Improving the Conversation around Knowledge for International Development

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Collaboration between Higher Education institutions (HEIs) and INGOs (International NGOs) is invaluable. As the co-convenors of the Rethinking Research Partnerships initiative (Dr Jude Fransman of the Open University, and Dr Kate Newman of Christian Aid) explain, collaboration can lead to the production of ‘responsive, actionable, practical research that balances rigour with relevance and incorporates the interests and voices of research mediators and end-users into agenda setting and research processes and products’. Partnerships can also build research capacity for all participants and their institutions, by revealing new forms and types of knowledge, ways of working and communication.

At the same time, however, there are a number of barriers to effective collaboration between HEIs and INGOs. These include conflicts between the agendas, schedules and ways of working of the different partners – though Newman and Fransman argue that valuing difference through the idea of ‘productive tensions’ is vital to partnership working. Collaboration can also be constrained by the way research tends to be funded, with short-term, tightly controlled and scheduled projects not leaving enough time for genuine co-production of research, flexible design and learning. Fransman and Newman insist that partnerships are not a given good and can ignore, reproduce or even exacerbate inequalities if assumptions about which types of evidence and expertise count are not addressed. This is why understanding the ‘politics of evidence’ in, around and through partnerships is so important as it determines who gets to participate and how.

Impact Objectives

- Understanding how assumptions about evidence shape research partnerships and determine who participates and how
- Exploring the potential for better participation in partnerships to contribute to the generation of more relevant, responsive and rigorous evidence

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Using creative participatory methods like building blocks and playdough to analyze partnerships
Fransman and Newman have coordinated a team of co-investigators from 14 UK based universities and INGOs to deliver a highly participatory series of seminars and a final conference, bringing together a wide range of stakeholders, including policy makers and international civil society figures as well as researchers from 15 countries around the world. The seminars involved the analysis of 7 case studies of research partnerships; each presented jointly by an academic and INGO practitioner, and used novel methods such as ‘analysis through visualisations, embodied movement, simulation and the use of tools such as mouldable clay and building blocks’. Fransman and Newman describe a key output from the series as ‘an iterative framework that locates the intra-relationship between evidence and participation in a cycle of four domains: evidence contexts; research purposes; the workings of power in partnerships; and how change is affected through partnerships’. Using this framework, they analysed the case studies to reveal some key messages including the need to ‘rethink partnerships as long-term relationships, built on trust and recognising emotion, linked to long term but evolving research agendas and movements that extend beyond institutions’.

In fact, partnerships between HEIs and INGOs are now more important than ever, due to a range of national and regional challenges. As Fransman and Newman explain: ‘accountability agendas, such as the UK Impact Agenda in the Higher Education sector and the UK Department for International Development Results Framework and performance-based funding in the International Development sector, are mounting pressure on academics to show their research is actionable and on INGOs to demonstrate effectiveness and rigour which contributes to the drive to research partnerships.’

This means the project’s main output, which is of vital importance to academics, INGO practitioners and others, is extremely timely. The team’s Critical Discussion Toolkit takes on board many of the highly practical tools that have emerged from the project and its discussions. The team also have a traditional academic article under review.

The Critical Discussion Toolkit is open-access and can be found via: www.christianaid.org.uk/resources/about-us/rethinkingresearch-partnerships.