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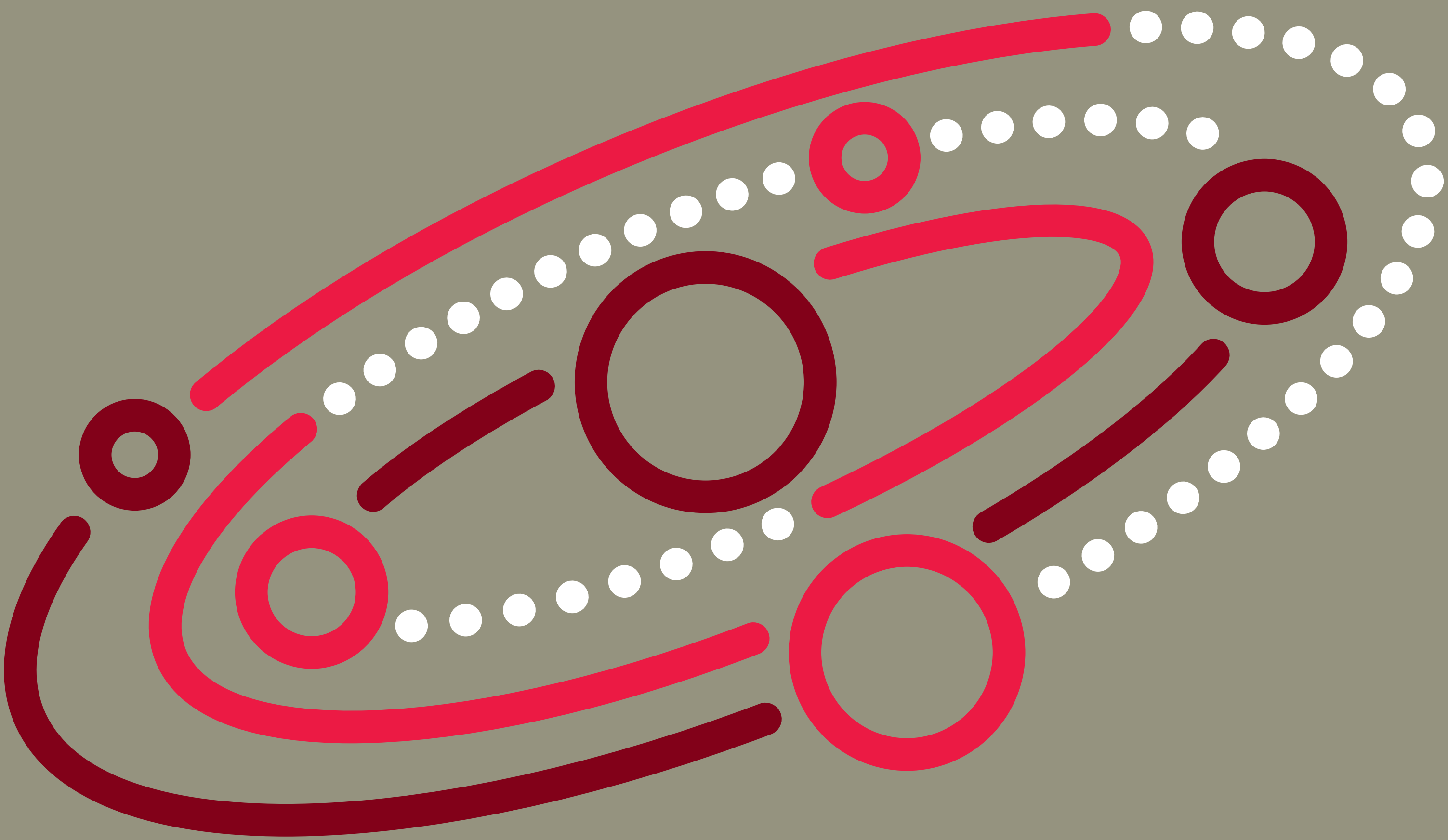
Engaging with research for real impact

The state of research in the INGO sector and ways forward for better practice



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Abbreviations

BEIS	Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy (UK)
DAC	Development Assistance Committee
DFID	Department for International Development (UK)
EBP	Evidence-Based Policy
GCRF	Global Challenges Research Fund
INGO	International Non-Governmental Organisation
MEL	Monitoring, Evaluation and Learning
MOOC	Massive Open Online Course
ODA	Overseas Development Assistance
PBF	Performance-Based Funding
PBR	Payment by Results
PhD	Doctorate of Philosophy
RCT	Randomized Control Trial
REF	Research Excellence Framework
TOC	Theory of Change
UK	United Kingdom
UKRI	UK Research and Innovation
VLE	Virtual Learning Environment

About Bond

Bond is the UK network for organisations working in international development. We unite and support a diverse network of over 450 civil society organisations and allies to help eradicate global poverty, inequality and injustice. We also deliver a range of services to help organisations be more effective and improve the quality and impact of their work.

Acknowledgements

This report was authored by Jude Fransman, a research fellow at the Open University and co-convenor of the Rethinking Research Collaborative. Jude has the following acknowledgements:

This research was funded by a Leverhulme Trust Early Career Fellowship Award. I would like to thank the funders for their flexible support. I would also like to thank those who participated in this study: the two INGOs who provided case studies; the 16 key informants; and above all, the seven journaling participants who invested significant time in documenting their daily experiences as INGO researchers. I am also grateful to the INGO Research Advisors Network who allowed me to join their meetings as a participant-observer and critical friend and who engaged with my findings.

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Published by Bond, Society Building, 8 All Saints Street, London N1 9RL UK
Registered Charity No. 1068839 Company Registration No. 3395681
(England and Wales) © Bond, 2019

Design: Lee Scott Design www.leescott-design.co.uk

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Executive summary

Research is more important than ever to international non-governmental organisations (INGOs), who need evidence to plan their work and provide proof of their impact. INGOs are increasingly turning to research as a resource for assessing and improving their activities as well as organisational structures and strategy.

This engagement with research can take many forms from adapting, synthesising and using existing research to commissioning new research, participating in research collaborations or conducting their own research in house. Some INGOs are even participating in research governance, working with research funders to support agenda-setting and evaluation.

This report supports organisations to thoroughly consider their options for engaging with evidence and develop more strategic approaches to using, generating and communicating research. By showcasing a range of innovative examples of practice and exploring the many challenges involved in this complex work, this report provides guidance to those developing a research approach within their organisation.

The report draws on the findings from a three-year research study on the different ways in which UK-based INGOs are engaging with research and the common challenges involved. Funded by the Leverhulme Trust, the study also identified sector-wide support structures which can help INGOs address these challenges.

A complicated operating context

INGOs' mounting interest in research stems from a turbulent national context, from diminishing resources and heightened accountability measures, to changes in expenditure of aid spending and the uncertainty of Brexit. In response to this context, INGOs have become more competitive and professionalised, invested in quality assurance and knowledge-management systems, developed more knowledge-focussed identities and approaches to organisational learning, worked to shift decision-making power towards the global south and engaged in research collaborations with academics and other stakeholders.

Across these trends, research has been used to respond to a number of different audiences, both external (including donors, supporters, partners and beneficiaries) and internal. While this has inevitably been constrained by available funding, time and capacity, several strategies to overcome these constraints have included:

- commissioning research to external consultants
- collaborating in research partnerships
- engaging in formal research agenda-setting and evaluation processes
- conducting research in-house
- developing bespoke research systems and protocols
- shifting institutional culture to be more aware of the potential of research
- understanding and strengthening capacity through skills audits and research training programmes.

To examine how these diverse practices came about within the contexts of different types of INGOs, this study used a qualitative approach, which included a systematic review, key informant interviews, institutional case studies, participant journaling and participant observation. These generated in-depth insight into institutional structures, research practices and personal experiences across the sector. Rather than establishing a narrow definition of 'research' and 'engagement', the study adopted broad understandings of the terms, which meant that the lines between research, evaluation, policy and other related activities were often blurred.

Key challenges and responses

Looking at INGO structures and practices across the INGO sector, I've identified common challenges for INGOs and potential actions they can take to better engage with research.

1_ INGO research governance varies considerably across organisations

Organisational routes into research tended to stem from work around policy, programmes or organisational development. This created some challenges for harmonisation across the INGO, particularly within the larger organisations.

One response was to develop a formal research strategy, while others grounded their approach to research within an institutional culture, ethos or set of values. Research governance models included: establishing research as a discrete unit, as a cross-cutting theme, as a central hub with satellite units in different locations, as a network involving representatives from different units or regions, as a formal centre, and in some cases through a rebranding of the whole organisation as a research institution.

However, challenges existed, including: harmonising diverse understandings of and approaches to research across the organisation, negotiating core (as opposed to project-based) funding, implementing culture change, and crucially, shifting power to determine research agendas to field-offices or network partners in the global south when research expertise tends to be concentrated in the UK.

2_ INGO research practices are unconventional

Research activities in INGOs took place in multiple spaces and across many different timeframes from rapid consultations and reviews to long-term longitudinal studies.

Particular challenges were raised around negotiating collaborations. Respondents also used a number of metaphors to describe how their approaches to research differed to conventional academic practice, including:

- Think Tank Research (providing consultancy-type services)
- Frankenstein research (cobbling together multiple types of knowledge)
- Death Star Research (focusing research on key advocacy targets)
- Kaleidoscope Research (allowing for responsive, flexible and adaptive approaches)
- Research Facilitation (supporting different knowledge actors to formulate and bridge their research designs)
- Knowledge Curation (bringing together multiple types of knowledge experts and resources to serve broader advocacy agendas).

INGO research generates a range of methods and outputs, but challenges exist around creating systems to support these unconventional approaches. Innovative examples include development of an ethical review body as well as research systems and infrastructure.

However key challenges include creating 'thinking spaces'; working remotely across languages and cultures and maintaining a sense of community at a distance; collaborating in a meaningful rather than tokenistic way; accessing and sharing research resources; balancing credible and accessible outputs; ensuring quality and balancing reputational risk with integrity and a learning-oriented ethos.

3_ INGO researchers differ from academic researchers

INGO researchers came from diverse backgrounds, bringing with them a range of disciplinary, professional and contextual experiences. Common roles included: 'advisor', 'trainer', 'broker', 'innovator', 'thought-leader' and 'activist'. Many INGO researchers defined themselves against academic researchers, welcoming the more collaborative approach to research with greater responsibility to develop frameworks and lead initiatives, while others expressed concerns about authenticity and integrity as well as the desire to be recognised more for their individual expertise.

Though some INGO researchers felt that their disciplinary knowledge directly informed their organisational roles, many more identified a broader set of 'research literacies'. Other more social skills included the ability to broker diverse knowledge communities, provide mentoring support and communicate effectively. Some INGOs had conducted skills audits to assess organisational research capacity, while others developed research guidelines and even training courses.

Key challenges included the unstructured nature of research career trajectories within INGOs, issues around authorship, ownership and intellectual property (IP) when research is owned by the organisation rather than the individual; the trade-off between building in-house research capacity or developing skills to support commissioning and collaboration and formal versus informal support systems.

Ways forward to maximise research impact

A tension exists between peer-learning, collaboration and competition between INGOs with many organisations only able to secure internal support for research or external funding by positioning themselves as sector leaders. While this is an inevitable response to the current resource-starved climate in the UK, it can lead to significant wastage with many attempts to recreate the wheel rather than drawing on existing resources or pooling efforts. Partner organisations such as smaller NGOs in the global South might also benefit from better consolidation of the rich range of existing resources.

This report concludes by asking how the sector can negotiate the uncomfortable tension between collaboration, peer-learning and competition and suggesting some sector-wide initiatives that brokers might take to consolidate existing resources, develop standardised guidelines, explore the potential of professional accreditation for INGO researchers and formalise research support mechanisms.

The growth of INGO research has the potential to make a major contribution not just to development and humanitarian work across the sector but also beyond the sector, to inform research processes and practices in higher education. At a time when the UK has redistributed a significant portion of the ODA budget into higher education, universities are struggling with 'ODA-compliance' against systems, structures and skills that are not set up for research in complex development contexts. With innovative approaches to research impact (grounded in sophisticated MEL work and genuine understanding of policy processes), research ethics (with renewed attention to safeguarding) and a broader set of research approaches, outputs and skills, INGOs offer huge learning potential for ODA-funded research that extends beyond *compliance to excellence*.

1 — Introduction

INGOs across the UK are increasingly drawing on research in diverse ways to support different activities. This mounting interest in the use of research for INGOs stems from a national context, which is characterized by:

- **Diminishing resources** and increased competition in the face of austerity (Bond 2014; Fowler 2016).
- **Heightened accountability** and the shift to performance-based funding (PBF) or payment by results (PBR), with increasing demands for credible evidence (Court and Young 2004; Hagen-Zanker and Mallett 2013). This tends to favour approaches such as: systematic reviews, randomized control trials and evaluation tools such as log frames (Eyben et al 2015), although increased participation has also been emphasized (see IIED 2012; DFID 2013; Bond 2013).
- **Availability and accessibility of digital technologies** to support governance, collaboration and analysis with changing practices and standards around the use of big data (see DFID 2018).
- **Shifts in public opinion,** with a decrease in domestic charitable giving and cynicism surrounding the case for aid, exacerbated by the Oxfam and Save the Children abuse scandals in 2018. This is coupled with the rise of online campaigning and increasing presence of private sector consultancy firms, which increase competition for funds (Lawrence 2018; Banks and Brockington 2018).
- **Greater engagement with the global South.** Funders are increasingly providing direct support to southern NGOs and developing research capacity in many southern contexts (Hall and Tandon, 2017; Hayman et al, 2016).
- **Reprioritization of Overseas Development Assistance** including the redirection of research funds from the Department of International Development (DFID) to the Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy (BEIS) to support academic research (see the review by the Independent Commission for Aid Impact ICAI 2017).
- **Uncertainty in the face of Brexit** (Bond 2017).

This context has led to the following trends in INGOs:

- **A rise in quality assurance and knowledge management systems,** leading to greater professionalisation and diversification of the sector (Eyben 2013; Taylor 2013; Bond 2014).
- **Greater competition between INGOs** for limited funds, leading to a rise in corporate-like practices, such as niche marketing and brand management as well as market research (Dhanani 2018).
- **New knowledge-focused identities.** A survey by Bond revealed that many INGOs see potential in their role as "knowledge hubs": managing knowledge effectively; contributing to the creation and communication of new knowledge; and using knowledge to support strategic development of their organisations (Bond 2014).
- **Greater emphasis on learning** through investment in staff development, and more support for organisational development and adaptive or agile management practices. Although, as a recent report by Penny Lawrence argues, the complex structures of the largest INGOs are often incompatible with efforts to be agile (Green 2015; Lawrence 2018).
- **Efforts to redistribute decision-making power to the global South,** with some INGOs relocating and others decentralising or adopting more networked organisational models (Lawrence 2018).
- **More participation in partnerships with academics,** and increasingly in larger and more complex research consortia, with many INGOs playing a brokering role between funders, academics and southern NGOs (Fransman and Newman, under review; Newman et al forthcoming).

These trends help to frame the way that research is understood, the purposes it serves and the activities that surround it in different INGOs. Research is also framed by the different understandings and agendas of different types of audience.

Research audiences who are external to the INGO include: funding organisations and policy-makers; supporters and the broader British public; partner organisations and beneficiaries; and more targeted stakeholders who might benefit from the research focus, such as public sector professionals.

These diverse audiences have very different ideas about what counts as credible or useful evidence, which can create tensions when multiple audiences are implicated in a single piece of research. Similar tensions in values and understandings of the nature and purpose of research exist internally across the different departments of (especially larger) INGOs (Hayman 2016). These might be broadly broken down into several different research purposes:

- **Research for assessing and improving programmes:** In a survey conducted by INTRAC (Hayman and Bartlett 2013), most of the responding INGOs mentioned they use research for monitoring and performance assessments of programmes. This is used to inform better practice, as well as evaluation and impact assessments to provide evidence for success. This responds both to a learning agenda and to the need to provide results for funders and supporters.
- **Research for influencing:** Policy and campaigns teams also use evidence to support advocacy work by improving the legitimacy and influence of arguments (Thrandardottir 2016) to change policy and practice, to support different groups to take action, or to spark dialogue between different stakeholders (Mably 2006). Crucially, research can be used not only to strengthen influencing strategies, but also to define advocacy agendas in the first place and help to understand political systems to develop stronger advocacy strategies (Gooding 2016; Mayne et al 2018).
- **Research for organisational learning:** INGOs also use research to support their strategic development or contribute to institutional memory. This is either through established knowledge management systems, physical or virtual repositories, less institutionalised reviews, or even semi-formal spaces for reflection (Whatley 2013). Though, especially in larger organisations, there are often tensions between formal systems and the amount of knowledge that exists in an INGO (Matturi 2016).

Other, perhaps less common research purposes include **research for knowledge leadership** (establishing the INGO as a recognised expert in a particular field or region); **research for networking** (participating in a research initiative in order to expand the organisation's networks and to better understand the nature of different types of organisation); and **research for funding** (since research constitutes an increasing proportion of ODA expenditure). Research is also used in more specific ways to support other more particular INGO functions, such as understanding the nature of supporters, improving finance and strategy, and supporting communications.

While the trends above reveal a number of justifications for engaging with research, significant constraints include:

- **Lack of funds/prioritisation:** Research is rarely a high priority for INGOs and many of the INGO researchers interviewed for this study mentioned their efforts in "internal advocacy" to secure core organisational funds and convince colleagues of the value of research.
- **Lack of time:** Most of the participants in this study also mentioned time constraints as a major barrier to research engagement. As well as authorised time to engage in research activities alongside daily roles and responsibilities, many respondents highlighted the lack of reflexive time or "thinking spaces" to read, reflect and design research activities.
- **Lack of capacity:** Many respondents also mentioned both the inadequacy of existing knowledge and skills, especially at field-office level, and also the lack of support systems, ranging from repositories and access to academic literature, to advisors and access to continuing professional development.

At the same time, however, many INGOs have developed innovative strategies to overcome these constraints, including:

- **Commissioning research** to external consultants. This is done in order to provide an external assessment or to enhance their understanding of specific issues to improve programming, frame an advocacy campaign, or develop their organisational strategy.
- **Collaborating with academics** with the potential to influence the direction of research in response to practice-based priorities, and to acquire new knowledge and skills through participation in the process.
- **Engaging in formal agenda-setting and evaluation processes** in the higher education sector, through participation in strategic boards or review panels of research funders such as UK Research and Innovation (UKRI).
- **Conducting research in-house** and grounding studies in existing relationships with partners and their experience in complex contexts. For example, through longitudinal approaches which track the effects of policy processes in partner communities over several years.
- **Developing bespoke research systems.** For example, sophisticated ethical protocols and processes, which bring together academic guidelines with a deeper understanding of context, practice and safeguarding implications.
- **Shifting institutional cultures** to encourage a research mindset and greater awareness of the potential of research skills, approaches and sensibilities to support work across the organisation.
- **Strengthening capacity** through skills audits, guidelines and training, and developing support systems to provide advice, accompaniment and spaces to collectively reflect and share learning.

This report builds on a three-year research study funded by the Leverhulme Trust to showcase some of this innovative practice around research engagement, explore some of the choices that different INGOs have made in shaping their approaches to research, and highlight some of the challenges involved. After outlining the study's framings and methodology I discuss the findings in three key areas:

1. Organisation and governance of research in INGOs.
2. Research approaches and relationships.
3. What it means to be an INGO researcher.

I conclude each section by suggesting some broad issues to consider in developing your research approach for your organisation and end the report by highlighting some existing sector-wide support structures.

2 —
Framings and methodology

In this section I start by discussing the key terminology employed in this report and then describing the methodology which framed the study.

2.1 Framings

INGOs

This study adopts a broad understanding of INGOs. This includes a range of big international NGOs (BINGOs) as well as smaller single-issue specialists; faith-based and secular organisations; those with a central focus on international development; and others with a more subject-specific or domestic (UK) focus but with an emerging interest in international development.

The small-scale, though in-depth, nature of this study makes it hard to generalise findings across all INGO types, especially with smaller and more specialist INGOs, which were less represented in the data. However, by presenting a range of approaches adopted by a diverse group of organisations, and by discussing how these relate to different organisational structures, agendas and values, this report seeks to offer some insight into the distinct opportunities and challenges faced by different types of INGO.

Research

The evidence-informed policy and practice movement has fuelled a burgeoning interest in the INGO sector on evidence generation and use (eg Bond 2013; DFID 2013; Eyben et al 2015). But what distinguishes evidence from research and other knowledge practices (eg Hayman et al 2016)?

In their systematic review of the literature on knowledge to improve practice in the UK's public health sector, Davies et al (2015) examine different understandings of knowledge. On the one hand, knowledge can be empirical (arising from structured data gathering), theoretical (arising from abstract discourse), or explicit (responding to guidelines). This type of knowledge is commonly branded "scientific" and is structured by agreed standards and mechanisms for assuring quality and positioning new knowledge in relation to established knowledge – most commonly organised as disciplines or fields.

On the other hand, knowledge can also be experiential or contextual (arising from practice experience or specific contexts) and tacit (held by individuals or groups). This type of knowledge is often branded "practice-based" and is structured by different professional norms and judged by its relevance to addressing practice-based issues or responding to specific contexts of practice.

These knowledge-types have traditionally been viewed as a dichotomy, but there is increasing agreement that they are actually more of a spectrum, or even interrelated, with academic knowledge practices also recognised as social and contextualised, and practice-based knowledge increasingly professionalised and engaging with scientific norms.

As such, the term research as used in this study can refer to any explicit empirical or theoretical approach which draws on established guidelines and positions itself in relation to existing knowledge. It can be academic or practice-based or a combination of the two.

However, while research refers to knowledge structures, processes, practices and products that respond to some agreed standards, evidence is the active translation of research data or any other type of knowledge into action. This could be to prove the success of a programme, improve practice (or enhance understanding which might lead to improvements in practice), or to substantiate an argument. Evidence does not necessarily need to be grounded in research and indeed many of the international development sector's most powerful "evidence artefacts" (Eyben et al 2015) are powered by evaluation data that is not framed by research standards. At the same time, such artefacts internalise assumptions about knowledge, which value certain knowledge practices over others – and often to the detriment of more process-driven, adaptive and participatory ways of working.

In response, this study moves away from evidence and returns to a focus on research. In doing so, the study will examine the underlying knowledge standards, which might inform better types of evidence practices and products for the INGO sector – while also highlighting some of the shortcomings of academic research.

Resisting a rigid definition of research, it focuses loosely on any activity involving a deliberate approach to produce, communicate or use knowledge which responds to existing standards or seeks to develop new ones.

This means that the lines between academic research, evaluation, policy analysis and other types of knowledge creation are often blurred and the focus is more on how different individuals and organisations make sense of the relationship between research, evidence and knowledge, than the extent to which they are engaged in research as an objective measure.

Research engagement

The study drew on a systematic review of understandings of research engagement (Fransman 2018) in order to consider a wide range of engagement activities. These include: interaction with existing research; generation of new research; access, adaptation, communication and use of research; participation in research governance; agenda-setting; and evaluation and development of research support systems including infrastructure and training.

This led to the development of a conceptual framework, which identified several lenses through which to examine research engagement:

- **Institutional structures and processes:** The organisational strategy and implementing systems will influence how research is understood and applied in an INGO.
- **Socially-situated practices:** Research is framed by specific cultures in specific spaces as well as organisational timescales. It is also implemented in different ways depending on the approach adopted, and involving different assumptions about quality, impact and ethics.
- **Personal identities:** Who gets to call themselves a researcher? How do different research experiences affect our sense of authenticity and integrity when we engage in research? And how do we relate to different research communities?
- **Material artefacts:** How do different types of research technology, tools and texts influence the way that research is represented? Does a journal article carry more authority than a policy brief, infographic or blog and who makes that judgement?
- **Jargon or discourse:** How does using the word research as opposed to evidence or knowledge reframe the debate? Can only academics be researchers? How does our choice of terminology influence our agendas for INGO research?

These framings set the parameters for this study, which focused on three key areas:

1. INGO research governance and organisation (structures, processes and systems).
2. INGO research practices (spaces and paces, cultures, approaches and artefacts).
3. INGO researchers (identities, knowledge/skills and researcher development).

2.2. Methodology

The methodology for the study was structured across five components.

First, a systematic review developed a conceptual framework for understanding research engagement. It compared the evolution of research engagement in the UK's international development sector with four other sectors of policy and practice: social policy; community development and cultural heritage; science and technology; and higher education.

Second, key informant interviews were conducted with 16 respondents from INGOs with a strong research focus as well as other key sector stakeholders to gauge the state of the art of research across the sector. These interviews focused on how research priorities and approaches to research had evolved over time, and what the key challenges and opportunities were in relation to the current UK context.

Third, institutional case studies were implemented with two different types of INGOs to understand how approaches to research were shaped by organisational structures, funding mechanisms, roles and responsibilities, and activities. These case studies involved reviews of organisational strategy and job descriptions, interviews with different members of staff and more in-depth research following a specific research activity over a one-year period.

Fourth, seven INGO researchers over six to 12-month periods were asked to document and explore day-to-day research practices and their evolving INGO researcher identities. This involved participant data collection (through photographs, videos and notes) organised around three to five semi-structured interviews and a final presentation of the data. This allowed the participants to play a leading role in the analysis of their data, drawing out key themes and reflecting in changes in their analysis over time. As co-researchers, the participants also co-owned their data with the potential to publish their own auto-ethnographies.

Finally, the study also involved participant observation in three meetings of the INGO Research Advisors network as well as a number of dissemination events with different sector-brokers, enabling engagement with the findings and further refining of the study's conclusions.

In total 17 INGOs and sector brokers were involved in this research.[1] The study also drew on broader surveys of 35 INGOs by INTRAC (Hayman and Bartlett 2013) and 69 Bond members (Bond 2014).

[1] These included: ActionAid International; BOND; Bretton Woods Project; Brooke Action for Working Horses and Donkeys; Christian Aid; The Dog Trust; HIV/AIDS Alliance; Humanitarian Academy for Development; International Planned Parenthood Federation; INTRAC; Oxfam; Royal National lifeboat Institute; Save the Children; Sight Savers; Tearfund; Voluntary Service Overseas; and Water Aid.

3 — Findings

3.1 INGO research governance and organisation

Routes into research

In most INGOs, research is a relatively new priority area and while individual members of staff may have had some kind of research profile, there has traditionally been no dedicated space for research in most organisations. For this reason, research agendas and the organisational location of research activities have tended to evolve from other organisational priority areas. As Figure 1 below shows, these were often grounded in either policy/campaigns, programmes/evaluation or organisational development.

As discussed in the introduction section, each area has its own rationale and agenda, which also frames the way that research is understood and rolled out within an INGO. For example, one respondent explained how research evolved from a campaigns focus into a more cross-cutting strategy while still retaining some of its original characteristics:

"It was much more campaign-y to start with, so basically the research team was created... in order to provide ammunition for big campaigns on debt and trade and education. It's now become more dispersed... and it's got a broader reading now - how do you understand the world, thinking about citizens in states and theories of change and all this kind of stuff. But it's still surprisingly economistic. And surprisingly routed in campaigns."

These foundational agendas and understandings have a powerful effect on what research means to an INGO. Tensions between the different perspectives can emerge as research grows in priority, demanding a more coordinated response across the organisation. As one respondent mused:

"It comes down to individual backgrounds but to generalize, I'd say that campaigners tend to be more normative and people doing programmes are more like: 'we know what works' ... and then obviously the MEL people live this extraordinary life where they actually think they can measure stuff... And often people talk past each other across these different positions."

These tensions were particularly pronounced in larger INGOs, while the smaller subject-specialist organisations tended to have a more unified agenda or were able to negotiate difference by virtue of closer relationships with a smaller pool of staff. One response from a larger INGO was to create a research centre with two co-heads from both the policy and programmes departments, ensuring that the perspectives of both were integrated into the research agendas and activities (see Box 1).

Creating cohesion: strategies and mindsets

Other INGOs found ways to create cohesion across different research agendas and understandings by framing their approach to research through broader organisational identity, ethos or values. Respondents from one faith-based INGO noted: "Our approach to research is shaped by our identity as a partnership organisation with a relational theology." Another observed: "Our research signature is informed by our Theory of Change, so it will be empowering, it will build solidarity, it will support our campaigning..." Sometimes these approaches will be substantiated by a framework document, but often it is something more intangible: a set of values akin to the organisation's culture or ethos.

A few INGOs have extended such attempts to achieve cohesion by developing a formal research strategy linked to their strategic goals. Box 2 below, for example, presents Sightsavers' research strategy, which serves to position their research agendas and activates both internally and externally,

Box 1: Christian Aid's Centre for Excellence in Research, Evidence and Learning (REL)

REL was set up in 2016 to enhance the research skills of Christian Aid's staff, undertake commissioned research, and implement an in-house research agenda, developing strategic insights for Christian Aid and the broader international development sector. The centre is located across the programmes and policy departments and led by co-heads from each.

REL's research approach, engagement with staff, and thinking about research participants and users is grounded in the values of Christian Aid, with a belief in shifting power and working in partnership. This means constantly questioning who is involved in designing research, whose voices are heard, and who is making decisions about what is communicated to whom. REL also focuses on ensuring that the research it supports has impact and reaches the right people.

Beyond Christian Aid, REL aims to challenge the development sector, critically engaging with the politics of evidence, considering its production and use.

aiming to "[strengthen] the role of research evidence in our programmes and advocacy as well as the role of our organisation in the global research agenda." The five-year strategy aligns with the broader organisational strategy, as well as additional strategies in key thematic areas. It is accompanied by a Research Governance Framework, supported by a well-defined Theory of Change (TOC) and is structured across four objectives. There is also a clear monitoring strategy, which includes the identification of a number of indictors that will be used to monitor its progress towards the four objectives.

While the development of such a strategy is an impressive feat, some of the larger INGOs have been dissuaded from pursuing similar strategies because of broader instability in their organisations, which results in changes in overarching strategies and regular organisational re-structuring. In the face of instability, alternative approaches have included developing a research signature or cultivating a research mindset, which attempts to fuel a culture shift across the organisation rather than a more formalised set of structures and processes.

Box 2: Sightsavers' Research Strategy

This five-year strategy emphasises the importance of research evidence to achieving Sightsavers' organisational goals and provides guidance to its staff, partners and other stakeholders on why and how it will do so.

The document sets out the strategy for strengthening the role of research evidence in programmes and advocacy as well as the role of the organisation in the global research agenda. It aims to provide Sightsavers' staff, partner organisations and wider stakeholders with a clear understanding of the organisation's commitment to research, strategic goals and priorities in the next five years; and plans to deliver these to high standards. This document supports the organisational and thematic strategy and is guided by four objectives:

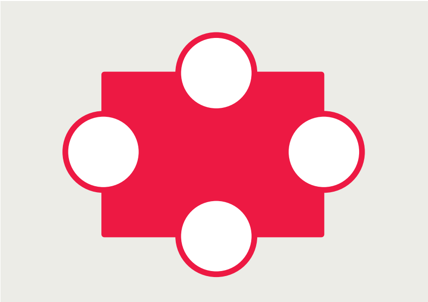
- **Objective one:** Keep up to date with the existing body of evidence and ensure its effective use in our programmes and advocacy.
- **Objective two:** Conduct high quality research to generate new evidence to address global knowledge gaps and our operational challenges. In particular:
  - > Understanding and describing needs, systems and contexts of programmes;
  - > Testing new approaches to the delivery of services;
  - > Assessing the impact and cost-effectiveness of interventions.
- **Objective three:** Build organisational capacity and effective partnerships to generate, understand and use research evidence.
- **Objective four:** Ensure effective dissemination of research findings within and outside the organisation.

This strategy is grounded in an understanding of research as a collaborative process. The strategy also describes how Sightsavers will monitor its research work and identifies a number of indictors that will be used to monitor progress towards these objectives.

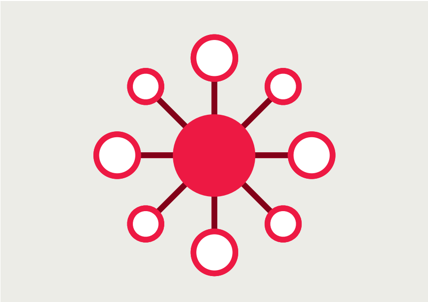
Structures of research within INGOs

Within the INGOs who participated in this study, research was configured in a variety of ways within organisational structures. These included the following:

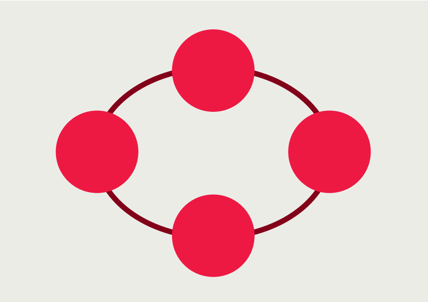
Research units:
These are increasingly common amongst INGOs with investment in a research team responsible for coordinating research activities and any research strategy. They are also responsible for conducting research in-house, advising, and developing capacity across the organisation.



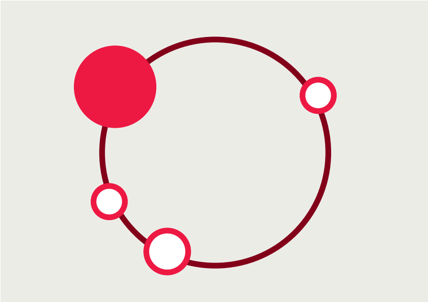
Research as cross-cutting:
Some INGOs didn't have a discrete team but included research as a dimension of the work of several other units. Sometimes this involved having someone in each team with a research role and sometimes it was framed more as an additional set of activities.



Research hubs:
Some INGOs structured research through a dedicated hub with satellite representatives in different teams and/or regions. Often the hub was a single person located at headquarters while research tended to be an additional rather than exclusive role for satellite members.



Research networks:
Similar to the hub approach but without a clear coordinating role, some INGOs had research networks, which brought together representatives across the organisation who took on a research role either as their exclusive responsibility or in addition to their regular role.



Research centres:
A less common approach was investing in a discrete centre with dedicated core funding to develop and implement a research strategy across the INGO. In one case this model was positioned organisationally across programmes and organisational development departments.

Research institutions:
The final approach was to register the entire INGO as a research institution. This involved meeting specific criteria around resources and infrastructure but enabled the INGO to apply as a Principle Investigator for research funds targeted to the higher education sector.

Many of the INGOs had experimented with more than one of these approaches as core funds became more or less available (to support discrete units or centres) and relationships between UK-based offices and those in the global South were redefined. Some of the more autonomous units or centres expressed an identity which extended beyond the INGO itself, "hovering on [the] inside/outside boundary of the organisation – we are a team of inside/outsiders." Others spoke of a conflict between the UK agendas and the research agendas of the broader confederation.

Key challenges around governing research in INGOs

This section has outlined some of the approaches that different INGOs have taken to structure research in their organisations. While there are several examples of innovative practice, there are also some challenges including:

- **Harmonising different approaches to research** across the INGO, especially when different aspects of research (such as design, data collection, analysis and communication) might be allocated to different units or teams.
- **Negotiating different functions** of research units, which might include offering advice or accompaniment to staff across the organisation, strengthening research capacity, conducting original research, monitoring the INGO's research activity or participating in broader research governance or agenda-setting activities (e.g. on the strategic boards of research funders or review colleges).
- **Securing core funding** (as opposed to project-based funding) to support more sustainable and holistic approaches to research.
- **Implementing culture change** to nurture a research mindset across the organisation, especially when research is an add-on for many members of staff.
- **Motivating staff and maintaining momentum** in networked structures without a dedicated coordinator or in the face of organistaional restructures.
- **Shifting power away from the UK** when expertise is often concentrated in the UK.
- **Navigating new strategy and/or restructures** when research agendas are framed by previous strategies or located within previous structures.
- **Improving the visibility of research teams** both within the INGO (and especially in the face of frequent staff-turnover) and externally as centres of expertise with the potential to contribute to broader research agendas.
- **Balancing long-term strategy with short-term opportunities** through, for example, serendipitous funding opportunities or the change to participate in new research collaborations.

Things to consider

In response, INGOs might consider the following questions and actions:

1. **What type of functions can research serve within your organisation?** Is there a minimum proportion of research activity that should be covered by core funding? In which funding stream should this be located?

   > Senior management might consider mapping the potential of research to support different aspects of organisational strategy, processes and thematic areas, and consider to what extent core funding is needed to support a coordinated approach to research.

2. **What types of understandings of research and research agendas exist across your organisation?** How do these interact with external understandings and agendas?

   > While developed to support collaboration, some of the participatory tools in Christian Aid's Rethinking research partnerships discussion guide and toolkit can be used to map the different evidence assumptions and needs across your organisation (see pages 12 to 15 on "understanding research and evidence"): https://www.christianaid.org.uk/resources/about-us/rethinking-research-partnerships

3. **Should you adopt a single approach to research across the organisation?** Can this be achieved through a formal strategy, through a specific governance structure or through a broader culture shift and what might this involve?

   > Sightsavers provide a comprehensive example of how you might go about developing a coherent research strategy: https://www.sightsavers.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/09/Sightsavers_Research_Strategy.pdf However, this unified approach is easier to implement in single-issue organisations and can be a challenging approach for larger organisations characterised by frequent restructuring and relatively short-term organisational strategies. In such cases an alternative unifying approach (such as Brooke's Research policy, ActionAid's Research signature or Oxfam's Research for influencing) might be preferable. The Values mapping tool (2.2) in the Development impact and you toolkit can support this as well: https://diytoolkit.org/media/DIY-Toolkit-Full-Download-A4-Size.pdf

   > Senior management might also consider the location of research in the INGO. Does it make sense to invest in a discrete research unit or even centre? What are the benefits of structuring research as a cross-cutting theme or more distributed network?

4. **How should research structures contribute to shifting power away from the UK** (avoiding extractive relationships with partners in the global South as sources of data and ensuring that 'expertise' is not only located in the UK)?

   > The Rethinking Research Collaborative worked with the UK's principal research funders (UKRI) to develop eight principles for fair and equitable research partnerships, as well as a series of learning resources to support implementation of these principles in practice. While framed in terms of partnerships between UK-based academics and partners in (or working closely with those in) the global South, the principles might also be applied to UK-based INGOs in relation to their offices or partners in the global South. https://rethinkingresearchpartnerships.files.wordpress.com/2018/10/fair-and-equitable-partnerships_research-report-public.pdf

   https://www.christianaid.org.uk/about-us/programme-policy-practice/resources-fair-and-equitable-development-research-partnership.

   > A more theoretical set of resources on decolonising research has been developed by the Convivial Thinking network and offers diverse insight into different ways of 'knowing the world' which might challenge some of the assumptions about the locations of research expertise in an INGO and expose alternative sources of knowledge based in the global South: https://www.convivialthinking.org

5. **How can you monitor successful research engagement or research impact in your organisation?** What indicators might you draw on?

   > Sightsavers' research strategy includes a series of indicators for monitoring its implementation. These include input indicators (such as percentage of the organisational income spent on research); process indicators (such as number of research seminars conducted) and outcome indicators (such as number of academic papers submitted/published). The process of agreeing indicators for monitoring research activity can also help to clarify the purpose and functions of research in your INGO and its relationship to your organisational values and agendas. Although in more adaptive approaches to research (see following section) these indicators may need to be flexible or at least revisited and updated regularly.

3.2 INGO research practices

Spaces, places and paces

Those involved in the journaling exercise revealed that INGO research unfolds in a variety of virtual and physical spaces, ranging from UK-based INGO offices to complex contexts of humanitarian crisis, through online conference calls and virtual data systems to homes and cafes as well as planes, trains and boats; in universities, museums, animal shelters and the houses of parliament.

One respondent explained that such different spaces each carry their own understandings and interests as well as different assumptions about what counts as research and what type of behaviour is appropriate. She saw her role as about understanding and translating across these different spaces:

"Brokering, being in between, moving between the spaces. Trying to explain, trying to get from "we want to do research" to "what do you want to find out" or from "what you want to find out" to what's actually possible" or from "what you've found out" to how you can tell people about it... Reading, reflecting, translating, questioning, responding to requests, and reshaping, reframing, explaining, understanding."

Other respondents acknowledged the benefits of technologies and online spaces such as intranets, shared data-systems and repositories, and organisational messenger services (e.g. Yammer), online meeting platforms (e.g. Skype or Zoom), shared work spaces (e.g. Slack) or even social media and communication tools (e.g. WhatsApp and Twitter). However, some emphasised the importance of a real understanding of context, which is often lacking when research is centred around the UK without real understanding of the geographies and rhythms of remote collaborators.

Perhaps the most common observation was the importance of carving out "thinking spaces" to support and substantiate research work, since this more academic practice is often at odds with the fast-paced nature of INGO work:

"The daily churn of admin, of our periodic work, our coordination, sustaining and maintaining and rejuvenation of networks constantly requires us to be on a treadmill, and so the idea of being able to say I'm going to go off for two weeks and just read is just not realistic..."

In response, some INGOs have convened lunchtime seminars, moderated Yammer chats, and even writing retreats, though as one respondent observed, it is not just about making a space but also about normalising a certain type of behaviour:

"A few years ago we sent our senior management to [a university] for a reading week. And they were incapable of reading, right, they couldn't, they kept leaving the room to look at their Blackberrys. They had total attention deficit, and this was, this wasn't reading academic journals, this was reading, well, anything! You know, anything longer than a page, longer than an email."

The pace of INGO life was also reported to have a profound effect on the approach to research that could be taken and explains the tendency to align research with a TOC (responding to existing strategy and activities) rather than a research question or hypothesis (which requires an additional period of translation of findings into implications for action) as the approach favoured by academics:

"We did some work with a university on food price volatility and actually, it became a bit of a pain because the world moved on, we shifted focus. It took four years. It was a really nicely constructed piece of work, but the organisation didn't need it, and yet we had to keep servicing it."

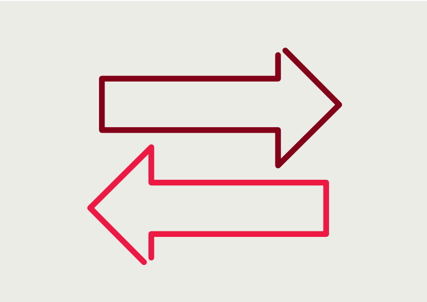
However, INGOs often have in-depth knowledge of development contexts and historical and enduring relationships with partners, which extend well beyond the short-term collaboration that tends to characterise academic research. This can give rise to more sustained research opportunities. For example, one INGO has developed decade-long longitudinal studies in three different contexts to track the effects of policy processes on the lives of partner communities.

Another less ambitious approach is to factor in more time at the early stages of research design, whether the research is commissioned, collaborative or conducted in-house. While this may feel like a burden it could save time later down the line, as one respondent observed:

"Often we won't set aside enough time with a consultant to articulate what we want and to support them along the way, so that when the draft comes through it may not be what we're looking for and needs a lot of re-working. "

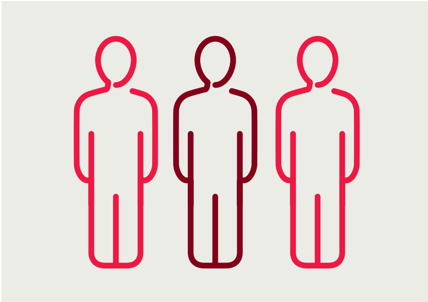
Research relationships

The diversity of spaces, places and functions of INGO research inevitably gives rise to multiple types of research relationship. This study identified six key configurations:

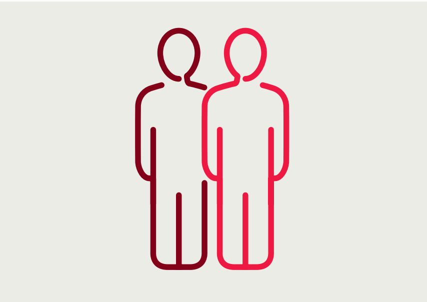


Client or Consultant:
Many INGOs commission new research (which involves tasks such as designing Terms of References, managing the work, evaluating and using the outputs). There has also been an increase in those playing a consulting role and responding to calls to tender.

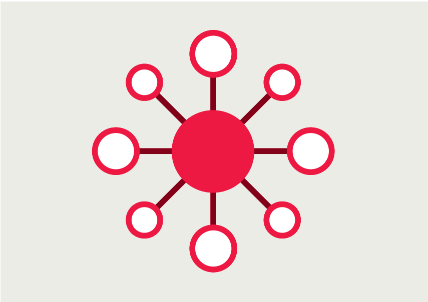
Partner:
INGOs frequently collaborate in research partnerships but the nature of their participation varies widely. In some cases, they are brought in tokenistically to tick an impact box or provide access to data, while in other cases they contribute to the research design and analysis or even lead partnerships.



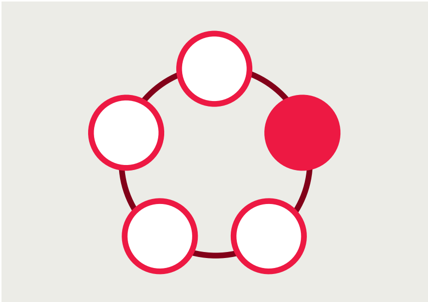
Broker:
Another common role is around brokering relationships between different stakeholders, including: communities and civil society partners in the global South, academics, policy makers and the private sector. INGOs' experience with multiple actors ideally position them for this translational role.



Friend:
While the emotional aspects of knowledge work tend to be downplayed, many respondents talked about the importance of enduring friendships in helping to navigate tensions between agendas, understandings or ways of working – and to bridge the gap between formal funded research projects.



Part of a network or movement:
INGOs might also participate in broader research networks or advocacy movements with agendas around decolonisation of knowledge. This might involve more agenda-setting work or opportunistic research.



Part of a process:
Sometimes INGOs will play a specific but limited role in a broader research process, for example, providing contextual knowledge to support design or ensure impact, contributing specific methodological expertise or supporting the communication or translation of findings into useful resources.

Often an INGO will embody many of these relationships – and often within the same research initiative, though there may also be competition between them. For example, one respondent spoke of her "true commitment" to research which was to strengthen the agendas of partners in the global south but which was sometimes undermined by competing opportunities to challenge research policy and respond to serendipitous funding opportunities in the UK.

Collaboration with external stakeholders, as well as internal stakeholders across different parts of the INGO was also highlighted as a key concern. While this study does not go into the extensive analysis of research partnerships with academics conducted through the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC) funded Evidence and the politics of participation study and the GCRF funded strategic research on Fair and equitable research partnerships (see Fransman and Newman 2017; Cornish et al 2017; and Rethinking Research Collaborative 2018 for in-depth analysis of partnerships with academic researchers) key issues included:

- The benefits of **long-term personal and institutionalised relationships** based on shared vision, trust, understanding and complimentary difference.
- The importance of **'critical friends'** as well as partners.
- The relative benefits of partnerships with **consultancy firms and think tanks** over academic institutions.
- The **drive to large consortia** raising new challenges around communication.
- The benefits of **London-based INGOs** from (often informal) networking and peer-learning opportunities with growing hubs in other areas such as Oxford and Scotland – but with more dispersed organisations often missing out.
- Growing **relationships with research funders** to inform agenda-setting and research governance but mixed experiences.
- Increase in **teaching as well partnerships** with universities.

While working collaboratively raises challenges, INGOs have significant experience in negotiating and sustaining diverse partnerships in the context of their development work. This offers significant learning for understanding and improving research collaboration.

Approaches to research

The INGOs in this study engaged with a wide range of research methods (including literature reviews, secondary analysis of evaluation data, surveys, action research, experiments such as randomized control trials, longitudinal studies and arts-based methods – see Box 3).

Box 3: ActionAid's Development Alternatives methodology

The 2007/08 financial crisis gave ActionAid and partners an opportunity to present options for a different sort of global operating system, one that was based on human rights and feminist principles. However, like many other organisations, ActionAid struggled to find a voice.

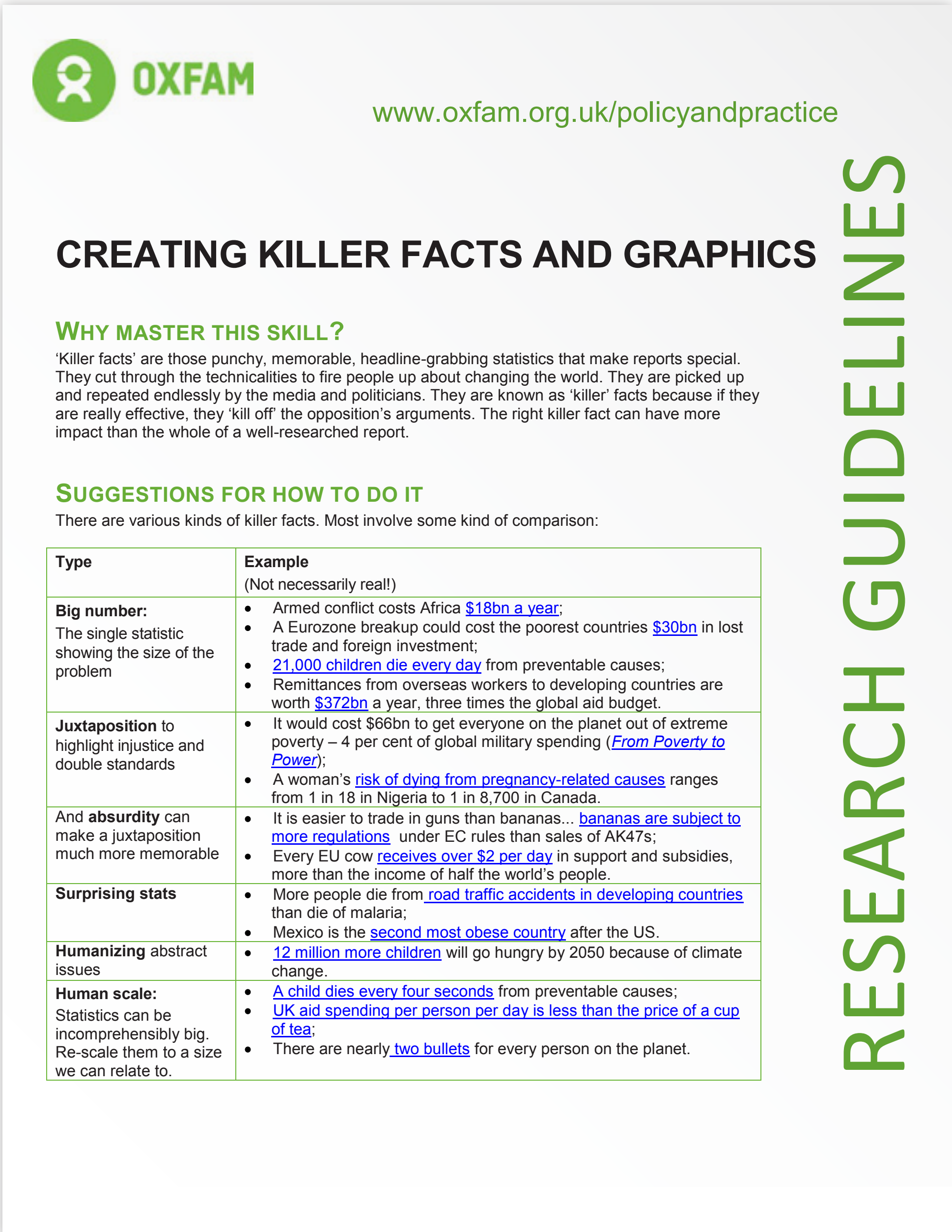
Whilst they were good at critiquing policies, they were less strong at presenting their "alternative" - the system they would rather see. In ActionAid's 2012 Strategy, ActionAid used a "scenarios" methodology for strategy development. Groups interacted with three creative manifestations – a play, a song, and a radio show – each outlining a vision of what ActionAid could look like in the future.

The method was incredibly engaging. Following an initial performance, participants picked out elements of each of the performances, discussed them and developed a further piece that used all the positive attributes. This amalgamated performance was then tweaked and became the basis for the strategy.

The concept of alternatives – of seeking out the different and positive narrative of a development future, was one of the strategy's core propositions. It also became a central element of ActionAid's Research signature – the key principles outlining their approach and research niche. In addition, the creative "scenarios" method led them to understand that arts methods might help to better vision radical futures. For example, in Uganda and Bangladesh, ActionAid and the University of York explored ways in which creative methods better unpacked development alternatives. Many of the emerging arts-based outputs spoke to different visions of nature, the environment and political space. A current ActionAid research project is looking at alternative policies and policy practice to support rural women's livelihoods and climate justice.

These methods generated a wide range of research outputs (including reports, policy briefings, peer-reviewed journal articles, books, capacity resources, blogs, websites, symbolic articles such as signed letters to the editor' of newspapers, and infographics based on "killer facts" – see Figure 2).

While there was a lot of discussion about the relative legitimacy of different outputs (with one respondent noting that you really need both the "lengthy, robust, well-referenced tome as a source of legitimacy even if nobody reads it" and the "glossy, succinct comms translation, which is what ends up getting used") others observed that often the process around developing the output is more valuable – in terms of linking different evidence sources and knowledge actors and learning.


OXFAM

www.oxfam.org.uk/policyandpractice

RESEARCH GUIDELINES

CREATING KILLER FACTS AND GRAPHICS

WHY MASTER THIS SKILL?

'Killer facts' are those punchy, memorable, headline-grabbing statistics that make reports special. They cut through the technicalities to fire people up about changing the world. They are picked up and repeated endlessly by the media and politicians. They are known as 'killer' facts because if they are really effective, they 'kill off' the opposition's arguments. The right killer fact can have more impact than the whole of a well-researched report.

SUGGESTIONS FOR HOW TO DO IT

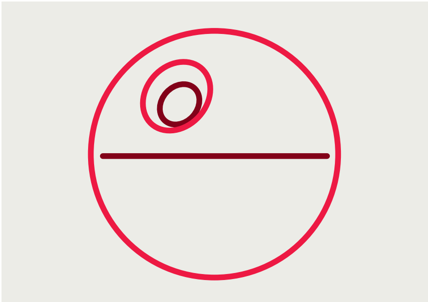
There are various kinds of killer facts. Most involve some kind of comparison:

Type	Example (Not necessarily real!)
Big number: The single statistic showing the size of the problem	• Armed conflict costs Africa $18bn a year; • A Eurozone breakup could cost the poorest countries $30bn in lost trade and foreign investment; • 21,000 children die every day from preventable causes; • Remittances from overseas workers to developing countries are worth $372bn a year, three times the global aid budget.
Juxtaposition to highlight injustice and double standards	• It would cost $66bn to get everyone on the planet out of extreme poverty – 4 per cent of global military spending (*From Poverty to Power*); • A woman's risk of dying from pregnancy-related causes ranges from 1 in 18 in Nigeria to 1 in 8,700 in Canada.
And **absurdity** can make a juxtaposition much more memorable	• It is easier to trade in guns than bananas... bananas are subject to more regulations under EC rules than sales of AK47s; • Every EU cow receives over $2 per day in support and subsidies, more than the income of half the world's people.
Surprising stats	• More people die from road traffic accidents in developing countries than die of malaria; • Mexico is the second most obese country after the US.
Humanizing abstract issues	• 12 million more children will go hungry by 2050 because of climate change.
Human scale: Statistics can be incomprehensibly big. Re-scale them to a size we can relate to.	• A child dies every four seconds from preventable causes; • UK aid spending per person per day is less than the price of a cup of tea; • There are nearly two bullets for every person on the planet.

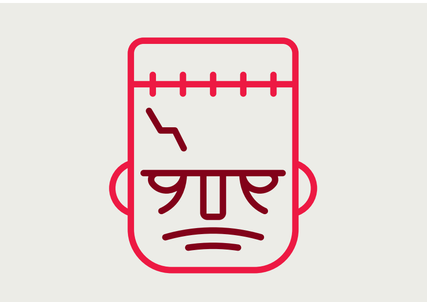
Some of these approaches to research are indistinguishable from academic approaches (with many INGOs commissioning research to academics or engaging in collaborative partnerships). However, across the different research practices and products, six further types of non-academic research might also be identified:

Think tank research:
This approach followed a relatively conventional research model with discrete projects adopting apt methods and resulting in outputs such as reports or briefings. It was most commonly adopted by subject specialist INGOs with methods and outputs largely determined by funding conventions.

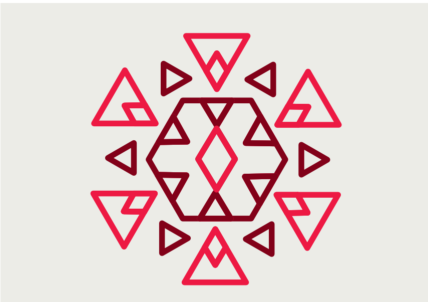
Research as facilitation:
This approach uses research to serve a learning function. It brings together different members of staff, stakeholders, initiatives or agendas with participatory methods, helping to eliminate issues, provoke reflection and enhance strategy and outputs. It is often collectively generated.



Deathstar research:
This approach followed a more advocacy-focused agenda and involves defining research objectives in relation to a perceived advocacy goal or target, with methods and outputs selected and evaluated on the basis of their impact on that target.



Frankenstein research:
This approach involves cobbling together different sources of evidence, methods and partners to address specific organizational needs, resulting in a design and outputs that lacked the conceptual neatness of academic approaches but were more responsive to specific development goals.



Kaleidoscope research:
Expanding on the Frankenstein approach, this approach allows for evolution of organisational needs over time and in response to learning, implying an adaptive or agile approach, which cannot be neatly packaged as a preconceived design.

Knowledge curation:
Rather than constituting research in itself, this approach involves carefully curating different types of research or other sources of evidence to support advocacy goals, for example by producing an edited volume or convening a high-level event.

Research systems: infrastructure, quality assurance and ethics

To support these less conventional approaches to research, INGOs have developed a range of systems to facilitate this. This includes: shared work spaces hosted either through shared drives, intranets or external platforms; repositories; and systems for consolidating programmatic data and for tracking internal activity (eg organisational research tracking software) or external knowledge production (eg through Google Alerts). At the same time, the limitations of such systems was a major source of contention for many respondents who were constantly frustrated by their inadequacy or by regular updates. One respondent spoke of having to locate an old organisational report through an external search because there was no online repository. Another spoke of challenges to quality assurance when relying on large bodies of data collected through different means:

"I'm constantly amazed by the sheer level of data held about beneficiaries and programmes that we collect as an organisation. The problem is not one of quantity but one of quality. The data we have is scattered, disconnected, hard to access, insecure and of mixed quality. Quality data collection happens in specific projects, usually catalysed by external grant funding. Qualitative data seems rarer, and less likely to be systematic or recorded at all."

Some INGOs are starting to develop their own systems for research quality assurance. Others have recognised that their specific approach to research demands a different type of ethical review system. Box 4 presents the innovative case of Brooke's Animal Welfare and Ethical Review Body (AWERB).

Box 4: The Brooke's Animal Welfare Ethical Review Body

Brooke research includes both animal-based and human-based research. While it is not legally required for this research to pass through an ethical review body, the consideration of ethics when involving animals and/or humans applies to the culture of care Brooke seeks to promote as a core value. On this basis, the Brooke has an Animal Welfare and Ethical Review Body (AWERB) whose job is to support the delivery of ethical research, which is carried out by Brooke staff, consultants, or with partners.

The aims of Brooke's AWERB are to:

> Support Brooke staff, consultants or other externally commissioned researchers to carry out ethical research now and for the future.

> Encourage researchers to carefully consider and justify the use and involvement of equids and people within research; to ensure that welfare risks have been minimised; and the act of sharing and learning from research results is maximised.

> Be an internally trusted body within the Brooke, consulted for advice on ethical issues/dilemmas.

The Brooke's AWERB refers to several internal and external regulatory frameworks when formulating advice and provides a secure environment for discussion of ethical issues. Activities include reviewing submitted research proposals, providing ethical training and guidance, and supporting transparent communications throughout the organisation. We are also beginning a retrospective review of completed projects and reviewing the role of AWERB within research partnerships.

The AWERB has an international membership with clearly defined roles and responsibilities each with a clear remit to raise **ethical concerns** in research activities using an appreciative inquiry approach. The roles include: chair, secretary, animal welfare advocate, people advocate, animal healthcare advocate, study design advocate, and public advocates.

Key challenges around research practices in INGOs

This section has outlined some approaches that different INGOs have taken to engage with research. While there are several examples of innovative practice, there are also some challenges including:

- **Working remotely** across different cultures and languages and maintaining a sense of community at a distance.
- **Creating thinking spaces** within already overloaded schedules.
- **Overcoming epistemological differences** between different approaches to research (e.g. seeking the "truth" versus framing an argument versus learning how to improve practice).
- **Accessing literature** that is often hidden beyond paywalls in order to connect to broader research fields
- **Accessing and harmonising data** that exists in different locations and is of varying quality.
- **Developing productive collaborations;** ensuring equitable participation and genuine relevance while negotiating productive tensions.
- **Negotiating tensions between better communications support** to develop more accessible and useful outputs with the risk of compromising the substance of the research.
- **Creating common approaches for ensuring integrity and ethical practice** which might involve tensions between protecting against reputational risk and embracing learning.

Things to consider

In response, INGOs might consider the following questions and actions:

1. **How can 'thinking spaces' be created** within discrete teams as well as in the broader organisation? Who should be involved and how can these spaces be made inclusive?

   You might approach these spaces at the following levels

   > Individual thinking spaces: what spaces exist for reading and reflecting within individual workloads, especially where research is an add-on rather than primary responsibility for many roles?

   > Physical events or spaces in different organisational locations: including lunchtime seminars, team away-days, library spaces for reading etc. and considering who participates in these, who doesn't and why?

   > Research retreats: creating dedicated time and space to focus on a particular topic or approach.

   > Online spaces: including online seminars and the use of intranets, organisational work spaces and social media to share resources and encourage discussion of topics.

2. **How can research be implemented adaptively?** This should respond to (but also withstand) changes in strategy, restructures and staff turnover as well as changing (inter)national contexts, new thematic priorities and new learning?

   > While adaptive research is a relatively new concept (though with strong links to active research and participatory practice as well as certain ethnographic traditions) adaptive management is gaining increasing attention in the international development sector. Duncan Green's blog offers seven "rules of thumb" for creating the conditions for adaptive management in INGOs – which could be usefully applied to approaches to research as well: https://oxfamblogs.org/fp2p/seven-rules-of-thumb-for-adaptive-management-what-do-you-think/

3. **What type of infrastructure or research systems do you need** to support your research activity? How can this be built into existing systems? How can systems withstand updates or overhauls?

   Virtual systems are extremely diverse and rapidly changing, making it hard to offer generic guidelines. However, some broad considerations might include:

   > At the organisational level, is there a dedicated space for research on your intranet? Is it well signposted/are staff members aware of it?

   > At the programme/project level, how is data stored and how accessible is it?

   > Across these levels, how is institutional memory preserved? What types of physical/virtual repositories exist and how can these be searched? Could it be worth digitalising older resources and developing an indexing system? How should new resources be preserved, stored and made searchable?

4. **How can INGOs ensure productive research collaborations** and be mindful both of their potential exploitation by academic researchers, who often control funds, and their potential to exploit smaller organisations in INGO-led collaborations with partners in the global South?

   There is an extensive body of literature and resources to support research collaboration between INGOs and other stakeholders. Some resources include:

   > Principles for Fair and Equitable Research Partnerships (including an overview of existing resources on research collaboration in Appendix 4): https://rethinkingresearchpartnerships.files.wordpress.com/2018/10/fair-and-equitable-partnershipsresearch-report-public.pdf

   > Targeted learning resources to support implementation of the principles: https://www.christianaid.org.uk/about-us/programme-policy-practice/resources-fair-and-equitable-development-research-partnerships

   > A Discussion Guide and Toolkit to support research partnerships between INGOs and academics: https://www.christianaid.org.uk/resources/about-us/rethinking-research-partnerships

   > A US-based but international research matching tool to support new collaborations: https://www.research4impact.com

5. **Would your organisation benefit from having a formal ethical review mechanism** for research and what are the challenges around working in different legislative and policy environments?

   > Extensive ethical guidelines already exist for different disciplinary approaches to research, for example:

   — The Social Research Association: http://the-sra.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/ethics03.pdf

   — British Psychological Association: https://www.bps.org.uk/news-and-policy/bps-code-ethics-and-conduct

   > However, as the experience of the Brooke revealed, these are not always apt for INGO research approaches. It might be therefore necessary to develop a new protocol such as the Brooke's AWERB, which draws on existing guidelines but adapts them to suit the needs of the organisation.

   > It is also important to consider the ethical guidelines, policies and legislation of the different countries in which the INGO works – as well as broader approaches to ethical practice such as the humanitarian "do no harm" principle and the UK's recent work around safeguarding: https://www.bond.org.uk/resources/safeguarding-guidance-and-tools

3.3 INGO researchers

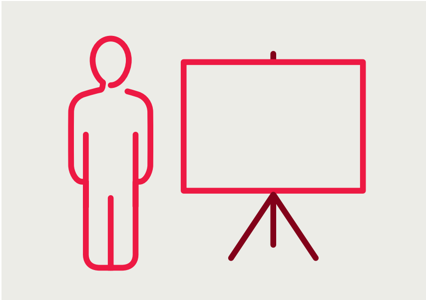
While relatively few INGO job titles explicitly refer to research, there appears to be a rise in references to research in job descriptions. Research-related roles include: research managers; directors or coordinators at the senior level; and research advisors, fellows, officers or assistants at the mid-junior level. Some INGOs also recruit associate fellows or consultants who are external to the INGO but offer either occasional advice or freelance support.

In this study, the INGO staff who saw themselves as playing a research role were employed in a wide range of roles including as policy analysts, programme managers, monitoring, evaluation and learning (MEL) specialists, impact strategists, thematic advisors, brand analysts and communications specialists. Others had held a previous research post at a university and retained an affiliated position such as Associate Professor or Researcher. This often involved some limited teaching input and occasionally co-supervision of doctoral (PhD) students. Often this relationship provided INGO staff with access to academic libraries, academic development programmes and links to Masters programmes with potential for collaboration around student dissertations (though respondents had mixed experiences in this area).

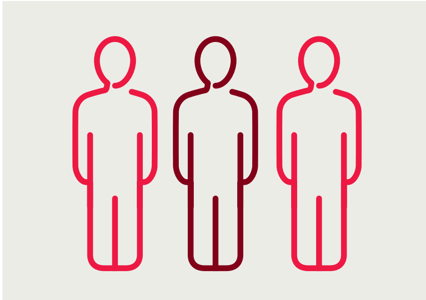
Being an INGO researcher

Data collected from those involved in journaling generated some rich insight into the day-to-day activities of INGO researchers and their different research identities, which might be broken down into the following categories (though most identified with several of these):

Advisor:
This appeared to be the most common role, with researchers supporting those commissioning, collaborating in or conducting research across the organisation. Demand for this advisory function is often overwhelming with one respondent referring to research advice as "the beast that can never be defeated!"

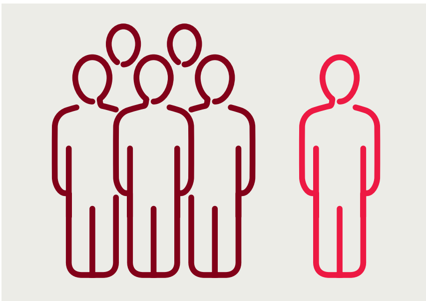


Trainer:
In an effort to strengthen research capacity across the INGO and break dependence on advisors, researchers were increasingly playing a training role (see following section) with some also acting as a mentor or supervisor.

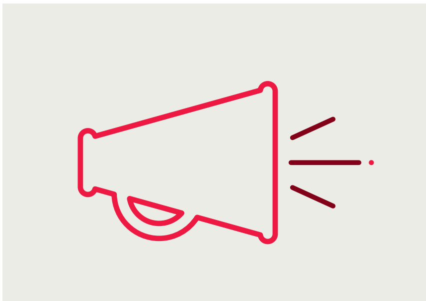


Broker:
Another common role involves brokering relationships between different parts of the INGO or between the INGO and other research stakeholders, with respondents highlighting the very specific skillset that this type of role necessitates.

Innovator:
INGO researchers are also engaged in developing new methodologies, outputs and systems. With funders such as UKRI and DFID increasingly interested in innovation as an output of research, this may be a developing role for INGO researchers.



Thought leader:
A smaller number of INGO researchers saw their role as contributing to knowledge either within a specialist field, around a particular research approach or in relation to research policy or strategy.



Activist:
Some INGO researchers also identified as a sort of research activist, either lobbying internally to promote the value of research within their organisation or externally to promote the value of INGO research within more traditional research.

As well as describing specific roles, journaling participants also discussed the emotional experiences of *being* an INGO researcher. While there was a varied sense of INGO researcher identity, journaling participants expressed the following feelings:

- **"Secure":** Less precarious than an equivalent academic career with permanent contracts and a generally more flexible and inclusive work pattern.
- **"Directionless":** Without an obvious career ladder to climb, there is more uncertainty about how careers will progress. For those with managerial responsibility, there is a feeling that there is "nowhere left to go unless I leave the organisation."
- **"Free":** To define their own programmes of work, develop their own approaches and establish their own type of research identity.
- **"Responsible":** With too much freedom, "feeling like I'm winging-it as there's no existing model for this type of work."
- **"Connected":** Part of a community with a team-based environment.
- **"Unsupported":** Without the same facilities, resources and supervision or mentorship support that you might find in academia.
- **"Invisible":** With institutionally defined research agendas and publications authored by the INGO, meaning "little recognition of my own individual research profile."
- **"Part of something bigger":** Contributing to a broader social justice agenda as well as new knowledge.
- **"Like an imposter":** With concerns over authenticity and integrity in a space without clear guidelines for rigour.
- **"Alienated":** Belonging neither to the academic world or the practitioner world, and constantly being required to justify one's worth to both.
- **"Frustrated":** "So much of this work is about slowly changing cultures and building capacity and it's hard to get recognition for what you can't see"

Across many of these feelings ran the sense of embarking on a new type of professional terrain – both full of opportunity but also uncertainty. Against this daunting landscape, many of the journaling participants called for greater recognition of these increasingly prevalent research roles, guidelines to support those creating and nurturing research roles in their organisations, and some consideration of career pathways and professional development opportunities for INGO researchers.

Research capacity

However, many of the participants in this study have invested significant effort into understanding and strengthening research capacity in their organisations – both in terms of individual knowledge and skills, and also in terms of a broader institutional culture shift. Some have even conducted formal skills audits to assess existing capacity, identify gaps and support needs in order to inform their recruitment strategy and in-house capacity strengthening initiatives.

In terms of skills and experience, there was a wealth of existing knowledge across the INGOs that participated in this study. There seems to be a rise in the level of qualifications for INGO staff with many INGO researchers or those in research-related roles holding a Masters degree or even a PhD. Disciplinary knowledge included economics, psychology, political science, sociology, anthropology and theology in addition to the more interdisciplinary fields of development studies, community development, education, health studies, environmental sciences, and business and management studies.

However, some noted the existence of a knowledge hierarchy, which privileged some fields over others:

"We say that all of our thinking should be begin with a power analysis, should start with stakeholder mapping, all the rest of it. But we don't have a power researcher, we don't have a political scientist in the team. So we don't reflect that in our research, which is all about number crunching because number crunching is what the campaigns team wants and what the funders and the media like. So there's a real 'quants' and economics bias."

At the same time, others observed that INGO knowledge work was sometimes constrained by lack of training in more technical disciplines:

"Economic literacy is probably the right term. I mean, I've lost count of the amount of times when people have come to me through informal networks to say, here's this paper, I'm not sure if it's important, and it has, like, you know, econometric analysis and I need your help!"

However, those playing a coordination or management role tended to emphasise the importance of more generic research skills for their work. This includes a strong understanding of research design, basic epistemology and markers of rigour such as validity, reliability and generalisability, as well as a good grasp of the relationship of research to the organisational strategy and values.

Others spoke of the importance of research literacies to support commissioning and evaluating outsourced research as well as literature reviews and secondary analysis of data. And less tangible skills around brokering relationships, translating and curating research sources, working reflexively and adaptively, and supervising and mentoring other researchers.

Box 5: Oxfam's Research Fellow scheme

Oxfam Great Britain started a Research Fellow scheme to support their in-country research capacity. Three Fellows are appointed through a competitive grant process, with each working around 18 months on a topic considered essential for the Oxfam Country programme. The bulk of their time is devoted to the prime research topic. In Myanmar, the Fellow is exploring how the Burmese view economic inequality and the link to poverty, while in the Philippines, the focus is on understanding the social norms that can be nudged to reduce child marriage. Each Fellow also spends 20% of their time on responding to other research needs and strengthening research quality. For example, two of the current Research Fellows based in Myanmar and the Philippines are jointly organising a research quality bootcamp for interested Oxfam staff in the Asia region.

While the participatory journaling in this study focused primarily on INGO researchers based in the UK, there was growing awareness of the need to both recognise and support research capacity in programme offices and partner organisations located in the global South.

Box 5 (above) gives an example of an initiative by Oxfam Great Britain to support Research Fellows to develop their research capacity and spend a dedicated period of time conducting research of relevance to their country programme. Other INGOs have supported sabbaticals for their staff to gain additional qualifications or attend professional development programmes such as those run by INTRAC, the Humanitarian Development Academy (HAD) and other sector brokers.

However, challenges exist around retaining staff who have benefited from such initiatives and may decide to return to their studies or use their new skills to pursue employment elsewhere. In response, several INGOs have developed broader in-house research guidelines and learning resources and implemented programmes of research training through webinars, virtual learning environments (VLEs) such as Moodle or Massive Open Online Courses (MOOCs) as well as face-to-face seminars workshops and bootcamps.

Box 6 gives the example of Christian Aid's Evidence for development professionals course, which seeks to strengthen evidence literacies across the INGO. Other courses are more focused on specific methodologies or themes such as negotiating ethics.

Box 6: Christian Aid's 'Evidence for Development Professionals' course

In 2017, the Centre for Excellence in Research, Evidence & Learning (REL) at Christian Aid developed and piloted its first Evidence for Development Professionals course, bringing together colleagues from across Christian Aid working on development and humanitarian programmes, policy/advocacy and fundraising, as part of a wider strategy to improve understanding of evidence quality within the organisation. Three cohorts of staff have now come through the programme.

The 9-week course consists of highly interactive weekly sessions on Skype focusing on different aspects of the research process – creating good questions, using literature reviews to find out what's already out there, seeking new evidence with strong methods for data collection, management and analysis, and engaging key stakeholders to maximise utilisation of research findings.

Participants now have a better understanding of the research cycle and the biases and limitations of the various methods available for generating evidence. This in turn is helping them to scope research and evaluations more effectively, to generate good evidence for policy and advocacy work, and to ensure claims around the impact of Christian Aid's work can be clearly evidenced.

Key challenges around researcher development in INGOs

This section outlines some of the different profiles and identities that INGO researchers embody, as well as the types of roles they play, knowledge and skills they draw on, and professional development they require. While there are several examples of innovative practice, there are also some challenges including:

- **Defining the INGO research career pathway** in a rapidly evolving field.
- **Balancing technical knowledge with generic 'research literacies'** to ensure a balance of skills and experience across the organisation.
- **Tackling epistemology** in accessible and applied ways so that informed decisions can be made about approaches to research that are responsive to organisation values and agendas.
- **Crediting individual researchers** when processes tend to be team-based and outputs and intellectual property (IP) are owned by the INGO.
- **Negotiating the tensions between investing in individual career development and building institutional capacity** when there is a clear need for targeted support, particularly in the global South, but when retaining staff can be a challenge.
- **Investing in in-house training versus using existing provision.**

Things to consider

In response, INGOs might consider the following questions and actions:

1. **What sort of research knowledge and skills are required** to respond to the research agendas of your organisation? What capacity already exists and where are the gaps? Should research responsibilities be built into existing roles or are new roles needed with a specific research focus?

   > To assess existing capacity a skills audit can be a helpful exercise. As well as identifying capacity gaps it can also reveal unexpected sources of knowledge and possibilities for collaboration and support across the INGO. Audits can adopt a simple staff survey format and gather information about qualifications and prior experience as well as more specific contextual, thematic or methodological knowledge.

2. **Should you invest in developing in-house training or can training be supplied by external providers?** What other actions can be taken to strengthen research capacity across your organisation? For example, a compilation of existing research guidelines or development of bespoke guidelines that suit your organisation needs and investment in more dynamic resources such as research seminars, blog posts, Masterclasses etc.

   > Before investing in new training you should check out existing free resources, for example, Oxfam's excellent research guidelines, which include published and forthcoming* guides on:
   > — Writing Terms of Reference for research
   > — Terms of Reference for research template
   > — Undertaking research with ethics
   > — Planning research for influencing*
   > — Integrating gender in research design*
   > — Reviewing the existing literature
   > — Conducting semi-structured interviews
   > — Researching human interest stories
   > — Conducting focus groups
   > — Planning participatory research*
   > — Planning survey research
   > — Understanding survey sampling
   > — Doing research with enumerators
   > — Understanding estimates of economic inequality
   > — Creating killer facts and graphics
   > — Writing for impact - lessons from journalism
   > — Writing an executive summary
   > — Giving helpful feedback on draft research papers and reports
   > — Oxfam style guide for notes, references and bibliographies.

- > https://policy-practice.oxfam.org.uk/our-approach/research/researchguidelines#12f2dd8e-0d8b-45ed-a0c1-2cb759a47554
- > If you feel that training is still necessary, then consider existing provision by sector brokers such as Bond, INTRAC and the Humanitarian Academy for Development (HAD):

  Bond: https://www.bond.org.uk/events

  INTRAC: https://www.intrac.org/how-we-work/training/

  HAD: http://had-int.org/courses/
- > And finally, if existing resources and courses don't meet the needs of your INGO you can either adapt available resources or follow the example of Christian Aid's Centre for Excellence in Research Evidence and Learning (REL)'s Evidence or Development Professionals course which is part of broader capacity strengthening initiatives across the organisation.

3. **How can power be shifted through training models** that don't just involve transmission of expertise from the UK to country offices but seek to nurture expertise in the global South?
   - > An in-depth skills audit might reveal a rich range of untapped research expertise in country offices and partner organisations based in the global South with potential for integrating into organisation-wide capacity strengthening initiatives.
   - > Another source of expertise located in the global South can be local universities – some of which have deep-rooted relationships with INGOs. You might consider partnering with academics in the global South instead of in the UK, especially given the gradual shift in funding by UK-based research funders such as the Wellcome Trust to southern funders such as the African Academy of Sciences: https://wellcome.ac.uk/news/shifting-centre-gravity-african-research-funding
   - > At the same time, INGO capacity-strengthening initiatives should not exclude participants from the global South coordinated initiatives in specific countries or regions such as Oxfam's Research Fellow scheme and regional methods. Bootcamps can ensure that research training is responsive to regional agendas as well as INGO priorities.

4. **Should more be done to acknowledge individual research profiles** or the collaborative model of research attractive to INGO researchers?
   - > In academia, rewards and incentives are focused on the individual and ongoing academic development is seen as a core part of a research career. Many INGO researchers prefer the more collaborative, team-based model of INGO research but to continue to grow they need time to develop their own research interests and expand their knowledge. Providing dedicated time for producing peer-reviewed articles, attending conferences and participating in research governance or agenda-setting events (e.g. funding review colleges or strategic committees) can raise the research profile of the INGO while contributing to individual learning.
   - > Several INGOs have also developed close partnerships with universities which can provide access to academic development opportunities as well as the chance to co-supervise PhD students or guest lecture. Another possibility is to develop reciprocal mentoring relationships with academics. Academic mentors might offer regular methodological and theoretical support to INGO researchers, while INGO researchers might mentor academics on conducting research in complex contexts of development or humanitarian crisis or developing better pathways to research impact.

4 — Conclusions

This report has examined recent trends in INGO engagement with research in the UK context (but with implications for country offices and partner organisation, particularly in the global South).

It has explored how research approaches are framed by institutional agendas, values, structures and processes. It has also identified a range of research practices; and considered the nature of a growing body of INGO professionals: INGO researchers and their developmental needs, as well as more institutionally-focussed approaches to research capacity strengthening. By showcasing a range of innovative examples of practice while also considering the many challenges involved in this complex work, the report has sought to provide some guidance to those developing a research approach within their organisation.

Within this space an elephant in the room lingers. This is the tension between peer-learning, collaboration and competition between INGOs with many organisations only able to secure internal support for research or external funding by positioning themselves as sector leaders. While this is an inevitable response to the current resource-starved climate in the UK, it can lead to significant wastage with many attempts to recreate the wheel rather than drawing on existing resources or pooling efforts. Partner organisations such as smaller NGOs in the global South might also benefit from better consolidation of the rich range of existing resources.

This implies the need for a more coordinated response that extends beyond the approaches taken by individual INGOs. I therefore conclude by suggesting four key actions that sector-brokers like Bond and INTRAC might take:

- **Consolidation of existing resources** in an accessible open access space, ideally with space for dialogue around the different initiatives to enhance learning and generate a strong community of practice around INGO research.
- **Development of sector-standardised guidelines** (for example, principles for INGO research, ethics protocols and quality assurance mechanisms).
- Exploring the potential of **professional accreditation for INGO researchers** which might help to legitimate INGO research careers, while creating a space to consider the types of skills and career trajectories implicated.
- **Formalising research support mechanisms** such as the INGO Research Advisors network which one respondent described as a "lifeline" and which provides a space for INGOs to share experiences and establish sector-wide priorities.

Finally, the growth of INGO research has the potential to make a major contribution not just to development and humanitarian work across the sector but also beyond the sector, to research processes and practices in higher education. At a time when the UK has redistributed a significant portion of the ODA budget into higher education (see ICAI 2017) universities are struggling with ODA-compliance against systems, structures and skills that are not set up for research in complex development contexts. With innovative approaches to research impact (grounded in sophisticated MEL work and genuine understanding of policy processes), research ethics (with renewed attention to safeguarding), and a broader set of research approaches, outputs and skills, INGOs offer huge learning potential for ODA-funded research that extends beyond compliance to excellence.

Further resources

Guidelines and courses

Bond evidence principles:
https://www.bond.org.uk/resources/evidence-principles

DFID: 'Assessing the Strength of Evidence':
https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachmentdata/file/291982/HTN-strength-evidence-march2014.pdf

Development Impact and You toolkit:
https://diytoolkit.org/media/DIY-Toolkit-Full-Download-A4-Size.pdf

Oxfam research guidelines:
https://policy-practice.oxfam.org.uk/our-approach/research/research-guidelines#12f2dd8e-0d8b-45ed-a0c1-2cb759a47554

Development Studies Association (DSA) NGOs Study Group:
https://www.devstud.org.uk/study-groups/ngos-in-development

Bond training opportunities:
https://www.bond.org.uk/events

INTRAC training opportunities:
https://www.intrac.org/how-we-work/training/

Humanitarian Academy for Development (HAD) training opportunities:
http://had-int.org/courses/

Networks

The INGO Research Advisors Network
(contact REL at Christian Aid for information)

Rethinking Research Collaborative:
https://rethinkingresearchcollaborative.com

UNESCO Chair in community-based research & social responsibility in higher education:
http://unescochair-cbrsr.org/index.php/k4c-2/

Convivial Thinking:
https://www.convivialthinking.org

Partnership resources

Promoting fair and equitable partnerships: research report (including an overview of existing resources on research collaboration in Appendix 4): https://rethinkingresearchpartnerships.files.wordpress.com/2018/10/fair-and-equitable-partnershipsresearch-report-public.pdf

Discussion Guide and Toolkit: https://www.christianaid.org.uk/resources/about-us/rethinking-research-partnerships

Learning resources on 'fair and equitable' research collaboration: https://www.christianaid.org.uk/about-us/programme-policy-practice/resources-fair-and-equitable-development-research-partnerships

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Notes

Bond is the UK network for organisations working in international development.

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