draw on financial resources from a third party.	The northern research institute is able to influence the research agenda and output quality of the southern partners only in so far as the southern partners see added value in the non-financial competencies and resources of the northern partner, eg their association with the northern ‘brand’, or their access to cutting edge methods or strategies for policy engagement.
5. A network of institutions with a shared interest and complementary competences in similar thematic research, and which share information and cooperate when appropriate, but which are funded independently and pursue research agenda established by their own country stakeholders.	The northern research institute is unable to influence output quality, but may retain some influence in the research and uptake methods due to the insight provided by the wider network. Some scope for quality control if network has a central Secretariat that offers a publication or dissemination service, eg website posting.

Funding Arrangements

Central to the configuration of research partnerships is the way in which research funds are channelled into the arrangement. Where a northern research institute is the core funder and controls disbursements, this provides the institute leverage over the partnership's activities as a whole, for example in the choice of research agenda, the programme design and quality of publications. However, such leverage may distort the true value added by the northern institute. For example, controlling periodic disbursements allows the northern institute to weight the budget with expertise drawn from its own personnel, irrespective of whether this is the most appropriate source of expertise for the particular research field. On some occasions this placement may be justified. On others it can breed resentment on the part of the southern partners - a situation compounded by the comparatively high fee rates of northern researchers. Box 1 illustrates the consequences that can arise in the choice of funding pathway.

Conversely, retaining control of funding within the northern research institute may provide additional assurance against 'project creep', contribute to financial accountability, facilitate quality assurance and, perhaps most significant, ensure that international perspectives on research are not entirely subordinated to local research issues. With some fundamental research questions on development linked to international trade, debt relief, international co-ordination on the MDGs and global public goods such as HIV vaccines and climate stability, retaining an international perspective is clearly important.

What Makes a Successful Research Partnership?

Described below are five characteristics of successful research partnerships.

1. Satisfy individual, as well as shared, objectives

Negotiations to formulate research partnerships are frequently driven by the requirements of the principal funding body, be that a northern research institute, development assistance agency or philanthropic company. It is rare for such organisations to make explicit allowance for programme objectives that might differ from one partner to the next. Indeed, the methodology of the Logical Framework (used by many donor organisations), assumes that all partners have equal allegiance to the same set of goals, purposes and outputs. In one recent research partnership on

Box 1.

Funding Pathways and their Consequence in North-South Research Partnerships

A globally branded programme on poverty research has been pioneered by a Northern research institute. Funds for the programme have been secured by this institute from the central (headquarters-based) budget of an OECD government ministry for international development. The programme is about to shift from its pilot phase (Phase I) to one of consolidation and global expansion (Phase II). Up to now two country-based research partnerships have been brokered, each involving multiple public, private (not-for-profit) and NGO research and dissemination organisations. Each of these pilot partnership arrangements sources their research funds directly from the Northern institute.

Phase II of the programme requires a more sustainable funding model, one that draws on the financial resources of the individual country-based offices of the international development ministry. This modification is intended to both allow expansion of the programme to a larger number of countries, and ensure close alignment between the priorities of the research programme and the policy priorities of the host country. For reasons of efficiency and transparency, the country-based offices of the development agency require this funding to be routed through a professional financial management agency, for subsequent disbursement direct to the one of the Southern partners.

The first of these 'new' country research partnerships is experiencing difficulties. With only weeks to go before funding approval is granted (or refused), the Northern research institute is seriously considering withdrawing from the arrangement. With no control over funding disbursements, the Northern institute feels it is losing its ability to influence the choice of research agenda, research methods, policy engagement strategies and overall quality. Indeed, the Southern partner (an independent research institute) who will be contracted by the financial management agency (a local branch of an international accounting/audit firm) is questioning the very presence of the Northern institute in the partnership, arguing that it now perceives only marginal added value from their participation.

The presence of an international NGO within the partnership negotiations provides a vital intervention. The NGO Director encourages the Southern research institute to recognise the added value of having an international perspective on poverty reduction, in particular the access the Northern institute can provide into inter-governmental avenues of policy engagement, and its experience in designing survey instruments around the proposed research theme. Realising that the loss of the Northern research institute from the partnership is a potential 'deal-breaker', the funding proposal is submitted with all the original parties as signatories. Although funding is subsequently approved, doubt continues on the part of the Southern institute as to the value added by the Northern institute.

chronic poverty in an East African country, the Logical Framework for the funding submission suggested that the partners shared equal allegiance to one goal, four purposes and four outputs. Bi-lateral meetings between the facilitators of these negotiations and each of the six main partner organisations revealed a combined total of over 50 strategic interests and objectives, many peculiar to just one partner.

For research partnerships to work the design of programme activities needs to satisfy as many of these different partner-specific interests and objectives as possible. As noted by the Director of a Southern university-based research institute: ‘you do not necessarily have to share the interests of another partner, but you do have to understand them, and you do have to accept them’. During partnership negotiations, it is important that potential partners are encouraged, as far as practicable, to reveal their strategic interests, and that all partners either understand (i) how these interests are aligned with the programme’s shared objectives (as represented for example in a Logical Framework), or (ii) where modifications to the strategic direction of the programme are needed in order to satisfy partner interests.

2. Develop ‘internal’ partnership brokering skills

It is often said that partnerships need a ‘champion’ – someone senior who can cut through or circumvent bureaucracies and attitudes that are not tailored to supporting collaborative relationships. This is frequently true. But just as important as a ‘champion’ is the notion of an ‘internal broker’ – someone from within one of the partner organisations who, at any point time, understands where the negotiations have reached in the overall partnering process, and where the process needs to head to next. An internal broker has the skills to negotiate not only from their own institution’s perspective, but from the perspective of other partners, and on behalf of the partnership as a whole. For example, an internal broker can help bring her own organisation around to the idea of finding solutions that satisfy the interests of another, programme-critical, partner who perhaps is currently unhappy with the direction negotiations are going. Likewise, an internal broker is able to identify the added value that a prospective partner brings, when others see only duplication or inferiority.

An internal broker is not an explicit role, demanding approval from the other parties. It is a light, unobtrusive set of facilitation and negotiation skills, deployed at the right time and in the right place, designed to keep partnership negotiations or partnership implementation

on track. With respect to transaction costs, an internal broker can be a way to bring facilitation skills into partnership negotiations without incurring the costs arising from commissioning a third-party. There are times when a third-party partnership broker or facilitator may be warranted, but in addition to the cost burden there is always the danger of creating dependency on an outsider.³ An internal broker is relatively cost neutral. S/he is part of the team.

3. Select the right person to negotiate

Research partnerships invariably involve academics – highly self-motivated individuals specialising in critique. Such qualities, although essential for high quality and defensible research, are not always the best suited to complex negotiations, where solutions (not gaps) and compromise (not perfection) are the order of the day. In any negotiation to design a research partnership, the right balance clearly has to be struck between research and negotiation skills. But engaging individuals with good human and relationship management skills, and with an ability to separate the ‘person from the problem’, is likely to be of considerable help.

4. Clarify the purpose of capacity building

Invariably, those funding north-south research partnerships will wish to see a capacity building component integrated within the programme; most likely some combination of institutional strengthening and individual competency development. It is important for all parties to have clarity on whether such capacity building is principally ‘a means to an end’, ie. part of the pathway towards research and policy impact, or an ‘end in itself’. Problems that can arise in this regard include the following scenarios:

- ➔ a northern research institute with a mandate to build research capacity with southern institutions vs a southern research institution who finds such a mandate patronising;
- ➔ a statistical analysis unit within a government ministry keen for ‘on-the-job’ training in qualitative research methods vs a southern research institute whose interest in this government unit is principally as a provider of raw statistical data or primary analysis;
- ➔ a northern research institute specialising in capacity building for sophisticated policy engagement vs a southern NGO who relies on the local media to pressure politicians in making policy change;

- a northern research institute whose institutional survival is threatened by the requirements of its funders to build capacity in southern research institutes in the exact same research field; and
- individuals representing both northern and southern research institute may be tempted to conflate their personal interests with those of their institutions.

Box 2 offers some prompts to help identify what is meant by capacity building within the context of a research partnership. Early clarification between the potential partners over the ‘who’, ‘what’ and ‘which’ of capacity building will likely reduce the risk that this topic becomes a source of tension later on.

Box 2. Key Questions around Capacity Building in Research Partnerships

Whose Capacity?

- Researchers
- Advocates and intermediaries
- Institutions

What Capacity?

- Researchers — methodologies, instrument design, surveys, qualitative analysis, quantitative analysis, publications,
- Policy advocates and intermediaries — policy engagement strategies, policy engagement execution
- Political decision-makers — research interpretation, policy assessment and formulation
- Institutions — mandates, programme strategy, financial and human resource management, quality assurance, reputation assurance, staff and programme performance

Which Approach?

- Prior training — formal (eg. Masters courses), informal (eg. short training workshop on qualitative methods)
- Off-the-job training — as above
- On-the-job training — within one research programme, cross-linked to other research programmes, short-term, long-term

the issue of funding). During the initial negotiations, anticipating what might happen at this future point in time can help smooth the passage from one funding phase of the partnership to the next. Most important is to jointly explore the main options for programme sustainability early on. These usually fall into one of three categories as follows:

- financial sustainability — all parties agree that the programme activities and main features of the partnership arrangement will probably continue, and that new funds will be applied for to sustain the partnership.
- institutionalisation — all parties acknowledge upfront that, after a certain period, the intention is to transform the relationship into a formal institution (eg a research centre or foundation) complete with its own governance structure. Knowing that this is a commonly desired outcome from the start is useful. This may help focus minds on the task of developing robust management systems for quality, performance and reputation - tasks that might otherwise be sidelined to discussions around research agendas and methods.
- outcome sustainability — here the emphasis is on all parties perceiving the partnership as essentially a time-bound capacity building exercise — a programme designed to foster capabilities and relationships for high quality research and policy engagement that ultimately integrate with the day-to-day modus operandi, workplans and budgets of each partner institution.

In summary, all partners entering into a time-bound research partnership need to share the same broad sustainability strategy.

5. Negotiate with sustainability in mind

Research funding is invariably time-bound. Although partners may feel they are negotiating a long-term, or even a permanent, set of relationships, within three to five years the partners will likely be sitting back together again deciding on whether, and if so how, to continue their collaboration (if only in relation to

Box 3.

Do's and Don'ts in North-South Research Partnerships

Do

- Recognise that research partnerships do not 'hover' in isolation of existing institutional affiliations. Even when developing a completely new research institution, for all but the initiating partner this new arrangement will need to align with the strategic interests of each of the partner's affiliated organisation.
- Appreciate that partners will have both shared and individual objectives, and that this is OK?
- Try to achieve the best possible division of tasks and responsibilities, based on the different strengths of the partners. This offers the best chance that synergistic effects will be produced and made use of.
- Appreciate that working in partnership requires a specific form of behaviour, one that involves recognising each others competencies, continuous effort in satisfying each others interests, is proactive, and embraces creativity and risk-taking.
- Ensure that all parties share in scientific supervision and administration. Leaving one or other party out of these functions can give the impression that one or other party is less significant within the partnership.
- Jointly design and agree management systems for sub-contracting, for quality and reputation assurance, and for performance monitoring and grievance management.
- Build mutual knowledge between key partners through small contracted projects as a step towards developing a long-term and complex partnership.
- Discuss the 'difficult' issues before entering into a partnership, and agree on at least a broad strategy for how these should be handled in the event that they occur, eg attribution for publications, research results of commercial value, intellectual property rights etc.

Don't

- Focus only on your own institutional or personal interests. The more interdependent the partnership, the more important it will be to try to satisfy the interests of others.
- Underestimate personal interests. Although these are unlikely to be revealed in the open, they will be driving much of the negotiations. Use coffee and lunch breaks during negotiations to build relationships and trust, and so that personal interests become more transparent.
- Get stuck on delivering the precise terms of a research funding agreement, to the detriment of relationships within the partnership. Request flexibility in budget line allocations and programme sub-objectives to allow the research programme to deliver on the strategic interests of multiple partners. Be prepared to allow a funding proposal (and its budget, objectives and workplan) to evolve into a new document, eg Interim Workplan; Inception Phase Plan; Business Plan etc.
- Be dismissive of individuals or institutions who require substantial capacity building to deliver on their commitments within a partnership. Research programmes that are intended to influence economic policy and planning will invariably require capacity building of nearly all partners somewhere along the continuum from research design, through analysis to policy engagement.

Do's and Don'ts

Listed in Box 3 are series of Do's and Don'ts for negotiating and managing North-South research partnerships.⁴

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