EXPLORING RESEARCH–POLICY PARTNERSHIPS IN INTERNATIONAL DEVELOPMENT


IDSBulletin
Transforming Development Knowledge

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Exploring Research–Policy Partnerships in International Development

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Andrew Church is Associate Pro-Vice-Chancellor (Research and Enterprise), University of Brighton. He is also Professor of Human Geography focusing on human–nature relations. From 2014, Andrew has been a Coordinating Lead Author leading an international team for the chapter on trends and status in ecosystem services for the Intergovernmental Science-Policy Platform on Biodiversity and Ecosystem Services (IPBES) Regional Assessment for Europe and Central Asia. He has been involved in a range of community–university engagement activities and has been the Co-Academic Director of the University of Brighton's award-winning Community University Partnership Programme (CUPP).

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James Georgalakis is the Director of Communications and Impact at the Institute of Development Studies (IDS), leading research communications, the strengthening of evidence use and the evaluation of research impact. He is also the Director of the ESRC-DFID Impact Initiative for International Development Research. He is completing a professional doctorate in policy research and practice at the University of Bath. His research interests relate to social network analysis of the interactive processes that shape the production and use of evidence in global health policy. Previous to joining IDS he delivered a range of policy communications and advocacy roles in non-governmental organisations.

Anderson Gitonga is from Kenya and currently serves as Chief Executive Officer of the United Disabled Persons of Kenya and Secretary to the Caucus on Disability Rights Advocacy. Anderson has been a community development specialist with a focus on disability rights for the last 20 years and has held numerous key programmatic and leadership functions in various organisations.

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Jill Healey has worked on international development and social justice issues, in a number of countries, for over 20 years. Her experience ranges from direct engagement with community members to influencing senior decision makers, and she has lived and worked in Malawi and Tanzania. Jill's employment history includes Voluntary Service Overseas (VSO), the Children's Society, and the Greater London Authority. She has been Executive Director of ChildHope for over seven years and a trustee of RefugeeYouth since 2009.

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Vicky Johnson has more than 20 years' experience as a researcher and consultant in social and community development, both in the UK and internationally. She is Principal Investigator for Youth Uncertainty

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Foreword

The important role of R&D investment in ensuring global economic and societal success is well recognised. In the private sector, this is clearly correlated with growth, innovation, and enhanced performance. DFID has, too, long recognised that the deployment of advances in science, social science, technology, and innovation is a critical enabler for development progress. Our strategic investment in research and the delivery of global public goods has delivered high returns, saved millions of lives and, equally importantly, informed policy and delivery design by development actors on what works (and what does not).

We know that success in this mission depends on very careful consideration, at the outset, of the problem to be addressed, the potential impact that can be enabled by high-quality research, and the step-by-step route to achieve success. This is about well-thought-out design, establishing and nurturing the right relationships, and building in sufficient flexibility to adapt your approach as you go (given what you do not necessarily know at the outset).

The ESRC-DFID Strategic Partnership has been successful in demonstrating what approaches are effective, being sharply focused on the combination of relevance and academic rigour with targeted, well-planned research uptake methods.

I am delighted to have been asked to write a foreword for this issue of the *IDS Bulletin* which brings to life some of the successes and challenges of getting traction from research that has enabled key actors to make well-informed choices, based on a much more rigorous knowledge base. The articles take you on a journey through different sectors and partnerships and, in doing so, tease out common themes with the potential to help many others in their research design.

The issue also shows that donors themselves have a critical role to play in creating an enabling environment for interdisciplinary research designed and implemented in partnership with potential users and beneficiaries. In summary, it illustrates plainly that the most effective research–policy partnerships are built on common agendas, sustained interaction, and evidence sensibly and logically framed for decision makers and practitioners.

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Introduction: Identifying the Qualities of Research–Policy Partnerships in International Development – A New Analytical Framework*

James Georgalakis[1] and Pauline Rose[2]

Abstract This article sets out a framework for analysing research–policy partnerships for societal change in international development settings. It defines types of change associated with engaging research evidence with policy and practice and draws on existing literature to explore how partnerships between researchers, intermediaries, and evidence users may be better understood. The proposed framework sets out three interconnected qualities of effective partnerships: (1) bounded mutuality, (2) sustained interactivity, and (3) policy adaptability. We apply this framework to the articles included in this *IDS Bulletin* describing ESRC-DFID-funded research projects in a variety of international development scenarios.

Keywords: research partnership, policy engagement, impact, international development, evidence-informed policy, research uptake.

1 Introduction

This analysis of research–policy partnerships builds on our understanding of the potential impact of knowledge on development processes. These concepts are based on previous work undertaken by the ESRC-DFID-funded Impact Initiative for International Development Research, for which the authors of this article are its Director (James Georgalakis, Institute of Development Studies) and its lead for education (Pauline Rose, REAL Centre, University of Cambridge). Over the past four years, we have worked with over 200 social science projects in 79 countries seeking to maximise their impact. One of the most persistent messages to emerge from this work has been around the perceived benefits of partnerships between academics, communities, and policy actors. However, there appear to be many meanings of partnership in the context of collaborations

Figure 1 The Impact Initiative's wheel of impact

- Changing ways of thinking;
- Raising awareness;
- Contributions to knowledge

- Impacts on policy and practice;
- A change in direction attributable to research

Conceptual   Instrumental

Capacity building   Networks and connectivity

- Building capacity of researchers/intermediaries to strengthen research uptake approaches

- Building and strengthening networks;
- Connecting up the supply of evidence with the demand for it

Source Impact Initiative.

around research for policy. We became increasingly curious about the possibility of identifying the key characteristics of partnerships capable of influencing how evidence is produced, accessed, and used to reduce poverty and inequality.

In order to develop an analytical framework with which to assess the learning arising from partnerships designed to have an impact beyond academia, we look at three areas of literature and associated practice. Firstly, there is the wide-ranging literature exploring the relationship between research and impact on policy and practice. In particular, this identifies interactive models of research-to-policy processes that are directly relevant to our focus on partnerships. Secondly, there is theoretical and practice-based work exploring partnerships in international development more broadly (rather than specifically between researchers and non-research users). A number of analytical frameworks for assessing the efficacy of such partnerships, particularly between Northern and Southern institutions, have some relevance to our inquiry. Finally, we consider the smaller, but growing, literature on the societal impact of partnerships between researchers and non-research users or knowledge intermediaries to which we hope this article will make a useful contribution. What becomes clear from a review of this literature is that, despite a variety of approaches to try and understand evidence use for policy formulation, implementation, and practice, the dynamics of partnerships between researchers and non-research users need to be better understood. It is this aspect that forms the focus of our article.

2 Definitions of research impact

The Impact Initiative has aimed to increase the uptake and impact of research from two major research programmes jointly funded by the UK's Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC) and the Department for International Development (DFID): the Joint Fund

for Poverty Alleviation Research and the Raising Learning Outcomes in Education Systems Research Programme. The starting point is that the ESRC-DFID strategic partnership is funding good-quality, policy-relevant research for which identifying 'pathways to impact' is integral.[3] The Initiative developed a wheel of impact derived from the definitions of research impact adopted by the ESRC: capacity building, conceptual, and instrumental impacts. From the outset, the Impact Initiative's strategy added to this 'networks and connectivity', as another anticipated outcome of the programme (Figure 1). This framework recognises the different modes of research impact as interrelated.

Although we regard all four modes of impact as desirable outcomes from research–policy collaborations, the focus on partnership inevitably recommends that we pay particular attention to the segment of the wheel that relates to building and strengthening networks. This gives rise to some of the reoccurring questions raised by the study of partnerships in development: whether new networks and strengthened relationships are an end in themselves, and/or a means to the end of research uptake and evidence use; whether they are best accomplished informally or also through more formal contractual relations; and how to address potential power dynamics within them.

3 Understanding research and policy: From linear to interactive concepts

The considerable interest in translating research into policy and practice is not new. It is apparent, however, that it has become a greater focus of attention in recent years. A recent systematic review of literature related to how academics can increase their impact on policy finds that, of 86 academic and non-academic publications dating back to the 1950s, 34 were published in the last two years (Oliver and Cairney 2019). During the 1970s and 1980s, there was growing recognition in the academic literature that there is no simple linear relationship between research knowledge and policy change. Alternative models ranged from theories suggesting that policy was just as likely to determine research agendas as the other way around, that social science gradually percolates into public consciousness (Weiss 1979), to a more complex interdependency between science and society (Jasanoff 2004). Despite these advancements, commitment to linear instrumentalist models of research use remained dominant in the public domain, particularly in the UK and Canada whose governments were at the forefront of an evidence-based policy movement in the 1990s that had originated in clinical practice (Gwyther 2014).

In the international development sector, increasing attention is being paid to the attribution of policy and practice change to specific research studies as a means of demonstrating academic excellence and value for money. This is apparent in DFID's approach to investing in research (ICAI 2018). In this field, conceptualisations of a gap between research communities on the supply side and policy networks on the demand side has tended to result in recommended practices to bridge this gap that are largely technical in nature. In particular, communication tools

and training for researchers and policy actors, as well as development of digital initiatives to increase the accessibility and availability of research has become commonplace (Georgalakis *et al.* 2017). However, these more technical approaches to achieving research uptake have come under increasing critique from those who argue that policy processes tend to be messy, and require ongoing engagement. This challenges the potential of bridging an evidence–policy gap with better communication or training (Cairney 2016; Parkhurst 2017).

Of all the approaches to research use to emerge in reaction to both these linear theories on the one hand and interpretivist accounts of socially constructed knowledge on the other, interactive models are perhaps one of the most useful in navigating complex policy and practice environments (Nutley, Walter and Davies 2007). Rather than focusing on autonomous streams of problems, policy, and politics which collide at key moments (Kingdon 1984), these models set out what Huberman calls 'sustained interactivity'. This approach recognises the blurring of boundaries between research producers, intermediaries, and users (Huberman 1994). This social and interactive process is also supported by well-established theories such as the role of policy and epistemic communities (Haas 1992) and the power dynamics of knowledge (Lukes 2003; Gaventa 2006).

4 Developing mutual agendas through research–policy partnerships
Whilst understanding how research and policy interact is fundamental to understanding the role of partnerships in leveraging societal impact, it is also informative to explore the nature of partnerships themselves in international development contexts, including how partners come together around mutual agendas. Even the meaning of the term 'partnership' is highly contested. In international development, there are concerns around terms like partnership becoming an empty buzzword. Whilst the language of partnership may be deployed, the reality is that politics and power dynamics are still at play (Cornwall and Brock 2005). As the imbalance of power may itself affect the organisational identity of those dependent on external funds, some have chosen to avoid the term partnership for a more neutral term of 'relationship' (Batley and Rose 2011).

Given the North to South power dynamics of development aid, it is perhaps to be expected that the most common approach to exploring international development partnerships is an analysis of power between donors and national actors, such as national governments and non-governmental organisations (NGOs), intermediary delivery agencies, the private sector; and local civil society groups (Brinkerhoff 2002; Lister 2000). The rationale for such partnerships in international development settings referred to in the literature are diverse, including mutual learning, the leveraging of expertise and local knowledge, building local capacity, and achieving value for money (Morse and McNamara 2006; DFID 2011).

However, until recently, this literature rarely went beyond an assessment of relatively binary donor–national relationships. In research initiatives designed to influence policy or practice, there is not necessarily an international donor playing an active role, and partnerships may take a whole variety of forms, including South to South governmental and NGO collaborations, and partnerships between Northern and Southern research institutions. Power dynamics affect relationships between researchers themselves and between them and policy actors, such as those in national governments and multilateral agencies. The asymmetry in power between different actors, and the influence this has on achieving desired outcomes, does not reside solely on traditional development paradigms. As Henning Melber points out, power inequalities penetrate every social context and will always affect how knowledge is generated and used (Melber 2019).

Brinkerhoff's evaluation tool (in the context of partnerships between government and non-government actors) helpfully provides a framework that acknowledges both normative and pragmatic approaches to defining the key dimensions of partnership for sustainable development (Brinkerhoff 2002). Mutuality, she argues, or mutual interdependence, needs to be present to maximise the benefits for each party. This means mutual commitment to the objectives of the collaboration and a strategy that is compatible with each actor's mission, values, and goals. However, Brinkerhoff is interested in more than the function and insists that development partnerships should also be assessed on their performance. Did they achieve what they set out to achieve?

For partnerships that are focused on bringing together researchers with NGOs, community-based organisations, or local researchers, a great deal of the reflection focuses on the principles of engagement. They seek equity, respect, mutual agendas, and trust (Baker *et al.* 1999). A movement has emerged supporting a vision of equitable research partnerships between Northern researchers and Southern researchers or practitioners. Leading this movement has been an innovative network of social scientists and international non-governmental organisations (INGOs) who have set out eight principles of fair and equitable research partnerships (Newman, Bharadwaj and Fransman, this *IDS Bulletin*, and Fransman and Newman 2019). Although their work was initially focused on achieving equity and fairness (Fransman, Newman and Cornish 2017), in this issue they also argue that if research is to have an impact, it must build directly on the knowledge and experience of those working at the coal face to challenge poverty and contribute to social justice. They optimistically argue that although a fair and equitable mutual agenda might not always be apparent at the outset of such partnerships, with time and patience they can develop. They propose that research excellence is more commonly understood from the perspective of Northern-dominated definitions which privilege those from relatively well-resourced universities with better access to high-impact journals. They argue for an embedded systems model of research impact that recognises practical experience, such as the

experiential learning of development practitioners, as an important source of knowledge.

Whilst recognising that equitable partnerships are desirable and morally imperative, they may not always be a necessary condition for innovative research and societal relevance. Newman *et al.*'s definition (this *IDS Bulletin*) of equitable appears to require redressing knowledge hierarchies between different actors, engaging critically and transparently with the politics of knowledge, and valuing all voices equally. However, under some circumstances, in real-world interaction between science and policy, the tensions, trade-offs, and compromises experienced when the research and policy come together may still lead to progressive change (Cairney 2016). However, in many policy contexts this may look more like temporary convergence around a common policy agenda than equitable partnership.

Mark Swilling, inspired by the work of Hajer, provides a compelling case for researchers to exercise some 'reflexive caution' when seeking to partner with policy actors to influence positive change (Swilling 2014; Hajer 2005). He describes researchers' mobilisation around particular public policy issues in what may be a combination of advisory services and policy advocacy as a stage-managed process. This performance is controlled by the dominant partners. Therefore, although convergence of agendas may have occurred, institutional conditions and the broader political and social context, in which each partner is governed by a separate mandate, places limitations around mutuality. Therefore, rather like Herbert Simon's 'bounded' rationality of decision makers, in which their understanding and use of evidence is shaped by political, social, and cultural factors, even in the best case scenario, mutuality of agendas in a research–policy partnership also appears bounded (Simon 1972).

5 Partnerships' engagement with policy processes

Forms of engagement between researchers and evidence users with the aim of achieving impact might differ depending on the disciplinary and associated methodological approaches of the research. For some researchers in development studies, co-production of research and meaningful engagement with partners is viewed as an end in itself. From this perspective, research is seen as development, not for development. Partnership is seen as a democratic tool that aims to promote equity and inclusivity. This approach has been central to concepts of participatory development that primarily belong to civil society advocates and scholars working on participation and empowerment (Mohan 2008). Similarly to Newman *et al.* (this *IDS Bulletin*), many participatory researchers argue that the failure to co-produce evidence with those most affected by the issues can have adverse consequences beyond the failure to achieve the ethical principle of cognitive justice. The negative effects of scientific-based agricultural reform in East Africa in the 1970s that played to the interests of a political elite and Western-dominated science over pastoralists' local knowledge is one such example (Scott 1998). The power of participation and local partnership has become

a dominant normative perspective in development studies, although the challenges of influencing policy at scale through participatory approaches remain enormous (Chambers 2017).

Our focus here, however, is on research–policy partnerships in all their forms within the remit of ESRC-DFID-funded research, not just those employing a participatory or community-based approach. We therefore recognise that approaches to research methodology that promote co-production are not the only way that researchers aim to achieve impact. Other approaches might envision a clearer division of labour between different partners in the pathways to impact process. For example, approaches to knowledge mobilisation in the early part of the new millennium were increasingly focused on the role of intermediaries, conceptualised by some as 'boundary partners' (Cash *et al.* 2003) and by others as brokers (Datta 2012). These partners are presumed to have key abilities and motivations around the translation and exchange of knowledge with policy and professional actors. This is brokerage built on attempts to move beyond a unidirectional model of knowledge transfer. Common strategies in sectors such as global health attempt to overcome 'impermeable barriers' between researchers and policymakers through fundamentally relational processes such as building multidisciplinary teams of academics, practitioners, and government officials (Sen *et al.* 2017).

This brings us to consider network analysis which focuses on the interactions themselves and related changes in individual relationships. Network analysis aims to reveal deeply rooted individual and networked relationships that may have indirect impact on evidence-informed policy and practice, regardless of the research approach being used (Jessani *et al.* 2018). It identifies that deliberative and ongoing interactivity is an essential part of engaging in non-linear, multifaceted policy formulation and implementation processes (Datta 2012). This brings us back to our earlier points on interactive theories around evidence use, and recommends that an assessment of partnerships for impact looks beyond the mutuality of agenda. Sustained interactivity that strengthens networks and results in changes in relationships appear equally important to promoting evidence use.

However, the emergent dominance of interactive theories of research to policy and practice dynamics have not gone unchallenged. For pressure groups and advocacy organisations, the existence of connections between research producers and users, and productive relationships between key individuals and institutions is important but on its own inadequate (Mayne *et al.* 2018). They argue that, in addition, advocates of evidenced-informed policy need to be capable of framing information so that it meets the demands of policymakers, often operating beyond the specialist policy community that partnerships are regularly engaging with. Paul Cairney describes how policymakers operate in an environment full of uncertainty where they must make decisions based on ambiguous information. This requires the

simplification of complex problems and, as mentioned above, bounded mutuality. In this political context, longstanding partnerships with policy actors who are often mid-level civil servants and policy professionals, does not make it any less important to construct compelling policy-friendly narratives and identify key influencing opportunities in the political sphere (Cairney 2016).

Whether operating as a policy outsider, insider, or both at once, the capability to adapt for policy requires good timing, policy-relevant research, and the ability to contextualise research evidence for live policy issues (Oliver and Cairney 2019). It also relies on having individuals positioned appropriately as members of the collaboration (Carden 2009). These qualities do not automatically emerge from mutual agendas and interactivity, and so should be given special attention. Partners in the policy sphere, such as policy professionals in government ministries or multilateral agencies, can provide access to closed policy spaces and may be privy to forthcoming announcements or new initiatives. Above all, they understand how policy issues are perceived and what opportunities might exist.

Research–policy partnerships can also be relatively technical or niche, partners may not be politically influential within their own institutions, or the issues may be low on the agenda of senior decision makers. Policy adaptability requires compromise, negotiation, and often an appetite for risk. Key policy spaces or moments must be prioritised despite research institutions working to very different timescales to policy actors and practitioners (Mayne *et al.* 2018). These interactions rarely appear consistent with the linear approach of researchers simply aiming to disseminate their research to decision makers. Donors and policy partners shape research agendas and funding opportunities and, as in the case recently in Tanzania (Dausen 2018), may even legislate around which types of evidence are politically acceptable. Policy partners can act as gatekeepers, filtering out politically awkward evidence or prioritising their own agendas.

The policy engagement capacity of partnerships appears closely related to the roles and responsibilities of their members. Partners may be constrained by their perceived roles as politically neutral, as in the case of government officials, or as neutral brokers, as in the case of academics. Some partnerships deliberately exploit these differences in the partners' mandates to their advantage, letting campaigning organisations lobby senior decision makers, and researchers provide expert advice to government officials whilst informing advocacy objectives (Pittore *et al.* 2016). You cannot predict the future and prepare for unforeseeable policy opportunities. However, you can create a partnership with the resources, members, networks, and knowledge to adapt fast to changing circumstances.

6 Proposed framework

Building on this review of literature related to an understanding of the nature of research–policy partnerships in international development settings, and the interactions between research and policy and practice, we propose that any assessment of learning arising from such partnerships should critically investigate: (1) bounded mutuality, (2) sustained interactivity, and (3) policy adaptability. Each of these qualities appear capable of contributing to processes which may result in changes in: (i) capacity to produce and use evidence, (ii) relationships that connect up the creation, interpretation, and use of evidence, (iii) knowledge and awareness of the implications of research, and, finally (iv) evidence uptake. It could be argued that high-quality evidence is a pre-requisite for research to improve policy processes, although this itself requires defining, and in a development context will almost certainly be subject to different views on what quality is (Moore *et al.* 2017).

Each of the three qualities of effective research–policy partnerships identified in our article can occur independently of each other. However, they are likely to be reciprocally reinforcing, and their combination offers the greatest opportunities for achieving the desired change. And, as many of the articles in this *IDS Bulletin* highlight, cutting across the three components of the framework is the importance of building and sustaining trust. As Hinton, Bronwin and Savage (this *IDS Bulletin*) indicate, for policy uptake to occur, 'the *process* of research matters alongside the findings'. We therefore suggest that relative weakness in one partnership quality compared to another does not automatically render partnerships obsolete.

Strength in a mutual agenda, for example, may be more crucial to a specific initiative than well-established networks. Likewise, partnerships built on partially aligned agendas may still successfully leverage awareness of a body of evidence at a critical political moment. However, success is most likely where the three characteristics converge. We therefore need to look at all three qualities together, within the broader political and social context in which they occur, and assess how they may accomplish the intended (or unintended) outcomes of the partnership. What is of central importance to the framework presented here is that the intended impacts, whether conceptual, capacity related, relational or instrumental, are understood as being interrelated to the core research partnership qualities themselves. The partnership is as much a product of, as a contributor to, the external environment.

It is also worth noting that investing in building partnerships may not always be a win-win. The time required will be at the expense of other activities in which researchers, policy actors, and practitioners each engage. For example, in academia, there is a healthy debate about whether such engagement may be at the expense of time spent developing and publishing high-quality research which is, itself, a pre-requisite for expanding theoretical and practical knowledge. There are also reputational risks where academics heavily engaged

Figure 2 Research–policy partnerships analytical framework
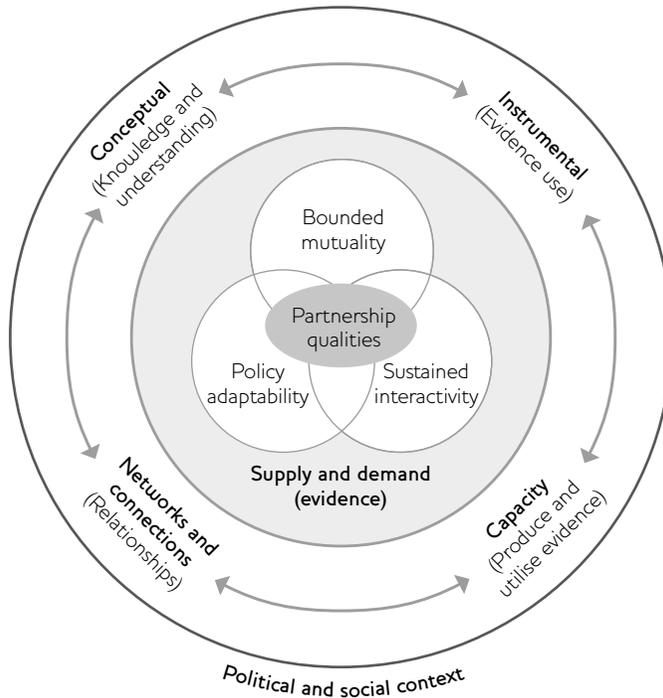
Source Authors' own.

in informing policy are sometimes criticised for being an academic 'lightweight' (Oliver and Cairney 2019). Importantly also, where the evidence contradicts the direction of policy driven by political imperatives, the position of researchers and policy actors within the networks may be jeopardised. This raises a question of the costs and benefits of researchers being insiders within policy processes, often in an advisory role, or whether they are likely to be more influential by remaining outside. There is no clear answer to this.

7 Applying the proposed qualities of research–policy partnerships to ESRC-DFID projects

In developing a framework for effective research–policy partnerships in international development settings, we take as given the case for equity and fairness. The importance of such equitable partnerships is apparent in all the articles in this *IDS Bulletin*. Nonetheless, whilst power dynamics within partnerships cannot and should not be ignored, our framework is primarily focused on the elements of successful partnerships for contributing to positive change. As many of the articles acknowledge, we also recognise that research–policy partnerships require resources and capacity, the lack of which is a major barrier to success.

7.1 Bounded mutuality

We have identified bounded mutuality as a key component of successful partnerships. A starting point for this is identifying the extent to

which there is a common understanding of the policy problem and set of values underpinning the collaboration, even if partners are mandated differently. In research–policy partnerships, this can occur where demand for and supply of evidence converge. This could be, for example, around a shared agenda of improving the quality of education or health, where policy actors or practitioners are keen to draw on evidence that will inform their design of programmes.

Mutual agenda can develop where researchers and policy actors or practitioners are involved in the co-production of research. This was the case for an international partnership focused on the development of a regional monitoring 'toolkit' for pro-poor health policy for the Southern African Development Community (SADC) (Yeates *et al.*, this *IDS Bulletin*). Yeates *et al.* identify the importance of the partnership built on a mutual agenda, namely a common recognition of the problem of the high social and economic cost of the disease burden amongst countries within the SADC. This shared recognition, together with a demand for the research by the SADC Secretariat presented a 'live opportunity'.

Johnson *et al.* (this *IDS Bulletin)* further highlight the bounded nature of mutuality. In their case, a shared vision of the political and social justice issues of promoting youth rights through listening to their voices, needed to recognise that the partners involved had different personal, organisational, social, and political agendas. For their project, such partners included NGOs, researchers in Ethiopia, Nepal, and the UK, as well as young people themselves. As the authors identify, a mutual understanding of the value of research amongst different partners cannot necessarily be taken for granted. In their case, the NGOs involved in the project supported the research to varying degrees, with some needing to be 'convinced of the value of the research as opposed to, for example, longstanding intervention strategies or participatory action processes'.

7.2 Sustained interactivity

Sustained interactivity between the partners in the research–policy process itself and the wider environment that they are focused on is a second important condition for effective partnerships. 'Sustained' means building such engagement from the very start of the research process and beyond. The most successful research partnerships continue after the projects have ended: the partnerships see value in working with each other and so look for other opportunities as part of a longer-term, iterative process, rather than merely seeing engagement beyond academia as a function of the dissemination of results. Like bounded mutuality, sustained interactivity may be built on transdisciplinary co-production within the research process itself. For Johnson *et al.* and Yeates *et al.* (this *IDS Bulletin)*, interaction between researchers and policy actors and practitioners existed before the development of their ESRC-DFID research proposals. In both examples, sustaining this interactivity via a variety of platforms to ensure smooth communications throughout the project and beyond was essential for building trust and combined ownership of the work.

For Yeates *et al.*, relationships in the UK, in Africa, and with the SADC Secretariat itself in developing a toolkit were based on participatory principles. They recognise, however, that there were some limits to the participatory approach inasmuch as the broad goals were pre-defined by the terms of the funding grant. An important aspect of this interaction was the mutual learning that occurred, such as in the capacity of partners to use evidence and evidence-use behaviours in policy development. Interaction also occurred in the process of developing publications, which was both seen as beneficial for developing trust as well as for self-reflection of government officials on the efficacy of their health programmes. As the authors note, such sustained interactivity needs to not only begin before a project starts, but also continue beyond the lifetime of a particular project.

Processes for building and maintaining diverse individual and networked connections are an important consideration in planning for impact. Advisory groups, committees, learning events, and regular meetings are one approach, which ideally need to directly inform how the research and related policy issues are understood and framed, and how the findings are developing on an ongoing basis. Such structures were found to be important for the success of Johnson *et al.*'s work in Ethiopia and Nepal (this *IDS Bulletin*). They note that meetings to share approaches, together with platform and spaces for dialogue, to agree findings and discuss potential impact, has been important, both through face-to-face and remote engagement.

Beyond these more formal structures and approaches, relationships may be fluid and informal, with knowledge and understanding passing both ways. Hinton *et al.* (this *IDS Bulletin*) compare two examples of ESRC-DFID-funded research as part of the Raising Learning Outcomes (RLO) programme: one where there were pre-existing informal relations between NGO partners of the research with both DFID and the government, and one without prior experience in the country. They identify that the former was able to open up opportunities for its research to inform DFID and the government's work much more effectively.

In some instances, attempts of sustained interactivity may be politically charged. However, it remains important in such situations. For Mulugeta *et al.* (this *IDS Bulletin*), an iterative, interactive process was needed for gaining pastoralist perspectives and using this to engage and inform district, regional, and national government officials in Ethiopia of their findings. The authors note that the Ethiopian government has a strong demand for policy-relevant research, even if this has been seen as contributing to government-led development initiatives rather than critiquing it.[4] In the context of their work, a fundamental difference in understanding of the purpose of research between the authors and government officials meant that the relationship was not straightforward. The starting point of their research, on a politically sensitive topic of understanding the causes of conflict in pastoralist areas, was based on a fundamental difference in understanding of

the causes of conflict: for the researchers, it related to a 'rational response to environmental change and state-led dispossessions, while to government, it is an expression of "backwardness" and "irrationality"'.

Indeed, partnership to achieve a conceptual shift in understanding was at the heart of their research. The iterative and evolving approach to partnership was essential for building trust. This, in turn, opened the door for dialogue around differing perspectives with the intention that the evidence could help to shift understandings amongst government partners of how pastoralists understand conflict in their communities. It would seem that the potential for shifting understandings was very much facilitated by the fact that two of the Ethiopian researchers were part of the Omo-Turkana Research Network,[5] which came about as a result of their ongoing informal engagement at a local level of government within the Southern National, Nationalities, and People's regional state of Ethiopia.

For Kett *et al.*, Johnson *et al.*, and Mulugeta *et al.* (this *IDS Bulletin)*, interactivity involves co-production through the direct engagement of marginalised populations (in these cases, people with disabilities, marginalised young people, and pastoralists, respectively). For all of them, this is a means to build trust amongst the partners, and credibility of the evidence. Kett *et al.* (this *IDS Bulletin*) identify how their research on disability in Liberia, Kenya, Uganda, Sierra Leone, and Zambia has benefited from active collaboration and co-construction with (rather than more passively including) advocates, practitioners, and policymakers. As the authors point out, it is not necessarily that people with disabilities (or others who are the focus of the research) will be gathering and analysing data, but they can play a key role in informing the design and understanding the implications of the results of the research, for example. They also highlight how engagement of people with disabilities throughout the process is a way to build capacity and the confidence of other partners in understanding their perspectives. This requires ongoing, genuine interaction and not tokenistic involvement (such as through data collection) which is likely to lead to resentment rather than the building of trust.

However, co-production of research is not always necessarily the approach used for achieving sustained interactivity. Chowdhury (this *IDS Bulletin*) provides an example of how sustained interaction between BRAC's Research and Evidence Division and the Oral Therapy Extension Programme resulted in a breakthrough in the effective use of oral rehydration therapy to address diarrhoea that was a major killer in Bangladesh in the 1980s. In this example, independent research was seen as important 'not just for research' sake but to solve a problem or to improve delivery of interventions' (Chowdhury, this *IDS Bulletin*). He notes that sustained, ongoing engagement of researchers from the pilot of the programme through to its scale-up enabled 'mid-course corrections'.

Similarly, an ESRC-DFID RLO project focusing on improving literacy in northern Uganda has been built on a partnership between Mango Tree – an NGO established in 2009 – and researchers at the University of Illinois who undertook a randomised controlled trial to identify the impact of the interventions (see Hinton *et al.*, this *IDS Bulletin*). Whilst the research was undertaken independently, the design was informed by engagement with the NGO who in turn has used the results both to inform their own practice as well as for wider engagement with DFID and government to inform policy change. Interactivity between NGOs and researchers in such independent research may not, however, always be straightforward, as this example indicates. NGOs are likely to regularly change their interventions for a variety of reasons, which can inevitably create challenges where researchers are aiming to identify differences between those receiving an intervention and those not.

7.3 Policy adaptability
Adaptability refers to the capability of partnerships to identify key influencing spaces and re-frame evidence for specific policy audiences. It also enables partners to adapt when the policy environment changes, such as in the light of shifts in the political or social contexts. Such adaptability means that partnerships are in a strong position to capture policy windows of opportunity swiftly as they arise. It might also involve collaboration with boundary partners (outside the core partnership) such as policy advocates, or other brokers such as the media who can incorporate the evidence into their own campaigns and priorities. For policy impacts, this is perhaps best understood as the ability of research partnerships focused on policy areas to provide responses to perceived policy dilemmas. This can relate to longer-term agenda setting as well as more instrumental impact on policy deliberations.

Hinton *et al.* (this *IDS Bulletin*), writing from the perspective of DFID advisers, note the importance of taking account of the differing incentives of partners – with researchers primarily recognised on the basis of high-quality publications, while governments (with short-term political cycles) having a more immediate need to identify 'what works' from a value-for-money perspective. The responsiveness of researchers, potentially with the involvement of brokers, can help to bridge this gap. Hinton *et al.* argue that donors themselves can play the role of knowledge brokers and translators (or 'super communicators' as they call them) between researchers and governments. In Uganda, for example, even though DFID did not identify itself as a knowledge broker, it clearly had a key role to play in engaging the research it had funded within national policy debates. Having the evidence on the importance of early literacy at its disposal enabled DFID colleagues to act, as key opportunities arose in design phases and strategic plans in relevant areas.

In India, the DFID adviser noted a potential mismatch between the types of publications researchers prepare and the need for research to be articulated in a way that policymakers, who are not experts, can engage with. This can be as much about framing for policy and timing

as simplifying. Bridging the gap is a role that he, as a DFID adviser, saw himself as playing, including, for example, recognising the best way to communicate with government officials where sensitive issues emerging from research might arise. However, as both the cases identify, donor advisers in-country are themselves time-constrained, incentives are not necessarily aligned with them actively engaging with research, and they might not possess the skill set needed to engage effectively with research.

Super communicators can, therefore, take other forms. In the India case, researcher engagement with the media as well as ongoing engagement by locally based academics and NGOs, has been fruitful in promoting policy uptake by government. Hinton *et al.* (this *IDS Bulletin*) note the importance of agile ways of working, as windows of opportunity, such as due to new political appointments, can be fleeting. An example of this comes from Johnson *et al.*'s work in Ethiopia (this *IDS Bulletin*). The formation of a new government presented the research–NGO partnership with a unique possibility to ensure that marginalised youth voices were heard in the development of the new youth policy.

Yeates *et al.* (this *IDS Bulletin*) recognises that despite a clear mutual agenda with the SADC Secretariat and the relatively good timing of their project, there was far more limited engagement with national-level policy actors than specialists working at the regional level. This restricted the partnership's scope for engaging in policy processes at a national level. In order to be able to mobilise research evidence for policy, the target decision makers are much more likely to be receptive when they have some sense of ownership of the knowledge. In the end, the toolkit they were working on came too late to directly impact on the current policy process that had helped frame their research. Although, two years later, it still proved relevant to the revision of a regional monitoring and evaluation initiative subsequently led by the SADC Secretariat. This demonstrates that a partnership's ability to operate effectively in the policy sphere is as much about connections with critical boundary partners as the extent to which projects are synchronised with policy formulation timescales. The first of these is all part of adapting to policy, but the second is often beyond the control of specific research initiatives.

8 Conclusions

This article has set out to review partnerships between researchers and evidence users aimed at achieving positive change in international development settings. Drawing on the existing literature, an analytical framework based on three interrelated partnership qualities of bounded mutuality, sustained interactivity, and policy adaptability emerged. These characteristics are shaped by an understanding of evidence-into-policy processes as fundamentally social and interactive, and underpinned by political context, social norms, and power. When applied to case studies of partnership from ESRC-DFID-funded research, all three partnership qualities have been found to exist to varying degrees and in different ways. Although there is evidence that these conditions helped bring about desired changes in terms of

evidence use, capacity, knowledge, and relationships, the comparative strength of these qualities in specific partnerships also suggests that even more could have been achieved if they had been more deeply rooted. And, in many cases, the principles emerge as part of the research process, rather than being planned from the outset.

We therefore conclude by proposing that the use of this analytical framework at the design stage of a research process could increase the viability of a partnership, by taking into account the importance of mutuality, interactivity, and policy adaptability from the outset. We hope others will seek to validate this concept with existing methodologies and literature, and apply variations of it to their own work.

Notes

* This issue grew out of the Impact Initiative for International Development Research which seeks to maximise impact and learning from ESRC-DFID's Joint Fund for Poverty Alleviation Research and their Raising Learning Outcomes in Education Systems Research Programme.

1 Institute of Development Studies, UK.

2 Research for Equitable Access and Learning (REAL) Centre, University of Cambridge, UK.

3 ESRC funding is based on three criteria: (1) quality – all ESRC research awards are made in open competition, subject to transparent peer assessment at the outset and evaluation on completion; (2) impact – the research is intended to make a difference; and (3) independence – independence and impartiality of ESRC-funded research is viewed as key. For further information, see: https://esrc.ukri.org/about-us/what-we-do/.

4 There has been a change in government in Ethiopia since this research took place.

5 Omo-Turkana Research Network: an international consortium of social and environmental scientists researching the impacts of hydrological, agricultural, and social change on the people and ecosystems surrounding the Lower Omo Valley and Lake Turkana. See: www.canr.msu.edu/oturn/.

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Rethinking Research Impact through Principles for Fair and Equitable Partnerships[*†]

Kate Newman,[1] Sowmyaa Bharadwaj[2] and Jude Fransman[3,4]

Abstract With renewed investment of the UK's official development assistance (ODA) commitment into research, there is a need to rethink traditional understandings of 'research impact'. In this article, we argue that impact in ODA-funded research should go beyond translating research findings into practice and policy or implementing research in partnership with research mediators/users. Instead, development agendas of those living and working in the global South, including academics and practitioners, and those working in international non-governmental organisations should influence the research agendas, approaches, and schemes that allocate funding. These stakeholders have profound knowledge of what real-world impact looks like, the types of impact needed, local and national realities, and how complex processes of development impact unfold. Drawing on a programme of research conducted by the Rethinking Research Collaborative, we examine eight principles for 'fair and equitable research partnerships' using insights from our individual experiences to offer new thinking on ODA-funded research impact.

Keywords: research impact, research partnerships, official development assistance (ODA), Global Challenges Research Fund (GCRF), INGOs, global South, practitioners, academics, multiple knowledges.

1 Introduction

The ESRC-DFID-funded Joint Fund for Poverty Alleviation Research and the Raising Learning Outcomes in Education Systems Programme are examples of an accelerating investment of the UK's official development assistance (ODA) into research, culminating in the launch of the £1.5 billion Global Challenges Research Fund (GCRF) in 2015. This unprecedented investment responds to persuasive arguments for the benefits of academic knowledge to global development (e.g. Conway and Waage 2010; Bardsley 2017). Allocating ODA to research also suggests that research can be 'ODA compliant'; i.e. that it can have the promotion of the economic development and welfare of developing

countries as its main objective.[5] As such, any research funded through the GCRF must:

- Seek to investigate a specific problem or seek a specific outcome which will have an impact on a developing country or countries;

- Provide evidence as to why this is a problem for the developing country or countries;

- Address the issue identified effectively and efficiently;

- Use the strengths of the UK to address the issue, working in collaboration with others as appropriate;

- Demonstrate that the research is of an internationally excellent standard;

- Identify appropriate pathways to impact to ensure that the developing country benefits from the research.[6]

These criteria imply that research must not only be problem (or solution) focused, relating to the 'real-world issues' and contexts of developing countries. It must also be clear from the onset about how it will create impact, in relation to economic development and the welfare of countries on the Development Assistance Committee (DAC) list (DFID 2016). Although how impact is understood in this context is not clarified.

Research impact has been an increasing priority in the UK since the focus of Tony Blair's government on evidence-informed policy in the late 1990s (Nesta/Alliance for Useful Evidence 2016) and the continuing 'impact agenda' for higher education, channelled through the Research Excellence Framework (REF) (HEFCE 2011: 17, 2017; Nurse 2015). The emphasis has shifted somewhat away from communication of research outputs to engaging users and mediators in research processes (see Fransman 2018). However, despite new requirements to describe 'pathways to impact' in order to secure public research funding, the focus remains on a relatively simplistic supply-side model of impact (Boswell and Smith 2017) which positions the expertise in academia and tends to attribute impact to the individual academic (Dunlop 2018); rather than recognising the complexity of systems and the difficulties of separating the effect of individual action from systemic effects (Cairney and Oliver 2018).

At the same time, those working as practitioners or policymakers in the international development sector engage with the complexity of 'creating impact' on a daily basis, and acknowledge that impact is dependent on a range of factors and actors (Datta 2012; Green 2016). Whether and how outcomes are achieved not only depends on an organisation's knowledge, skills, and expertise in programme design and delivery, but also on more difficult-to-control issues such as timing, political expediency, individual personalities, and relationships.

For activities to contribute to impact depends on deep contextual understandings, well-developed theories of change (which make the link between vision, outcomes, activities and assumptions) and buy-in from a range of individuals and groups. Such practices also operate within (and are therefore constrained by) national and international policy systems (see Carbonnier and Kontinen 2014; Kok *et al.* 2017).

The ability of any development activity to create impact is therefore complex and social – it involves an array of actors and implies the importance of a collaborative approach (Georgalakis 2017). In this article, we argue that for ODA-funded research to contribute to real-world impact, we need to ground that research in the experience and current practice of development practitioners, and their knowledge and understanding of what impact is needed and how this might be created. This suggests the need to radically rethink our assumptions in this area. This means that rather than starting with research priorities and the implications of the research design for 'pathways to impact', we need to take the ongoing development activities of practitioners as a starting point, working with, and within, their wider processes of change. This rethinking has implications for how research is understood in relation to other knowledge systems, how research funding is allocated, and how research collaborations are designed, implemented, and supported.

This need to rethink what is understood by (international development) research impact, and how that impact is created is a key concern of the Rethinking Research Collaborative (RRC). The collaborative (which was established in 2018) is an informal international network of academics, civil society organisations (CSOs), social movements, international non-governmental organisations (INGOs), and research support providers, who are working together to encourage more inclusive, responsive, and transformative collaborations for useful and accessible international development research. While the focus of the collaborative is on international development and ODA-funded research, it also interacts with a growing body of literature on 'knowledge mobilisation', 'evidence use'; 'co-production', and 'joint inquiry' (see, for example, Beckett *et al.* 2018; Oliver and Boaz forthcoming, 2019; Prainsack 2018). However, while there is a growing consensus around the importance of collaborative approaches for genuinely impactful research, there remains a tendency to foreground the research sphere in this work (focusing on improving the participation of non-academic stakeholders in research processes; see, for example, Fransman and Newman forthcoming), rather than foregrounding the sphere of development practice (and asking how research can be conceived and developed in this applied space).

In this article, we (three RRC representatives – from Christian Aid, the Open University, and Praxis Institute of Participatory Practices) briefly introduce current thinking on research impact, and then share the findings of a recent programme of strategic research carried out by the RRC. This research led to the generation of eight principles for fair and equitable research partnerships. We consider each principle

Figure 1 **Linear model of research impact**

Transfer or translation into policy/practice
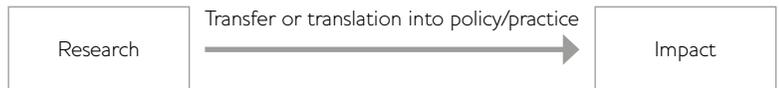
| Research | → | Impact |

Source Authors' own.

in turn, drawing on examples from our own experience to suggest that to operationalise the principles it is necessary to reconsider how research impact is understood. We conclude by proposing that if fair and equitable research partnerships are to have impact on poverty, in line with ODA criteria, then a renewed model of ODA-funded research is needed. Such a model involves changing and strengthening research systems (as well as institutions) both in the global North and South.

2 Models of research impact and the implications for research collaboration

The current drive in UK higher education policy to focus on research impact (as an end goal) and research collaboration (as a means to that goal) encompasses a range of traditions, approaches, and understandings that have emerged from sectors as diverse as health and social care, cultural heritage and community development, and science and technology (see Fransman 2018). A review of the literature and practice across these different sectors suggests that understandings of research impact have tended to evolve in similar ways which we have captured through four models; represented diagrammatically in Figures 1–4. Initially, impact was understood through simplistic linear models of knowledge transfer (see Figure 1).

These evolved to place greater emphasis on dialogue, engagement, or collaboration (see Figure 2) while retaining the linear relationship between spheres of research (which involves varying degrees of participation) and the sphere of impact.

A third wave of models began to recognise research impact as part of a more cyclical process of knowledge production and policymaking (see

Figure 2 **Relationship model of research impact**

| Research |

Engagement/
co-production

| Impact |

| Policy/practice |

Source Authors' own.

Figure 3 **Cyclical systems model of research impact**
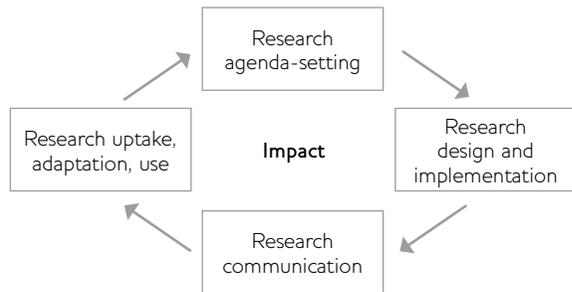
Source Authors' own.

Figure 3). While 'impact' is located in the sphere of uptake/adaptation/ use, the nature of these complex processes will be affected by the ways in which research agendas have been set and the nature of research production and communication.

More recently, understandings of impact evolved to recognise impact as part of more complex systems of knowledge mobilisation (see Figure 4).

These different models have implications for the way research impact is understood, the types of collaboration that are involved, and how capacity is strengthened.

Figure 4 **Embedded systems model of research impact**
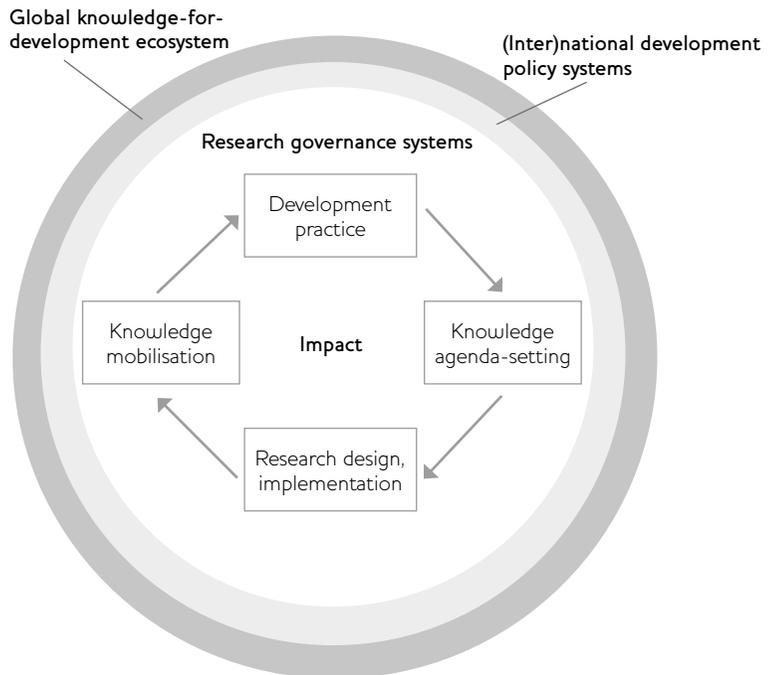
Source Authors' own.

In the first three models, the focus is on the academic research system, which might or might not invite collaboration from non-academics. In contrast, the knowledge mobilisation cycle at the heart of Figure 4 invites academic research processes to engage with the ongoing knowledge activities of development practitioners (see Hayman *et al.* 2016; Mougeot 2017), while recognising the effects of the broader national and international knowledge systems in which the cycle is embedded (Bradley 2017; Kok *et al.* 2017; Lebel and McLean 2018; UKCDS 2017).

We argue that this fourth type of approach is necessary both to fulfil the ambitions of ODA compliance in research impact; and to adhere to the implications of the eight principles developed for fair and equitable research partnerships. This has implications for how research impact is conceived and understood; as well as how such impact can be created. We suggest that the principles, initially developed to support the process of fair and equitable research partnering, can (and indeed should) be applied to give meaning to the concept of research impact. Reflecting on the principles enables us to develop a deeper understanding of the potential for research impact, and how it might be achieved. Responding to these insights suggests a need for different types of relationships between UK-based academics and their research partners; which in turn can enable a more diverse, inclusive, and relevant approach to the production of development knowledge.

3 Eight principles for fair and equitable research partnerships
3.1 Background and methodology
In early 2018, UK Research and Innovation (UKRI – a body set up to coordinate work across the seven research councils, Innovate UK, and Research England, and to create an environment to enable research and innovation to flourish) was considering how to strengthen the ODA commitments of the GCRF in response to some criticism from the Independent Commission for Aid Impact (ICAI 2017). 'Fair and equitable' research partnerships were a key element of the GCRF's approach to delivering these commitments (UKCDS 2017), but there was limited shared understanding of what the idea of 'fair and equitable' research partnerships meant in practice.

In response, the RRC proposed some strategic research (involving the collection of qualitative data through interviews, focus group discussions, and written statements) to explore the perspectives and experiences of research 'partners' (i.e. those individuals, organisations, and networks who were not based in UK academic institutions, but had been, or had the potential to be involved in ODA-funded research; these included INGO and research broker organisation staff based in the UK, and academics and civil society based in the global South[7]). Over a one-month period, the RRC reached out to its extensive networks, with each of the co-investigators targeting partners from their own stakeholder group. Respondents reflected on their experiences as partners in research, focusing on the factors which enabled and constrained their participation. It quickly became clear that in

considering fair and equitable research partnerships, it is not enough to look at a specific partnership in isolation; rather, it is necessary to consider the entire research system – from agenda-setting, to research design, implementation, and communication, as well as the mobilisation of knowledge into practice and policy beyond the research.

Building from the research, we held a roundtable event in April, bringing together key representatives from UK-based research funding bodies, GCRF strategic research leads, and representatives from the different partner organisations to discuss our findings. We also carried out a literature review to examine existing resources on partnerships. The research and discussions led to the development of a set of principles for fair and equitable research partnerships and a set of resource materials,[8] targeted at different stakeholder groups, to support translation of these principles into policy and practice.

3.2 Eight principles
The eight principles identified are as follows:

1 Put poverty first.

2 Critically engage with contexts.

3 Redress evidence hierarchies.

4 Adapt and respond.

5 Respect diversity.

6 Commit to transparency.

7 Invest in the relationship.

8 Keep learning.

In the following section, we take each principle in turn, and consider its implications for a renewed understanding of research impact. We introduce the principle through a quote from a 'research partner' (collected during our research) which influenced the formation of the principle. We then unpack the meaning of the principle, drawing on an example from practice to identify the implications for an embedded, systems-based approach to research impact.

3.3 Applying the principles to a renewed understanding of research impact
Principle 1: Put poverty first (Kate, Christian Aid[9])
Research becomes meaningful only when it helps the communities… it is extremely important to reflect on what constructive purpose the research is serving in light of the larger societal context and how it is contributing in making the world a better place to live. (Academic based in the global South[10])

For CSOs which are campaigning for social justice or implementing poverty eradication programmes, the need to 'put poverty first' is clear.

Poverty eradication is our core mandate and research is only meaningful if it adds value to our interventions, integrates with our wider work plans, and contributes to our organisational objectives. More generally, as practitioners we spend a lot of time thinking about what success looks like in our work, and what this means for how impact is understood, what it might look like in different settings and how it is created – considerations such as this are bound up in our day-to-day practice. The need to unpack assumptions about impact were highlighted to me in a specific experience I had last year:

> *It's 2017, I'm sitting in an Arts and Humanities Research Council moderators panel which is grappling with the challenge of which proposals to fund; and I am reflecting on the notion of impact. Many of these research projects are giving primacy to the power of the arts to enable developmental impact. But I'm not so sure. At their heart, these are research projects, aimed at developing new knowledge. Assumptions that knowledge will translate into action and new behaviours permeate the 'impact pathways'. And yet, I know from my work in INGOs that there is no simple linear link between knowledge and behaviour change. As I listen to the principal investigators describe their work and plans, I'm asking myself what assumptions are being made here; which of these research projects will have developmental impact. Is it about the methodologies they use, or the relationships that they have that will enable them to contribute to positive change? How much do these researchers know about other development interventions that are happening in the same area, and the challenges and successes they have had in bringing about change? Does the literature review include analysis of practitioner-generated literature detailing reflections on their learning around behaviour change, or is the focus just on how the research is located within the current academic body of knowledge?* (Kate Newman)

Reflecting on this experience suggests that if research is to have real-world impact, then it is not enough to articulate a research question that appears to address a development challenge; it is not even enough to design a good participatory process, which involves those who are facing the particular development challenge in question. Rather, it is important to locate the research within a wider practice-based theory of change – and to understand how it will 'land' in the broader context. Those designing the research need to have a deep understanding of the actors, processes, and interventions already at play, and of the different dimensions and paces of change; to understand how their research integrates into ongoing work.

Attention to these issues influences the research questions and who is asking them; the research design and whose voices are included; the research process and who the researchers are; and how creating impact will be considered and actively sought through the process. But beyond this, it suggests a shift at every level of the research system – including rethinking how research agendas are set, and how incentives are integrated into the system. For example, research funders would need to consider how to encourage and enable discussions to take place, so that those involved in supporting practical development work are able to

become influential in how research is framed, planned, and implemented, ultimately to create the best possibility for impact throughout.

Principle 2: Critically engage with contexts (Kate, Christian Aid)

If the [UKRI] *could foster genuine research collaborations over the medium to long term through its funding modalities, this would offer transformative potential for research. To make this possible,* [UKRI] *needs to consider the way the entire research funding pipeline is structured and how research collaboration can be strengthened at each point.* (Civil society practitioner based in the global South)

To understand and respond to the complex pathways to development impact discussed through the previous principle, it is crucial to recognise the multiple contexts of impact, mapping the different actors involved and identifying opportunities and barriers for change. Where we are located, what we prioritise, and how we respond to different types of evidence and knowledge, influences how we frame and understand issues. Researchers should be constantly questioning the representativeness of their partnership and the broader research funding and policy systems that support them, asking: who is included, and are they the best placed to understand and respond to the development challenges in question, or are they involved because they are relatively easy to reach and well connected? Development brokers such as large INGOs are well placed to understand and mediate these different contexts.

Based in the UK office of an INGO, I have the opportunity to interact with multiple contexts – on one day I might speak to a UK-based academic or someone from a funding institution; and my colleagues in our country offices. Having relationships across these different contexts allows me to understand some of the different dynamics, pressures, incentives and interests at play, and negotiate between them, often acting as a broker when sitting in my office in London, but equally relying heavily on my colleagues, and their ability to 'translate' contexts, when I visit a programme in the global South.

Switching between contexts helps me to understand what I know, but equally what I don't know. Christian Aid understands poverty as being caused and sustained by unequal power relations; recognising that the way these are experienced differs in different settings, and for different people (and groups of people). Through working closely with our country programmes we come to understand their contextual experiences, and create spaces so that they can determine how and why to enter into global debates. I listen, learn, and adapt my thinking; but also share my understanding of my local context so that I can support others to participate in it. By working together we aim to influence and challenge the norms that are in operation; to shift global power dynamics that shape how we interact, and how our knowledge, experiences, and perspectives are responded to. (Kate Newman)

Although contexts shape the possibilities for partnership, and for research, no context is fixed, they are dynamic. In mapping and

exploring different aspects of the context – considering who the actors are, what motivations they have, their evidence preferences, and what opportunities and constraints these present, as well as what 'power' means (i.e. who has it, why, and how is it used) – we can start to appreciate the different dynamics which shape research and influence its potential for impact. This can lay the foundations for pragmatic decisions on the extent to which such dynamics are confronted through the research and the partnership, worked around, or merely acknowledged in our research approach and impact planning. More fundamentally, this suggests that a rooted power and political analysis needs to be at the heart of a research-for-impact process, suggesting the importance of recognising diverse skills within any research process (see Principle 5).

Principle 3: Redress evidence hierarchies (Sowmyaa, Praxis)

Leadership should not be determined merely by geography or history, but by the capabilities and experience of those involved. Researchers in the global South should not be constantly put in the position of providing data for those in the UK to analyse and publish. (Civil society practitioner based in the global South)

Whose knowledge is valued, and who participates in the different stages of the research process – from design through data collection, to analysis and publication – are all underpinned by expectations about what constitutes 'quality evidence'. Although it is clear that different types of evidence are relevant when responding to different research questions, it is also clear that for many Southern academics and practitioners, there are unspoken hierarchies of evidence which marginalise their knowledge and experiences and may confine them to the role of data collectors. Reflecting on how these hierarchies play out has wider implications for impact.

Being put in the position of providing data for Northern academics to analyse and publish is an issue I have encountered frequently. It comes about largely because of the way that knowledge and evidence currently come to be seen as 'legitimate'. There is a well-established and rather non-dynamic route for research making its way into peer-reviewed journals and there are standards and processes in place to ensure whether a methodology is ethical or not. Those who manage to manoeuvre their way along these pathways tend to belong to a certain powerful class. Academic qualifications – especially PhDs – are a barrier to entering this pool of people as such qualifications are valued over years of lived experience, even if that experience has contributed to deep knowledge on the subject of the research.

A striking characteristic of current evidence hierarchies is that knowledge created by communities and their NGO partners is marginalised as grey literature. We struggle to carve out space for community outputs as valid evidence; our experience is that these are often modified by researchers who use complex frameworks to which people's realities are retrofitted. Northern researchers add this layer of interpretation to research findings to make them 'acceptable'.

And in this process, the communities or NGOs that generated evidence in the first place remain relegated to the position of information sources. The provision of a token space for the marginalised to 'participate' in research is almost always just enough to acknowledge the need to be 'democratic and informed', whilst ensuring that the balance of power remains undisturbed. (Sowmyaa Bharadwaj)

While impact in relation to Principles 1 and 2 concerned real-life changes in poverty contexts, impact here relates to the types of knowledge that are considered valuable in international development, and how knowledge is mobilised within the wider system. To have an impact on poverty, we need to include a wider diversity of knowledge to drive research agendas. This does not mean that diversity of knowledge is appropriate in every research setting. For example, scientific or medical research often includes specialist expertise and decontextualised knowledge; even so, how it translates into practice depends on broader social understanding. But in considering the impact of social science research, the needs, aspirations, and visions of those living in poverty are of central importance, suggesting a need to develop systems to enable diverse forms of knowledge to influence locally, nationally, and globally.

This means that we need to revisit systems that classify different types of evidence and shape the distinction between 'grey literature' and valid (academic) evidence and knowledge. Key to this is to build more democratic systems of knowledge certification, to decentralise control over peer-reviewed journals and other mechanisms that widen chasms, and to invest in processes to encourage and enable different types of evidence to flow into international development knowledge. For example, through involving non-academics more in research agenda-setting and allowing them to take on leadership roles. This will ensure that the knowledge generated from any research is deeper, shared on its own terms with its own framing, voices, and positionality, more closely aligned with the multiple and complex processes of change, and thereby more able to create impact.

Principle 4: Adapt and respond (Kate, Christian Aid)

Unnecessary controls in the process need to be done away with. There should be an option for an optimum degree of flexibility in the process, and more importantly, space for creativity and innovation… This is because we in the South can see certain things which others cannot see, and therefore, we should have enough liberty and freedom to change course, when necessary. (Academic based in the global South)

Social change is complex and complicated, and rarely follows a linear planned path. Although there is continued pressure from funders and policymakers for those implementing development programmes to clearly identify project outcomes, and follow neatly designed programmes of activity to reach these, there is also recognition that such pathways do not exist. Whether intended activities create the intended impact depends on the individuals involved, the (shifting) context, and broader socioeconomic, political, and environmental

dynamics. More progressive development funders are increasingly open to funding interventions that specify a programme objective, but enable flexibility in how that objective is reached, valuing space to reflect, learn, and adapt as programmes are delivered. Much can be learnt from the long-term and relational practices of NGOs which have a deep, engrained understanding of the contexts in which they work, and are adept at responding and adapting practice accordingly.

> *I am travelling to Colombia to set up a ten-year study as part of Christian Aid's commitment to deepen our understanding of how change happens, and how we and our partners contribute to it. Before I travel, I have had a few conversations about the study with my colleagues in Christian Aid Colombia, discussing the context (including the recent signing of a peace accord following over 50 years of armed conflict) and their work. But I have not had a chance to meet the partner organisation (Cómision Intereclesial de Justicia y Paz) yet. I arrive in Bogotà, and then we travel to a rural area which will be the site of the study. It is here that I intend to carry out focus group discussions with community members to understand their recent experiences, and how they view the concepts of justice and peace.*

> *Just before I arrive, a human rights defender is killed. The community visits are dominated by memorials for the individual; people are sad and scared. I have travelled a long way and used precious resources to set up this study, and yet I realise the timing is not right to assert my research needs. I must find other ways to engage, to adapt my plans, and integrate with the current needs of the community participants and the local partner. I need to listen and respond to the possibilities presented, keeping an eye on what I was trying to achieve, while respecting the needs and priorities of others involved. Less time is spent on the research itself, and more on clarifying what the partners and community want and need, and how the research would integrate with their ongoing plans to challenge injustice and build peace. It becomes clear that the research itself is seen as a way of documenting community memory; and that the international visibility which would come through the research is part of a wider plan to enable those affected by the conflict to rebuild their lives of dignity to become agents of change and build sustainable peace; my understanding of impact shifts dramatically.* (Kate Newman)

Real-world research can be challenging – the 'study area' interacts with an ongoing process, it is not a test location or a bounded discrete entity or experience. This can make planning and implementing research complex. Taking a responsive and adaptive approach can enable research to embed more deeply in its context and unearth greater possibilities for impact. Social change strategies often include processes of horizon scanning and adapting to shifting contexts and opportunities. This also implies that pathways to impact should have inbuilt flexibility to evolve over time and must be revisited, collectively, throughout the research partnership. The ability to do this will depend on strong partnership relationships with clarity of vision for the research, alongside deep understanding of the dynamic context in which it is taking place.

Principle 5: Respect diversity of knowledge and skills (Sowmyaa, Praxis)

Creative and participatory methods are best suited to engaging communities because they allow for different forms of knowledge to be recognised, and because they open the possibility for communities to make use of the research process, themselves. (Civil society practitioner based in the global South)

Making a research partnership greater than the sum of its parts means taking time at the outset to explore the knowledges, skills, and experiences that each partner brings; this includes recognising the full range of skills, beyond academic expertise, needed for partnership and for impact. Moreover, if that research is to create development impact, this will also involve exploring the views, perspectives, and aspirations of those whose lives the research is intended to change. It is not enough to understand skills, but also to consider the motivations and expectations of different partners, and each other's institutional contexts.

Being associated with an organisation that uses participatory methods and approaches to sustainable development, I find that participatory research has often emerged as a way of bringing in diverse perspectives. We are frequently approached to facilitate engagement with marginalised groups to bring their voices to the fore and often this engagement is at the core of the research output. Divergent views within the various community groups, between the researchers and the researched as well as among the various sets of researchers, emerge. The struggle is to navigate the complexities of these diverse views and at the same time, do justice to the processes that facilitated the articulation of these views. (Sowmyaa Bharadwaj)

While researchers are good at research, they may be less capable of creating change strategies, or reading and responding to opportunities to bring about change and impact, than the group of people for whom the impact is intended. Those living in poverty and experiencing discrimination and marginalisation on the other hand, when provided appropriate opportunities, are very capable of designing strategies that have far-reaching and meaningful impact. Thus, researchers need to ensure that such diverse individuals' skills are valued and respected as a foundation to creating impact.

The way that change and impact are understood and prioritised as well as understanding what types of change may be most impactful (for example, is it about those involved acting on new knowledge, or about policy change, or theoretical understanding?) requires a concerted effort. In order to create impact, we therefore need to create space to consider different perspectives on, understandings of, and needs for impact; and value diverse and distinct pathways for the importance they hold for different members of the partnership.

Principle 6: Commit to transparency (Sowmyaa, Praxis)

The entire grant process should be carried out in a structured, organised, and transparent manner. Aspects like budget and funds disbursal should be free from ambiguities to avoid any conflicts later on. There should also be flexibility in how and where the money flows, to avoid any stakeholder exerting undue rights over research funds. (Academic based in Asia)

A code of conduct or a memorandum of understanding are useful ways to make explicit the commitments of each partner in a research partnership. These include administration and budgeting, and the rights of all partners regarding acknowledgement, authorship, intellectual property, and data use. But despite the possibilities offered by mechanisms like these, there are underlying challenges about the meaning of transparency.

When I was interviewing practitioners in the global South for this research, several noted that while Northern partners tended to be very transparent about working out the research design, methods, and plans, when it came to budgets and finances, 'transparency' looked different. Southern practitioners shared how they were often expected to submit their cost estimations with no yardstick to measure against, and then these were beaten down so that they ended up working for a fraction of overall costs; after multiple iterations on methods and rushed submissions, no one had time for transparency in budgetary discussions. Similarly, at the other end of the research process, Northern partners determined which information about the research was relevant to share in monitoring reports to donors, almost always lacking overall financial reporting.

In Praxis we have had similar struggles, and have learnt that transparency needs to be about the relationships rather than a legal document. For example, when agreeing copyright there is often a long complex exchange with the legal department of the contracting entity. We might be assured of flexibility, but when the work is complete and we seek 'permission' to use the data that we have collected, we are politely refused. Rather than engage in a debate about copyright itself, we are referred to the copyright clause that was signed off on in the contract. It's almost as if transparency is wholeheartedly encouraged by the more powerful and those controlling the finances – and they put in several clauses that showcase transparency, but because they have access to systems they can ensure that they seem benevolent while power hierarchies remain in the status quo. (Sowmyaa Bharadwaj)

Challenges to transparency affect the wider processes surrounding research – including who feels ownership of the process, which can limit the potential for impact. Partners in a research relationship, in embracing the commitment to transparency, should ensure that they find ways to recognise and question these inbuilt power hierarchies rather than perpetuating them. It is only by considering the wider relationship and behaviours that transparency can begin to operate as a value rather than a transaction. In this way, it can contribute to creating impact within the specific partnership relationship and related research, and beyond to the wider research system, to open up space for discussions on fairness and equity, and to consider how impact is attributed and owned.

Principle 7: Invest in the relationship (Sowmyaa, Praxis)

The level of effort and time to bring the researcher team together with the implementing team to speak similar language, to understand each other, is exhausting. All additional costs have to be covered, and the practitioners have to be fully involved in conceptualisation, design, methods development, etc. So having a model where your costs are capped or you are even expected to contribute your own resources doesn't work. (INGO practitioner, global North)

Partnership working takes time, and this needs additional investment beyond the costs of the research itself. Ensuring that relationships between partners move beyond the transactional relationships detailed in the contract can offer better opportunities for impact. But creating space for communicating, listening, and understanding multiple perspectives within a research partnership is not always straightforward.

For us at Praxis, research relationships that have gone beyond a contract relationship have been far more enjoyable, offer a much better space for innovation, have yielded far better results and been used in forums and platforms that were not initially planned. The stumbling block to such relationships is sustainability, because the relationship with an organisation is invariably steered by an individual. Organisational relationships are actually those of two people; a lot depends on this.

Another often tricky side to relationship building is ensuring recognition of the different levels of power that the partners in the research relationship wield. Often, in tripartite relationships with Northern academics that we align with in philosophy, we feel pushed up against a wall if one of the other consortium partners who we are depending on for their visibility potential, like for instance a government department, happens to be an agency that perpetuates or strengthens power hierarchies itself. The challenge then is to work out whether to invest in strengthening such a relationship. (Sowmyaa Bharadwaj)

Strong and sustained relationships are vital for impact, but relationship building is a less tangible aspect of research and seldom funded. And yet, sustained relationships are essential for bridging knowledges, creating common languages, and facilitating impact pathways. Funders could help by earmarking funds for the relationship before, during, and after projects. Partners might also consider the need to work beyond the templated and inflexible contractual dotted line framework and join efforts. This would help to avoid reducing partnerships to the commitments of individual people, by investing in strategies to ensure that the wider organisation benefits from, and has an interest in, sustaining the partnership. Given the long timescale of development impact, such long-lasting relationships are key to enabling sustainable change.

Principle 8: Keep learning (Jude, Open University)

[The lead partner] *organised monthly reflection meetings and quarterly planning meetings where partners shared the work and challenges. This helped inform the shared decision-making system.* (Civil society practitioner based in Asia)

Research partnerships are important because they enable us to work with people that we would not usually work with, and in ways that we do not usually work. This can give us access to new skills, perspectives, understandings, and knowledges; and it can mean that together we can create opportunities for synergies and deeper understandings. Learning is about mindset and openness. Within a research partnership, it is about valuing diversity. If the partnership is to become a site for transformation, it is necessary to deliberately create spaces to enable learning. It is also important to recognise that learning is not always comfortable and can frequently be emotional – while on the one hand we might be learning new skills, we might also be learning about ourselves, our assumptions, and behaviour. Translating that learning into action requires bravery and honesty. Without mechanisms to capture learning and channel it back into onward organisational strategies, the benefits of individual and collective learning will always be limited.

> *Our strategic research was grounded in previous learning – from within our different organisations, through our emerging collective RRC network, and that of the wider community of people involved with the GCRF. While our objectives emphasised the creation of learning outputs, I underestimated the extent to which the project would spark learning on an individual level and for our collaborative. The rushed and under-funded nature of the work meant that partners were giving far more than their paid time. Feelings of frustration, indignation, and even resentment merged with high levels of stress. But there were positive emotions too – a passionate commitment to our vision for changing policy and practice, shared moments of solidarity and humour, exhilaration when it started coming together and the funders responded so positively.*

> *Uniting at the end of the project to write a reflexive learning case study allowed us to vent and share these emotions and experiences. We had all experienced different learning journeys and had been affected in different ways but creating a space to express these enabled us to build trust and feel stronger as a team. Developing this article has been a similar challenge but also another opportunity to listen to and learn from each other. However, we are still challenged in how best to channel this learning beyond the individual partners back to our own institutions and the project funders. With so much emphasis on 'success' and pressure to showcase achievements, it is hard to have deep discussion at the institutional level, to engage with wider systems, and encourage them to respond to the more uncomfortable aspects of learning.* (Jude Fransman)

A meaningful model of impact for ODA-funded research must have learning at its core. Learning underpins ability to: develop shared understandings of context and agendas for change; map and respond to different actors; unpack power and bring together different knowledges and experiences; flexibly adapt to changing circumstances; and ensure strong communication and ongoing relationships. Moreover, spaces for individual reflection must be complemented with processes to share learning, within the partnership and beyond, to translate learning into organisational development. Taking a learning approach requires a

Table 1 Contribution of the eight principles to a renewed understanding of impact/towards a process of achieving greater impact

1	**Put poverty first**	Situate research impact pathways within existing practice-based development work/impact systems.
2	**Critically engage with contexts**	Consider the multiple contexts of research and who is represented across the partnership and research system, reflecting on implications for how impact is understood, where impact might be felt and given meaning.
3	**Redress evidence hierarchies**	Recognise the different knowledge and evidence preferences/needs of the actors involved and ensure spaces are created to shift assumptions on what types of evidence, and whose knowledge can create impact and how.
4	**Adapt and respond**	Complex and rapidly changing development contexts require responsive and adaptive practice. Learn from the vast experience of practitioners who work adaptively and over the long term in specific contexts.
5	**Respect diversity**	Bringing together the diverse actors required for meaningful impact means valuing difference. Participatory and creative methods can help partners to understand each other and negotiate differences.
6	**Commit to transparency**	To build trust and ensure the commitment needed to maximise impact, all processes (including budgets) must be open. Create impact in the research system to ensure transparency moves beyond legal agreements to influence behaviours, expectations and ways of relating.
7	**Invest in the relationship**	To achieve meaningful impact, relationships must be strong and sustained. This involves thinking about shared visions and agendas beyond the individual project and funding adequate time to understand each other and build trust.
8	**Keep learning**	To develop shared agendas for change and be able to create impact, invest time in individual reflection and ensure processes to feed learning back into the wider partnership and research systems.

Source Authors' own.

culture shift to recognising and embracing the learning from potential failure, acknowledging that while projects might struggle in certain ways, learning from this can be key to enabling impact. This includes a recognition that impact may come in a different form from that initially envisaged.

Table 1 summarises the contribution made by each of the principles to our proposed understanding of impact.

4 Conclusions

By reflecting on and giving meaning to a set of principles, initially designed to support 'fair and equitable partnerships', we can delve deeper into understanding the role partnerships can play in contributing to more impactful research. Our experience and our analysis suggest that there are multiple factors that need to be considered if research is to become properly embedded in systems of development and change.

Theory on research impact has evolved in recent years. What started with assumptions of linear transfers – linking knowledge and impact directly – have become more complex, recognising both the need for co-production during research processes and considerations of cyclical models of research uptake, adaptation, and use. However, to date, this theory has engaged with impact from the perspective of the academic research system. By drawing on the eight principles for fair and equitable partnerships, generated from a 'partners' perspective', and sharing specific experiences we argue that if research is to be truly impactful, it needs to take its direction from the ongoing development activities of those working actively to bring about social change. By taking practice as the starting point, and appreciating the complex pathways to creating change, it is more likely that research will be able to contribute to real-world impact. This shifts the way research impact is understood, to ensure that it responds more closely to the knowledge and experience of those working directly to challenge poverty and contribute to social justice.

Operationalising such an embedded approach to impact has implications at different levels, for different actors involved.

Academics based in the global North need to be properly incentivised and supported to develop deeper impact models. This includes establishing the skills and capabilities they need to be able to properly engage with the understanding, knowledge, and experience of those outside the Northern university environment. It also means ensuring that a process which encourages the reporting of impact also takes into account the complexity of pathways, and focuses on valuing contribution rather than attribution, recognising the range of dynamics that affect the potential of any piece of research to create impact. Likewise, **academics in the global South** need to be encouraged to identify where collaboration with Northern-based academics brings value, and where collaboration with civil society practitioners may be more appropriate.

Understanding impact as complex, multifaceted, adaptive, cyclical, and long term has implications for research governance and agenda-setting. **Research funders in the global North** will need to develop new funding models with greater representation of a diversity of development actors in funding decision-making. New investment must be made to ensure adequate time for mapping impact contexts and actors, to respond to complex development impact pathways, and to

build strong, open relationships which recognise and combine different knowledges, creating spaces and systems for learning throughout.

Finally, **civil society practitioners** based in the global North and South also need to adapt: this includes recognising and asserting the skills and understanding **that they have developed** through their development interventions and **applying these** in the field of development research. But it also requires a deeper understanding of what research can and cannot bring into their wider impact strategies. Such practitioners need to understand when research might be useful, what research might be useful, and what skills and relationships are needed to be able to do it.

There are many good reasons for practitioners to engage in research as part of their development interventions; for example:

● To understand more about an issue observed as affecting programming and thereby to sharpen a programmatic intervention/ building a better response to a development challenge;

● To deepen understanding or gather evidence on an issue which may inform policy development, or be used within advocacy and campaigning action;

● To support reflection on and development of internal organisational practice, including how knowledge and evidence are understood within the organisation;

● To capture learning and deepen understanding of how work contributes to change, to strengthen practice, to secure funding, or influence the practice of others; and

● As a way of exploring, articulating, gathering, and documenting, from the perspective of those involved in programme work, to enable their voices, understanding, and sense-making to inform wider debates and dialogue on specific development issues.

But for research to have impact in any of these cases, it is crucial that the practitioner situates the research within their broader change strategy and invites others to collaborate within their process. This requires that all those involved acknowledge their skills and capabilities, positionalities, and motivations, to work together to enable such responsive embedded research, being honest about both the potential and limitations it offers. By building research agendas and focusing research design in this way, those involved in scoping, funding, and delivering ODA-funded research can create the potential for ODA excellence and enable research to play an active role in poverty eradication.

Notes

* This issue grew out of the Impact Initiative for International Development Research which seeks to maximise impact and learning from ESRC-DFID's Joint Fund for Poverty Alleviation Research and their Raising Learning Outcomes in Education Systems Research Programme.

† The authors would like to thank our funders, UK Research and Innovation (UKRI) for supporting this work. The research was supported by the Global Challenges Research Fund (GCRF), grant number: NS/A000075/1 and also by a Leverhulme Early Career Fellowship which allowed the Principal Investigator (PI) to coordinate this work, grant number: ECF-2014-605.

1 Christian Aid, UK.

2 Praxis Institute for Participatory Practices, India.

3 The Open University, UK.

4 The authors would like to thank the co-investigating team who have been an integral part of the thinking in this article: Budd Hall, Rachel Hayman, Pradeep Narayanan, and Rajesh Tandon.

5 www.oecd.org/dac/financing-sustainable-development/development-finance-standards/What-is-ODA.pdf.

6 www.ukri.org/files/legacy/international/gcrfodaguidance-pdf/.

7 Some of these partners had been actively involved in GCRF or UK-funded research, others were potential partners; we wanted to understand why they had not been involved to date.

8 See www.christianaid.org.uk/about-us/programme-policy-practice/resources-fair-and-equitable-development-research-partnerships.

9 The name in brackets beside each principle refers to which of the three authors is reflecting on their practice in addressing this principle.

10 This and following quotes from interviews/focus group discussions, April 2018.

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Pathways to Impact: Insights from Research Partnerships in Uganda and India[*†]

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Abstract This article sets out a perspective from the United Kingdom's Department for International Development (DFID) on the challenges of achieving research uptake. Two country case studies are presented from India and Uganda, which explore research projects under the Economic and Social Research Council ESRC-DFID-funded Raising Learning Outcomes programme. These case studies focus on relationships between the key stakeholders that enable policy debate relevant to the funded research. They are not a direct assessment of the impact that this research has had. Rather, this article explores the messy and iterative processes that DFID advisers are engaged in within the networks that they are embedded (and those that they are not), the way that they use partnerships to access evidence and promote it into policy debate, and the other drivers that matter. This article is important as a contribution to ongoing efforts to improve the quality and usage of education evidence in low-income contexts.

Keywords: education research, impact, partnership, policy, donors, international development, learning outcomes, DFID.

1 Introduction

Demand for evidence in education is growing. Countries across the globe recognise that education has the potential to unleash talent and support wider development. In January 2019, the Education World Forum (EWF) in London saw education ministers gather to debate 'what we should do with what we know: developing education policy for implementation impact and exponential success' (Education World Forum 2019). The 93 ministers at the EWF were on a quest to identify policies and programmes that could be applied in their country contexts to improve learning outcomes for all children. Rigorous evidence on how to do this is limited. Yet even the evidence that we do have is not routinely informing education policy and programming activity (RISE 2015). While the relationship between evidence and policy is not simple or linear, we believe it could be stronger. We, the three authors of this

article, aim to show here the 'knowledge space' that exists between research, policy, and practice in two countries: Uganda and India. Case studies have been selected on the basis that research grants under the Raising Learning Outcomes programme are live. As such, we set up the context and themes that the rest of this *IDS Bulletin* will revisit.

The authors are education advisers and members of the Education Research Team at the Department for International Development (DFID).[4] Our team has three key objectives: to commission rigorous qualitative and quantitative research; to focus research calls on 'what works' rather than problem identification; and thirdly, to build a culture of evidence (generation and use) in education in low-income contexts. High-quality evidence underpins effective policy engagement and dialogue with partner countries, and robust sector planning. We are part of a wider Research and Evidence Division (RED), which works to make DFID more systematic in the use of evidence and thereby have greater development impact.

RED contributes new knowledge and evidence to DFID and the broader global development community, as a global public good. It does this through active engagement with policymakers, commissioning research on key questions in development, and by ensuring robust evaluation of DFID's programmes. We work with the global research community to help produce guidance to support this mission through the Building Evidence in Education (BEE) global group that includes the World Bank, USAID, and United Nations agencies and foundations (see Hinton 2015; and Patrinos and Cross 2015; BE² forthcoming, 2019). DFID also recognised the need for accelerated action to ensure that research and evaluation evidence informs policy and programming choices. With this mission, in 2013, a dedicated *Evidence into Action* team was established within DFID.

One significant programme that DFID initiated, to help build the body of evidence in education, was developed in partnership with the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC). Started in 2014, this eight-year programme, Raising Learning Outcomes (RLO), aims to 'improve the efficiency, effectiveness and equity of education systems to deliver learning outcomes at scale in developing countries' (DFID 2018). DFID tracks the extent to which 'evidence generated through the programme contributes to debates amongst policymakers and practitioners' (*ibid.*). In order to achieve this, RLO research commissioning calls demanded (1) policy-relevant questions, (2) focus on large-scale interventions – ideally embedded within government, (3) mixed methods approaches to consider 'why' and 'how' alongside 'what works', and (4) a focus on gender and equity. Every applicant had to outline their intended 'pathway to impact', which have since been supported by an additional programme function, the Impact Initiative (organisers of this *IDS Bulletin*) to enhance the potential for research impact.

The global context has shifted. Donors, once significant players in terms of financing and sector budget support, may be on the margins of government sector planning. With this relative reduction in donor funding, governments are seeking evidence as a valued contribution from development assistance, a new 'currency' of development. DFID-funded research aims to support the highest standards in delivering this evidence and requires the use of rigorous and robust research methodologies, including adherence to internationally recognised ethical standards, with outputs disseminated openly following a robust process of quality assurance and/or peer review. 'Research outreach' refers to activities by researchers, their teams and implementers, or DFID staff to share findings of this research. A key rationale for working with the global community through BEE is to ensure both efficiency by jointly funding research, but critically to also provide greater coherence in the messages that are delivered to policymakers at a country level. By 'research uptake' and 'research impact', we mean that this research has contributed to debate about policy and practice (uptake) with the ultimate objective of improving development outcomes (impact). These definitions make clear some of the assumptions that underpin our analysis. We recognise that achieving impact is not a linear or inevitable pathway.

The remainder of this article is in three parts. First, we will present the theoretical framework which guided our interview approach and analysis of case studies. This explains that we believe that these knowledge systems rest on relationships. Second, we will present findings of two case studies before, third, drawing conclusions about actions that we and those we work with can take, to engage more meaningfully in the 'knowledge space'. It is important to note that we are not judging or assessing the policy impact of specific RLO grants here. Nor are we attempting to analyse academic incentives to achieve impact on policy and/or practice, or trends within education research on low-income contexts (though some observations from our wider work may implicitly emerge). We are not empirically documenting country reality either: this is not a full-blown political economy or behavioural insights analysis of the two countries.

We draw upon our wider experience and key informant interviews with three sets of people – DFID country advisers, RLO researchers, and government officials – to present a snapshot of how research can inform thinking and action in-country. The quotes represent individual opinions rather than being representative of the stakeholder group. In so doing, we challenge our own thinking about the relationships that enable research uptake and a culture of evidence in education.

2 Theoretical framework
We have developed a conceptual framework based on our wider experience of international development both from within and outside of DFID, and work with the RLO programme. We draw on the body of literature that explores knowledge systems in low-income contexts (which is relatively small – most of this literature focuses on

Figure 1 **The pillars of policy impact**
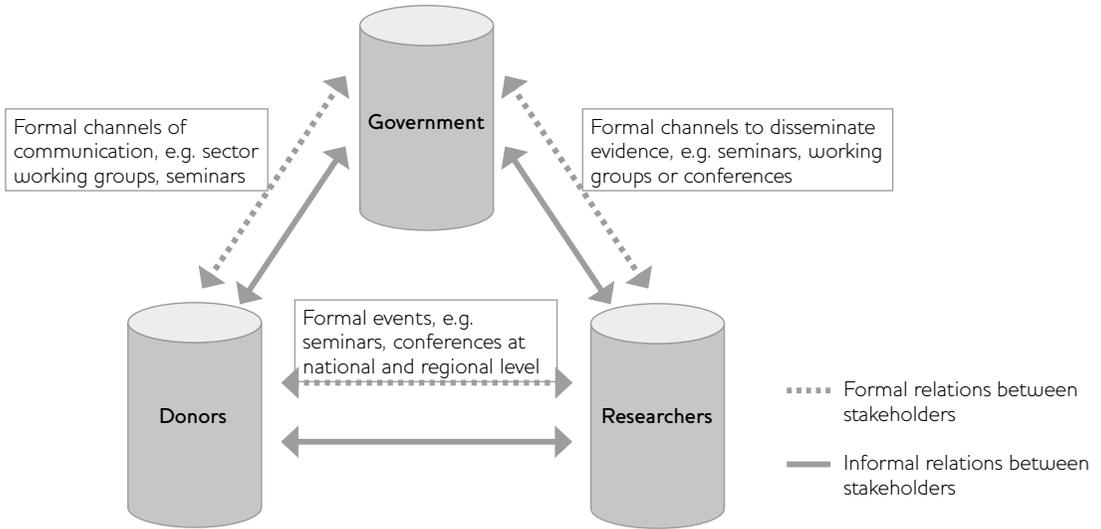
Source Authors' own.

OECD contexts). This includes research that shows decisions made in partnership between politicians, researchers, and civil society are more likely to lead to positive outcomes (Oliver, Lorenc and Innvaer 2014). This has particularly been evidenced in relation to health and agriculture (Datta 2018), which has a longer history, spend, and supply of more robust research in developing contexts than education research. We also draw upon literature that shows that 'the seemingly straightforward story of information supply, demand and use is complicated by user norms (how they prefer to make decisions), relationships (who they know and trust) and capacities (their confidence and capability to turn data into actionable insights)' (Custer *et al.* 2018).

In every results framework for a research programme funded by DFID, you will likely find an indicator related to 'policy uptake' or 'policy impact'. The results framework will set out what seems to be a linear theory of change: that commissioned research will, through activities organised by the research programme, reach education policymakers and practitioners. This new knowledge will convince these actors to change their decisions, thus resulting in real-world change and positive impact. We aim to show, through our conceptual framework and underpinning literature, that we do not believe this to be a straightforward linear process, but do believe that through better understanding and support to local knowledge systems, we can enable a greater impact of research on practice.

The increased funding of education research and demand coming from governments can shift debate and inform the development of policy. In other words, the *process* of research matters alongside the findings. Research is often viewed as the professional activity of generating knowledge and not enough value is placed on peer

networking, communication, and policy relevance throughout the process (Gévaudan 2017). Policymakers can be sceptical of researchers advocating their own findings; rather, they value the rigorous assessment of the global body of evidence. We observe that the role of a resident 'neutral' adviser (a role which in some countries is or could be taken up by a DFID adviser, for example) can be an important driver to facilitate the inclusion of evidence as part of a conversation in a non-linear policymaking process over time. Part of the importance of building a 'knowledge system' is to create an environment that enables evidence use, informs debate, and leads to more questioning of how policies and programmes should be developed and implemented.

Our framework makes explicit both the informal and formal relationships between three key stakeholder groups (see Figure 1) that we consider important to the achievement of large-scale policy impact: donors, researchers, and government actors.[5] We are not ignoring civil society, non-government organisers, the private sector, teachers, parents, and wider community members; rather, we are focusing on the existing dominant pillars and the relationships within and between these three groups. We reflect on the limitations of this approach in the conclusion. The metaphor of pillars as siloes aims to highlight the powerful incentives that inadvertently operate to privilege building intragroup relationships, rather than developing intergroup relations.[6] Each stakeholder pillar has a unique incentive set that drives the use of time and resources towards intragroup communication and flows of knowledge. For members of each pillar, success primarily relates to their status and esteem within their respective communities.

In over-simplified terms, *governments* need to identify 'what works' to secure buy-in to deliver manifesto commitments and implement reforms in an electoral cycle. Ministers are incentivised to maintain their popularity and voting base of citizens by delivering results. *Academics* need to develop ideas, deliver their research activity, speak at global conferences, and publish in top journals.[7] For bilateral *donors*, the drivers are to deliver the global goals; this demands that they secure resources for programmes. Success is measured by indicators that are often preassigned in results frameworks. With responsibility to show value for money to taxpayers, attention is on delivery of results. DFID country advisers may not have available time to deliver to centrally managed research programmes, where the 'senior responsible officer' (SRO)[8] is not in their chain of management. However, DFID's focus on professional development, and the logging of activity has historically been an important driver of research engagement. Increasingly, advisers are responding to government demands for policy advice; they recognise that evidence is their new currency of engagement.

Relationships between, and the user norms and incentives of these actors, are the subject of a much wider set of literature which raises bigger issues that go beyond the scope of this article. For instance, the donor–government relationship is addressed by an extensive literature

on the politics, geopolitics, and economics of aid. However, little of this literature considers the role of aid in global knowledge production, or the role of evidence in the aid relationship. It is easy to apply common theories on two sides of the aid debate to evidence. On the one hand, donors can be seen as brokers and translators of knowledge (Lewis and Mosse 2006), enabling national (government, civil society, local actors') ownership of the response to the evidence. Donors fund and present evidence on a particular policy-relevant question to governments or practitioners; governments choose to adopt this and amend policy accordingly or not. There is also literature that considers incentives for governments to demand and use research. This covers political and cultural reasons for demand/lack thereof, as well as capacity issues (capacity of individual policymakers, as well as the system they work within – such as limited internet connections) (Carden 2009; Newman, Fisher and Shaxson 2012; Carter *et al*. 2018).

Relationships between academics and government or donors are not covered by an extensive literature (Georgalakis *et al*. 2017), but there are again big issues here that we do not tackle in this article: the relative lack of funding to education research; a smaller field of education researchers; the extent to which researcher incentives to get tenure track and be published in top journals can jar with efforts to achieve research impact). We are not assessing whether research generated through co-creation between governments and researchers will be more likely to achieve impact (Boateng 2018); nor whether local researchers are essential members of the team for this pathway; we are taking the importance of this relationship as a grounding assumption.

We use a series of interviews to chart the nature of the intergroup relationships between government, donors, and researchers. Our informants, from each of these groups, highlight the messy reality of a pathway to impact. The interviews do not reveal a straightforward process to be achieved through an equation of having a local research partner, meeting a government official, publishing a blog, and presenting at a conference. Rather, they reveal the power of partnerships, in different forms, that enable the development of trust and potential for impact. Do governments feel research produced is relevant to their needs, or have the financial or human capacity to engage with the research findings? Given the proliferation of actors, are 'evidence-based' messages similarly proliferating? Is the donors' focus on their 'national interests' and their 'own' programmes constraining capacity to act as knowledge brokers for wider evidence? Is the need for an academic to publish in a high-ranking journal a hindrance or a help in terms of research uptake? Do institutional incentives of each of the stakeholder groups work against collective evidence-based action? Does this matter: is there a sense that the knowledge space in these contexts is alive, and prompting evidence-based decisions?

The case studies were selected to illustrate a range of the challenges noted above. They are not in-depth studies that can provide wider

generalisations; rather, they represent individual insights from across the three stakeholder groups. Many of the interviews were conducted by phone, not in the country context; thus statements were not confirmed by observations. These personal testimonies provide insights that indicate areas for further exploration, including the assumption embedded in the programme design that strong relationships between researchers and policymakers will be needed to drive future research uptake.

Uganda and India were both chosen as case studies due to the authors' familiarity and experiences in these countries. The case studies provide insights into critical factors that both restrict and enable research uptake. For example, the Uganda case study highlights the tension between the time required to produce high-quality research, and the time to engage with policymakers, who were often difficult to access. Meanwhile, the case study from India shows the shifting nature of the donor–government relationship, and reduced DFID education spend.

The case studies prompt a broader question. As the balance of resources shift away from donors being a powerful player in terms of their financial aid, will their 'seat at the table' depend in future on their ability to bring evidence to support policy debate? The EWF with 93 ministers present showed the increasing demand for knowledge of 'what works'? Is this an opportunity for more equal debate on how to shift learning outcomes and meet the global goals? Is evidence indeed the new currency of development?

3 Case study 1: pathways to impact in Uganda
3.1 Background to Uganda case study
The goal of Uganda's National Development Plan II (2015/16– 2019/20) is to reach middle-income status by 2020. Education is regarded as a government priority; however, this is not reflected in the commitment to education spend,[9] which in Uganda is around half the global recommendation and half that of its East African neighbours. The global 'learning crisis' is apparent in Uganda, with only one out of ten children assessed in Primary 3 in Uganda able to read and comprehend a Primary 2-level story and correctly solve Primary 2-level arithmetical division (Uwezo 2015). The most recent Education Sector Review seems to suggest that national education priorities are still focused on increasing school infrastructure, rather than a commitment to increasing learning outcomes. The challenge of raising learning outcomes is further compounded by the school-aged population (6–18 years) expected to almost double between 2010 and 2025 to 20.6 million (World Bank Group 2015: 52).

DFID and ESRC's RLO research programme has funded three projects in Uganda, two of which contributed to this case study to explore the role of partnerships for impact. The first research programme, led by Edward Seidman at New York University, sought to develop and validate an innovative, affordable, scalable, and practical tool for assessing teacher practices and classroom processes. It tested the tool,

Teacher Instructional Practices and Processes System (TIPPS), in the context of Uganda, with the additional aim of identifying its potential for providing feedback to teachers. The second research programme, led by Rebecca Thornton from the University of Illinois, uses longitudinal data to identify whether, with the right combination of training, teaching, and learning materials, teachers can be supported to effectively teach literacy – even in rural, under-resourced, overcrowded classrooms. The study also explores economic approaches to implementation at scale to determine value-for-money impacts on pupil learning and teacher performance in African schools. Researchers from both projects based in Uganda shared their experiences in relation to pathways to impact, in addition to representatives from DFID Uganda and a member of the National Examination Board working closely with the Ugandan government.[10]

3.2 Uganda government–donor intergroup relations

The appetite and use for education evidence in the Government of Uganda is still emerging. For example, the 2017/2018–2019/2020 Education Sector Strategic Plan, developed by the Ministry of Education and Sport has little to no reference to evidence or education sector analysis in Uganda. According to an adviser in DFID Uganda, up to 90 per cent of the education budget is already allocated to recurrent expenditure, which leaves limited room for creative thinking and decision-making and perhaps limits the perceived relevance of research. The DFID adviser added that there have been a number of examples of push back based on political decisions being made in the face of strong evidence; for example, in response to evidence on public–private partnerships. In addition, there is a general impatience from the government over research pace and timelines, and therefore a resistance to spending the time needed to test what works. The DFID adviser stated:

> There is limited appetite from government on using research and evidence to inform prioritisation and decision-making… As a way of being strategic, government list their priorities and respond opportunistically to offers that come.[11]

This opportunistic approach from the government suggests the importance that partnerships can play in being able to respond to government demand effectively.

There are, however, examples of evidence uptake. For example, in 2017, the Ministry of Finance held a Growth Research Conference, which led to the current narrative around the importance of human capital on meeting the growth agenda; a significant shift considering the priorities stated above around infrastructure. The Government of Uganda and the Local Development Partner Group has recently developed a new National Partnership Framework to illustrate areas of shared priority and to present thematic and key action areas to drive progress, which includes human capital development.[12]

In education, research commissioned through DFID's regional research hub on early years repetition, demonstrated how evidence can be successfully used for advocacy. The commissioner and his policy team were engaged in all parts of the research from the tools analysis and dissemination, which has since informed their thinking on early years. Ongoing research, led from UC Berkley on teacher attendance and teacher transfers, are good examples of government collaboration in evidence generation and application. A Southern-based co-investigator researcher commented that the interest in this particular research may be due to a number of reasons, including: the issues aligning directly with government challenges and priorities; strong partnerships between Northern and Ugandan researchers; Ugandan researchers having close links to the governments – for example, through having worked at the Ugandan National Examinations board; and involved collaboration with the government from the design phase. This again seems to suggest the value of having strong research expertise and partnership embedded in-country as well as the value of utilising those who have existing experience of collaborating with government.

3.3 Uganda researcher–government intergroup relations

The Prime Minister's Delivery Unit has identified four priority sectors, of which education is one. With support from a DFID Uganda-funded programme (Strengthening Evidenced Based Decision Making in Uganda), the Office of the Prime Minister both commissions research and requires that all departments and ministries have monitoring and evaluation working groups. Some working groups are more active than others but according to researchers in Uganda, these working groups are hard to access, navigate, and negotiate. They are often reserved for the bigger multilateral partners and not necessarily those researchers who are not in a partnership or partnered with a small non-governmental organisation (NGO). However, the power of partnership with NGOs as part of the pathway to respond to evidence or influence policy is exemplified by Thornton's research project partnered with the Ugandan NGO Mango Tree. The NGO, started in 2009, was incubated in context and already had informal partnerships with national and local government. The NGO has made small financial contributions to government initiatives to actively show reciprocal support, as well as to use relationships to build awareness. This has led to more formal integration of subsequent research and thinking, as well as enabling research to better respond and adapt to policy windows.

The classroom observation research, on the other hand, explored partnering with an NGO; however, they found this was difficult and ultimately not possible due to the mismatched incentives, timelines, and ways of working of researchers and the NGO, especially due to the conditions required for rigorous randomised controlled trials (RCTs). Again, this seems to come back to the value of relationships, where relationships are built over time, informally and formally, and viewed as two-way, not only between the NGO and researchers but also between the NGO–research partnership and government. The Mango

Tree researcher concluded that 'the researcher–NGO partnership can support national interventions and engage with government public activities… which goes a long way in building partnership'.[13]

The opportunities utilised by the Mango Tree research partnership with government does seem to support the researcher's observation that there is a growing capacity and capability within those in government to recognise rigorous evidence and understand the role evidence and research can play. However, there are also still strong incentives and benefits for the government to engage with consultants over rigorous research. Therefore, the value of building and fostering partnerships and relationships over time seems to play a significant role in building the demand and use of evidence by government.

3.4 Uganda researcher–donor intergroup relations

Researchers funded by DFID central programmes can have stronger links to DFID headquarters than with the DFID country adviser, even if as in this case, they are based in-country. This is perhaps primarily due to large-scale education research programmes being commissioned out of the UK and therefore researchers and DFID country advisers not necessarily having opportunities to form formal relationships, therefore missing opportunities to identify benefits of partnerships or closer involvement. One researcher[14] based in Uganda challenged that 'funders need to be more aware of who is doing what where, including investments in research in-country and centrally'. However, in contexts where there is often only one education adviser managing a large education portfolio in-country, DFID advisers do not necessarily self-identify as knowledge brokers, as is the case in Uganda. Engaging in research and with researchers is perhaps viewed as a luxury and a nice thing to have. Therefore, the strength of this relationship with the local country DFID office seems to vary between individual researchers.

Clear examples of evidence informing education policy and programming seem to stem from where there are existing relationships, including informal relationships. DFID Uganda's existing relationship with Mango Tree researchers meant that when the research gained traction with government, DFID used the momentum to inform the design of the DFID education programme and challenge current government thinking on the language of instruction in primary education. In the case of the classroom observation research, there were no existing relationships with DFID in-country and therefore the absence of informal connections seemed to limit the opportunity for researchers to engage more formally with DFID in-country, and potentially limit further opportunities for partnership and impact. The potential for this researcher–donor relationship to impact policy or practice does, it seems, depend on timing and ability to act during windows of opportunity provided by design phases and strategic plans. Therefore, existing relationships, informal or formal, are essential to enable partnership and research impact.

All researchers interviewed reflected that there are two key requirements for impact in Uganda. First, partnerships for impact work best when research teams are embedded in countries full-time, and are known to partners, donors, and governments and are part of key working groups and technical groups. Second, there is a need to redefine what it means to be a research partner: not just responsible for the production of evidence, but a need to actively engage with policy too. DFID could potentially support the role of partnerships for impact by building in more rigorous requirements, incentives, and expectations when commissioning research, to ensure in this case, closer collaboration at all stages of research with Ugandan researchers and Ugandan decision makers.

4 Pathways to impact in India[15]

4.1 Background to India case study

India is the fastest growing major economy in the world, projected to grow at 8.2 per cent per year over the next five years. Yet it is also home to the largest absolute number of people living in extreme poverty in the world. Education is seen by many as the way out of poverty, and a means to overcome entrenched social exclusion. The Department for School Education and Literacy develops national policy, including Sarva Shiksa Abhiyan (SSA or 'Education for All'). Responsibility for monitoring educational and administrative activities of schools rests primarily with district and block education officers, through village education committees, which include community members. Education spending by central government is steadily rising, and accounts for 3.7 per cent of proposed budget expenditure in 2017–18 (Ministry of Finance 2017). It is a key political priority for the government.

This case study draws on two research projects:[16] Ricardo Sabates at the University of Cambridge, investigating the potential of community-based accountability relationships to raise children's learning outcomes and Karthik Muralidharan's research at the University of California, which used an RCT to test the impact of Madhya Pradesh's (MP) School Quality Assessment programme on school governance and learning outcomes as the programme went to scale across the state. Abhijeet Singh from the Stockholm School of Economics was interviewed as a co-investigator on the MP research. Colin Bangay, DFID's education adviser in India during both projects' design phases was also interviewed. The DFID India office no longer has an education adviser, although the senior adviser leading on skills and business engagement contributes, where time allows, to policy debate for the sector.

4.2 India government–donor intergroup relations

The DFID adviser interviewed revealed a strong understanding of India's complex system of government, where central government comprises over 90 ministries, leading to challenges for policy coordination between ministries and between the central state and local governments. The cadre of professional civil servants are recruited to

take a range of leadership roles across different ministries during their career. These officers are the educated elites, many of whom have received Western education. Respect for evidence-based policymaking was mutual between the donors and government. Indeed, the adviser to the minister actively sought to engage with the latest international research, to identify the best route to implement change and deliver for a reformist government. Bangay's professional knowledge of global evidence was valued. Thus, he was able to build trust over time through responsive sharing of data that responded to the needs of policymakers. One example was his commissioning of a review into activity-based learning (DFID 2016). This research fitted with India's 2009 Right to Education Act which mandated child-centred and child-friendly education.

However, Indian officials can exhibit a degree of scepticism of outsiders and their agendas, be they donors or consultants. The well-known 'seagull' metaphor is used of experts flying in, making a lot of noise, and flying off leaving mounds of *guano* [reports] but few practical ways forward.[17]

> *The psychology of presenting evidence is missing… research is seen to be driven by external agendas, and this can, sometimes, affect trust in such research… I think even if evidence comes from donors the initial government reaction is to be defensive and to reject the research.* (Colin Bangay)

Bangay argued that uptake of the evidence will remain a challenge as long as investments in critical relationships are neglected.

The importance of the DFID adviser being resident and building a shared history of engagement was highlighted as significant in building trust. However, deeper relationships were often held by DFID's professional advisers appointed in-country, and their knowledge of the cultural context enabled more effective engagement politically. Bangay worked in close partnership with the local advisers, and benefited from their social capital. His engagement in government processes also demonstrated commitment beyond his own programme: the establishment of such informal relationships seems to have been key to open up space for policy dialogue.

Bangay stressed the importance of a realistic understanding of the pressures and constraints government policymakers are subject to (see Bangay and Little 2015):

> *Policymakers are not experts. They are time poor and they want surety and not probability. I think there is a mismatch between the culture of research and researchers and what policymakers are after. You need to repackage research for policymakers, otherwise they won't look at it. The two groups are thinking at two different levels.*

When sharing research findings, two factors were revealed as significant: timing and nuancing. First, the 'communicator' of evidence needs to

be available in-country and actively identifying key moments when evidence might influence critical decisions. Second, insight into the specific preferences of individual policymakers enables a nuanced adjustment in how messages are communicated. Who is best placed to communicate research was also carefully considered. Bangay gives an example of 'low-key' research on girls' access to education which was received well, despite it demonstrating unintended flaws in current government policy: 'The government was not particularly fond of this research, but they engaged with it… [W]e took a low-key approach and presented the results through the local research teams.'[18] He explained how this contrasted to most research being 'sold' to the government by 'expert middle-aged white men'.

4.3 India researcher–donor intergroup relations

Bangay suggested that there is more that donors could do to support access between academics and policymakers. One researcher noted: 'we tried repeatedly to get a meeting with the donor group, but our requests were not considered to be a priority, and as an external academic there is limited time to meet with those taking decisions in government'.[19] Advisers are being overwhelmed with the number of research initiatives at a country level and need to make strategic decisions about which to engage with. It appears that researchers may lack the initial connection with the relevant donor, and time restrictions on both sides act as a barrier to interaction. Financial resources were mentioned as a constraint on several occasions: 'The donors fund research but they don't always invest in the use or uptake of that research. This is a shame because, the people who will use or ignore research are policymakers' (Colin Bangay). In a meeting organised by the RLO team, several of the research teams bid for resources in a 'dragons' den' and were highly articulate around the need for funding for uptake.[20]

There is a spectrum of engagement in research by advisers, often associated with their own academic background and interest. Bangay ensured uptake of new research being produced, through international fora, engagement with DFID's own education research team, and policymakers. For example, he worked closely with the CREATE researchers[21] and linked to Muralidharan's research that built on a body of work in India (see Kingdon and Banerji 2009, and Chavan and Banerji 2012) that pointed towards two major bottlenecks to improving learning outcomes. Firstly, high levels of teacher absenteeism and little time spent on task leading, linked to poor governance and accountability mechanisms. Secondly, pedagogy that revolves around rote learning and progression dictated by the curriculum without adaptation to learners' specific needs. Bangay was able to use this knowledge in discussions with policymakers in India and the UK, to shape new research directions and policy for DFID centrally.

Abhijeet Singh[22] explained the importance for him of engaging with the donor in order to understand what DFID was looking to achieve from their investment in research and DFID's role of broker between

researchers, government, and non-profit partners: 'Colin [Bangay] was the person brokering this relation between Ark, the government, and non-profit consultants'. However, given DFID's move out of India 'getting traction with the country office was quite hard'. Despite this, Singh persevered in his engagement with DFID. 'There also seemed to be other venues to talk to [a] DFID audience' he noted, 'such as the Research on Improving Systems of Education (RISE).' Sabates[23] also noted that 'currently we have not had many opportunities to engage with DFID country advisers'.

4.4 India government–researcher intergroup relations

Researchers Muralidharan and Singh also succeeded in building trust with senior policymakers.[24] Singh notes the positive effects of Muralidharan's willingness to offer regular expert advice to officials beyond the scope of his current research projects. His global research reputation resulted in Muralidharan becoming an honorary adviser to the National Institute for Transforming India (NITI Aayog), which is a key space for policy influence. Singh stressed the importance of his colleague Karthik Muralidharan being a credible authority on economics and education by government:

> *Karthik's work gives openings for collaborations and conversations with officials because they saw the evidence* [from him] *before.*

The incentives for Indian policymakers at the central level to engage with research were strong. They were keen to have a media presence at key events and would accept opportunities to speak, particularly with high-profile external academics.[25] The fact that both research teams' focus of study aligned with ministerial priorities made space for interaction with government easier. The political context and practicability of implementation are also crucial. As Singh noted:

> *When you tell a policymaker that your education results are bad and they will be bad for the next 200 years, you won't be incentivising them to work for a change. For that to happen you need to give them actionable steps.*

In contrast to the top tiers of the civil service, there is wide variation in the skills and motivation of frontline staff. District education officials may be without support on IT, finance, procurement, and project management. This creates a challenge for the fidelity of research. The relationships between donors and governments at this level of government were more limited. In contrast, local research teams were often well embedded, making responsive policy debate possible. Ricardo Sabates stresses the importance of local expertise for his programme:

> *Pratham* [an Indian NGO] *have been engaged from the beginning, thinking together about research questions, research design and the experimental mixed methods… I think it is a very equal partnership. I know I am the principal investigator of this project. However, I think this is misleading. There are two PIs, one in Cambridge and one at Pratham.*

The embeddedness of local research teams was impressive and clearly is crucial to assess whether failures of policy implementation, rather than the intervention *per se*, were resulting in the lack of impact on learning. Genuine debate with government about implementation failures and the robustness of the research further deepened the government–researcher relationship.

Both research teams noted that time to support government officials outside the remit of the research was important, arguing that this was key to building the social capital and trust required when it came to dissemination of their own findings:

> *Once the collaboration is going, you need some easy way of communication… you can't have anything going on unless you have a* [local] *team in place… You signal your commitment (for a long-term relationship) by showing a constant stream of work.* (Singh)

This was particularly important for overcoming problems associated with personnel changes in ministries: 'During four years of work, we saw three secretaries and one interim secretary change, so the only institutional memory was the written documents we have provided' (Singh).

Researchers from Sabates' research project highlight the ability of local research to make a significant impact. Purnima Ramanujan[26] at the ASER Centre, Pratham states that:

> *Over the last decade, there has been more demand for and recognition of evidence in education… More and more, we find that the government, besides NGOs, are getting into more research and studies looking at how to improve learning in schools.*

Sabates highlights the work of the Annual Status of Education Report as an example of citizen-led research making policy impacts: 'It has been informing policy in India and informing the learning crisis globally. It has had an incredible impact in terms of how policymakers are responding to what they see in terms of learning levels in schools.'[27] One result of this, according to Sabates, has been the adoption by six Indian states of Teaching at the Right Level Methodology.

5 Conclusions

The case studies highlight three critical factors that are common to each context: understanding the political dynamics of research uptake; a culture of evidence-informed policy; and the importance of *supercommunicators*, who are trusted by government, to disseminate evidence. These factors are discussed in relation to the commonalities and differences between the Uganda and India case studies.

5.1 Understanding the political dynamics of research uptake

The case studies highlight the attention paid by impactful researchers and advisers to the cycles of policymaking. A common characteristic was their political intelligence and connections to the inner machinery

of government, with their tentacles in the system. This was seen in the Indian case study where the user norms were understood by the researcher who had an advisory role at the centre of government. The ability to identify champions of policy change and flag the timings for influence was also crucial. It was key in the way Sabates, as the international principal investigator, worked in joint partnership with Pratham, recognising their long-established relationships and cultural knowledge.

In both case studies, effective evidence engagement did not conform to the pre-designated timings of communication plans. Rather, agile ways of working and political intelligence were key, with a recognition that opportunities for bold reform are fleeting. It was during times of disruption to the system – such as new political appointments – that windows of opportunity arose. Interviews with DFID advisers revealed the constraints they are under. Despite this, the advisers interviewed sought out evidence to equip themselves as technical professionals. Some had formed alliances with local academics. Their reflections indicate that, with increasing external private philanthropy in the sector, financial aid was becoming less important than evidence as a 'currency' valued at the policy table.

5.2 A culture of evidence-informed policy

The case studies revealed the importance of a culture of evidence-informed policy in government. Where there were 'evidence champions' within government, they were key to the development of strong government–donor and government–researcher intergroup relations that enabled effective knowledge exchange. This culture was most developed in the Indian case where the demand for data was coming directly from the ministry, rather than topics for dissemination being externally driven. If research was perceived as helpful to deliver more effective services, so opportunities for uptake increased. Established relationships between the government and donor or government and researchers opened space for dialogue and dissemination of evidence. The researchers and advisers in both cases were aware of the importance of internal champions to maximise the opportunities for research uptake. Interviews also highlighted that government demand for evidence led to a proactive approach by the donor to respond, and in turn to more actively develop researcher–donor intergoup relations.

5.3 Supercommunicators to disseminate evidence

Interestingly, there was variation across the countries and case studies as to the key stakeholders feeding evidence into policy decisions. Such people might be called 'supercommunicators'. Whether they are a local academic, an international 'expert', a donor, or a multilateral partner, the critical factor was trust. We introduce the term supercommunicator to describe a good communicator who has additionally established trust with key policymakers. These are the people who have developed social and political capital, enabling them to influence most effectively. It was clear that the 'right' supercommunicator at one point in time or

level of government, may be different from another. Understanding the drivers of change to help select the 'supercommunicator' and careful attention to the choice of messenger was key, as discussed by Bangay in the India case study. Rather than it being a reluctance on the part of the academics to be 'supercommunicators', the challenge was often the lack of an established relationship with the donor or central government for policy dialogue. Interviews revealed a donor tendency to put the responsibility on the academic to organise government policy engagement, rather than recognising their potential role as a broker.

5.4 The challenges for research impact

We close with four challenges that might be kept in mind while reading other articles in this *IDS Bulletin*, and that we at DFID take away from this study as actions to consider in our own engagement to encourage impact from research.

Civil society has a unique reach, and networks that are valuable in the research impact pathways. These are networks that advisers are not necessarily embedded within. This was a common factor across the case studies. It raises the question of whether civil society voices are being sufficiently heard at the policy table. Is there, for example, a subconscious privileging by both donors and governments of the 'expert' external voice? Could NGOs and civil society be further supported as a voice in the pathways to impact? This has implications for our theoretical framework and prompts us to reconsider how we engage with NGOs, particularly as the sector grapples with the implementation challenge of taking cost-effective innovations to scale.

Drivers to develop intragroup relations will always remain strong, yet the interviews have revealed some powerful intergroup relations that have enabled research to influence policy and practice. The pillars of policy impact need not be siloed. We need to dig deeper to understand how to further develop these intergroup incentives.

Research impact does not emerge from a 'pathway to impact' plan. DFID can play a role in supporting agile ways of working, in sharing political knowledge of key moments for change, and being a broker for researchers requesting links with policymakers where those are not already established. For researchers, there is a tension between the time required to produce high-quality research, and time to engage with policy actors, which is insufficiently appreciated, and thus insufficiently budgeted for. Do donors have more of a role to play in supporting this process?

With increased programme delivery demands, DFID education advisers' time is increasingly constrained to take evidence into action. There is less time for thought leadership and advice on sector reform. Rather, advisers need to invest in oversight and advisory input to the individual programmes that they manage. The skill set and confidence of DFID country advisers interviewed was a critical factor in the time they made to engage with research. The length of their posting

and historic engagement in-country were important. This matters not only for the trust and depth of relationships with researchers and government, but also their ability to justify research engagement with their line management. These challenges have implications for DFID's own operating model, particularly because governments are requesting knowledge, rather than money as the 'new currency of development'. Ministries of education are seeking to support both the production and the consumption of research, as partners in the global dialogue of how to enhance learning.

Notes

* This issue grew out of the Impact Initiative for International Development Research which seeks to maximise impact and learning from ESRC-DFID's Joint Fund for Poverty Alleviation Research and their Raising Learning Outcomes in Education Systems Research Programme.

† Views expressed in this article are those of the authors and do not reflect an official DFID position.

1 Department for International Development (DFID), UK.

2 Department for International Development (DFID), UK.

3 Department for International Development (DFID), UK.

4 We wish to acknowledge support from Kate Ross for editing and with a review of the literature.

5 We recognise the key role of civil society, NGOs, the private sector, teachers, parents, and wider community members on research uptake. Further attention on their role is warranted and deserves to be the focus of more serious debate.

6 Thanks are due to the academic contributors to this issue for their discussions and in particular to Mark Henstridge from Oxford Policy Management for early debate on the competing incentives of academics and donors.

7 Defined as reflecting 'the place of a journal within its field, the relative difficulty of publishing in that journal, and the prestige associated with it' https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Journal_ranking (accessed 11 February 2019).

8 This is the staff member responsible for the oversight, finances, and ultimate delivery of a programme.

9 The Muscat Agreement (March 2014) recommends that government spends between 4 per cent and 6 per cent of gross domestic product (GDP) on education and between 15 per cent and 20 per cent of public expenditure on education. Uganda's education share of national income is 3.2 per cent of GDP, half of what Kenya and Tanzania spend.

10 Quotes are based on interviews with Rona Bronwin, between October and November 2018.

11 Interview, February 2019.

12 The collective skills, knowledge, or other intangible assets of individuals that can be used to create economic value for the individuals, their employers, or their community.

13 Interview, September 2018.

14 Interview, September 2018.

15 We wish to acknowledge the inputs and research provided by Josh Lowe, Blavatnik School of Government, in the production of this case study and to Salim Salamah for support with interviews.

16 Quotes are based on interviews with Rachel Hinton and/or Salim Salamah, between December 2018 and January 2019.

17 Thanks to Robin Todd, Cambridge Education, for discussions on the African context of government perceptions of donors.

18 Interview, February 2019.

19 Interview, September 2018.

20 ESRC-DFID grant holder workshop 'Knowledge Synthesis, Policy Directions, and Implications for Impact', Oxford, January 2019.

21 See www.create-rpc.org.

22 Quotes from Abhijeet Singh interview with Rachel Hinton, 13 December 2018.

23 Interview, February 2019.

24 Quotes from Abhijeet Singh and Karthik Muralidharan interview with Rachel Hinton, 13 December 2018.

25 This was evident at a strong speech by the minister in Delhi on the importance of research. Ministers are keen to demonstrate that they have delivered manifesto commitments.

26 Interview, February 2019.

27 Interview, February 2019.

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Exploring Partnerships between Academia and Disabled Persons' Organisations: Lessons Learned from Collaborative Research in Africa[*][†]

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Abstract In this article, we discuss how our academic research on disability and international development in five African countries has benefited hugely from active collaboration with advocates, practitioners, and policymakers, ultimately ensuring that research evidence is used to inform policy and practice. Whilst building such partnerships is seen as good practice, it is particularly important when working on disability issues, as the clarion call of the disability movement, 'nothing about us without us', attests. This is not just a slogan. Without the active and critical engagement of disabled people – as researchers, participants, advocates – the evidence gathered would not have the same impact. This article discusses experiences from research in Liberia, Kenya, Uganda, Sierra Leone, and Zambia. It highlights the challenges and opportunities such partnerships can bring in achieving the goals of leaving no one behind and doing nothing without the active engagement and inclusion of persons with disabilities.

Keywords: disability, participation, capacity building, partnership, Liberia, Kenya, Uganda, Sierra Leone, Zambia.

1 Introduction

Over the past few decades across the field of international development, there has been much talk of participation and participatory approaches to ensure the voices of the traditionally voiceless are heard. At the same time, critiques of these approaches have highlighted the inherently unequal power relations and dynamics within these participatory relationships (e.g. White 1996; Cornwall 2008). As an approach, participation has its roots in anthropology, where anthropologists have long debated the issues of speaking *about* and speaking *for*, in relation to marginalised groups and populations.

Similarly, there has been much debate, particularly since the 1990s, around who is speaking on behalf of whom within the international disability movement – as expressed in its slogan 'nothing about us without us'. Mirroring this mantra, the trajectory of praxis within the field of disability and international development has been for inclusion, as communicated by the use of the word 'inclusion' to modify existing subfields (e.g. inclusive development, inclusive education, inclusive design, etc.). While this is laudable, we argue here that 'inclusion' risks becoming the new buzzword, devoid of intention and politics, in much the same way Cornwall (2008) argued that participation did.

In a recent paper based on our poverty alleviation research for disabled people in Liberia (Kett *et al*. forthcoming), we noted that there was a worrying trend towards making inclusion a 'technocratic process', based more on tokenism and a mechanistic focus on how to achieve inclusion, rather than a *politicised* one. Our main concern with this was that while there is a need to understand the technical process of inclusion, by removing the political aspects, the desired societal transformation to achieve equity and inclusion is unlikely to be achieved solely through mechanistic means. As such, we reflect the same concerns about processes that Sarah White identified in her seminal article around participation (White 1996). White identified four levels of participation (nominal, instrumental, representative, and transformative), which are mediated by a range of factors including power dynamics, capacity, and confidence in the likelihood of achievements. She also made the point that genuine participation should create tensions and conflict, which in turn fosters conditions for dialogue, collaboration, and inclusion.

Andrea Cornwall picks up these different aspects of participation, and argues that as a malleable concept, it can be reframed to mean anything demanded of it; however, therein lies the fundamental problem (Cornwall 2008: 269). Moreover, Cornwall further argues that those who end up in the referent categories (e.g. 'women', 'the poor', or indeed, people with disabilities) may not in fact view themselves through this lens at all (Cornwall 2008: 277). She surmises, like White, that participation is a valid concept, but that its use risks delegitimising popular protest. Have we now reached a position where we face the same challenges with the concept of inclusion? Not only who (or what) is being written about, but who is doing the writing and in what context?

While the growing number of such partnerships and collaborations has been made easier through modern technology, this also raises questions about what results from these collaborations, both in terms of key learnings for these partnerships in the near future as well as longer-term changes. A key explicit aim of many international research collaborations is the transfer of skills to international partners. Where such capacity building has been discussed in terms of North–South partnership, this has traditionally carried the unspoken assumption that the Southern partners are the beneficiaries of capacity building, while the Northern partners are the providers (Binka 2005). In practice,

the reproduction of this model of capacity building has often led to a North–South power asymmetry, where Southern partners are excluded from experiencing the benefits of the research collaboration on an equitable basis to Northern partners, for example in sharing authorship of research publications.

Adding a 'disability component' to this can shift the dynamics even further, with assumptions about power, voice, and representation (Albert 2006). However, perhaps what is needed is to think more broadly about the concept of inclusion and see these partnerships as the basis for politicised and engaged debates, whereby all members of the research team are the ones being included – not just those with disabilities. In doing so, we believe that all partners became more aware of the issues facing persons with disabilities, how they may include and incorporate them in their particular area of work, and how they could work better – and more inclusively – going forward.

While acknowledging the essential need to continue to train and build the capacity of disabled researchers globally, we wish to consider two related issues within disability-inclusive development and research in this article. The first of these is how to build the capacity of existing researchers (who could be disabled or non-disabled) who work in fields other than disability studies. These researchers represent a valuable and (hopefully) readily available source of expertise that could be harnessed and applied to disability issues, including the much-needed first step of gaining high-quality, accurate disability data, helpful to evaluate the current status of disability inclusion in national settings. However, in countries without a history of a strong disability movement, knowledge of disability issues is often sparse amongst professional researchers, limiting their efficacy to work independently on disability issues at the outset. This is compounded by the fact that disability has often been sidelined, or is seen as a specialist issue, which has resulted in a lack of focus in more generalised subject areas such as economics, politics, or other social sciences.

The second issue concerns the truism that not every person wants to be a researcher. Another key additional way to ensure disability-inclusive research and development is through close collaboration and capacity building of disabled persons' organisations (DPOs). The involvement of DPOs by governments in matters concerning disabled people is promoted by the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (2008).[10] Thus, these organisations are often the first port of call within high-level governmental consultations and planning concerning people with disabilities; and where policies are set without considering the needs of people with disabilities, the voices of DPO members are usually at the forefront advocating for change. This is not to suggest that DPOs are wholly unproblematic in terms of disability inclusion as, for instance, they are often run by men with physical impairments, meaning that the voice and agency of other groups – for example, disabled women and of those with different impairment

(e.g. learnings) – can be excluded from advocacy and lobbying of these groups (Yeo and Moore 2003).

Notwithstanding this, while the effectiveness of DPOs has varied between and within countries both in terms of their range of representation of disabled voices and of their overall impact, in many settings they are now part and parcel of the mainstream political process (e.g. National Union of Disabled Persons of Uganda;[11] see Yeo and Moore 2003), making DPO involvement instrumental in disability-inclusive development. When partnering with academics, while DPO members may not necessarily need to know how to 'do' research in terms of all its cyclic components (e.g. theory generation, academic publication), understanding the key product of research – evidence – and how it may inform organisational activities is certainly crucial to DPO efforts. Thus, DPOs have much to gain from collaborations with professional researchers, who can build their capacity in this and other aspects; and vice versa.

In this article, we discuss how research on disability in Liberia, Kenya, Uganda, Sierra Leone, and Zambia has benefited hugely from the active collaboration and co-construction (rather than mere inclusion) with advocates, practitioners, and policymakers to ensure that the evidence gathered is credible and inclusive. We also discuss how project partners perceive their capacity to have been built and how the project may have effected longer-lasting changes in terms of partnership. We also highlight how our partnerships were formed and maintained. This was not without challenges, but as Sarah White noted, it is precisely in these challenges that inclusion becomes politicised and in turn produces more relevant results that can be used to inform policy and practice. Without the active and critical engagement of disabled people – as researchers, participants, advocates – the evidence gathered would not have the same impact.

It is also worth noting that the tripartite nature of the partnerships discussed here, although effective in this context, were still led by Northern researchers, even though efforts were made to ensure equality amongst the partners at all stages of the research. Whilst acknowledging the fundamental power dynamics within these relationships (Swartz 2009), it is interesting to observe that where they were most effective was in strengthening in-country collaborations between national researchers who had previously undertaken little or no work on disability issues, and advocates, who felt they gained credibility from the evidence provided by the collaboration between them and the national research institutes.

2 Method and results

The material in this article is based on discussion and experiences of colleagues and partners over the course of two projects, 'Bridging the Gap: Examining Disability and Development in Four African Countries'[12] and 'Understanding the Political and Institutional Conditions for Effective Poverty Reduction for Persons with Disabilities

in Liberia',[13] as well as material from a panel at the Bridging the Gap final conference. This was held on 12–13 March 2018, and the panel discussion was entitled 'Bridging the Gap between DPOs and Academia: Lessons Learned from Collaborative Research in Africa' held on the second day and lasting approximately one hour. The session was chaired by two Bridging the Gap Co-Investigators (Mark T. Carew) and (Maria Kett) and involved five project partners as panel discussants (Anderson Gitonga, John-Bosco Asiimwe, Joyce Olenja, Richard Bwalya, and Leslie Swartz), including four academics and one DPO member and representing Kenya, Uganda, South Africa, and Zambia. Inclusive of the chairs, two of the participants in the session were persons with disabilities (one from the global North and one from the global South) and there was a mix of early-career and senior academics. The last author and project Principal Investigator (Nora Groce) was also in the audience and took part in the Q&A towards the end of session. The session was transcribed by a professional company, as well as in closed captioning for audience members on the day.

What follows are excerpts from the transcript of the session, as well as of transcribed material from other interviews with project partners, organised thematically and presented with additional commentary to facilitate theoretical and practical linkages regarding disability-inclusive research and development strategies. Additional inputs from partners in another DFID-ESRC-funded project (Understanding the Political and Institutional Conditions for Effective Poverty Reduction for Persons with Disabilities in Liberia) have also been incorporated into this article.

3 How is capacity built and by whom?

One of the most common areas discussed in North–South partnerships is that of 'capacity building', but less commonly discussed is how an individual or an organisation knows they have enough capacity: when do we know we have 'built capacity' and what does having one's capacity built look like and feel like? Within disability-inclusive research and development collaborations, the North–South direction undoubtedly represents one way to build capacity, but the inclusive nature of the partnership also allows the capacity building to be bidirectional, begging the question 'Whose capacity is being built and by whom?'.

Within the session panel, discussants from academic backgrounds affirmed that they had learnt skills through partnership with DPOs:

> *Disability research, at least in our setting – is not as well established as any other, so for me, I am on a learning curve and continue to learn more.* (Academic partner)

> *The movement has been through quite a lot. We have learnt that things have been built from the onset, and we were trained, and I didn't have experience relating to the Washington Group questions,*[12] *and not many have that much knowledge in terms of using that.* (Academic partner)

The first panel discussant comments on the dearth of disability research in their context. This is common in many settings and research subareas globally. For example, although an evidence base around disability and sexuality is emerging, there are comparatively few studies on the subject conducted in low- and middle-income countries (Carew *et al.* 2017). A contributing factor and perhaps also a cause of this lack of disability research is that most scholars very rarely receive training on disability issues (e.g. how to collect good-quality disability data), despite the fact that disability is a cross-cutting issue. This is also signalled by the second panel discussant who noted that they had previously had very little training regarding the Washington Group questions on disability. Thus, collaboration with a DPO, as well as colleagues with dedicated disability expertise, represents a valuable capacity-building opportunity for those wanting to learn about disability and how it is relevant in their fields.

DPO members also felt that their capacity was being built through partnerships with academics:

> *For us, we believe we develop capacities of colleagues at* [the] *University and, for instance, in the area of disability, the types of disabilities, where to get these policies. They always came to us to discuss those kind of things. How to handle persons, for instance, who are deaf, persons with a psychosocial disability, we were happy to train that team, and I'm sure in some way we increased the capacity to be able to deal with persons with disabilities.* (DPO member)

Joining up with what the academic partners communicated, the DPO members suggest that one key learning provided through partnership with a DPO is the training they can provide around disability. Here, the discussant highlights one practical element, namely that academic partners can learn how to work with people who have disabilities. This can be a difficult concept to grasp for many non-disabled people due to the infrequency of contact opportunities that most have with people who are disabled, and the heterogeneous nature of impairments themselves. For example, working with people who have physical disabilities does not equip individuals with much relevant experience to work with people who have learning disabilities. With that said, there are of course no special skills needed to work with people who have disabilities who are largely the same as any other individuals; much of the value of any training is about increasing the confidence of partners around working with people with disabilities. This is also part of the learning curve that the first panel discussant communicated. It also may have an additional benefit of raising awareness around inclusion of students with disabilities, and in turn because of this, increase the likelihood of their participation in higher education as academic staff are more open to facilitate this.

In addition to increasing both awareness and expertise around disability inclusion for academics, the partnership also facilitated increased awareness and understanding of the research process, as well as providing an evidence base, for DPOs. As one panel discussant

noted when giving reflections about what DPOs can learn through partnership with academics:

We also gained immensely. As a DPO, our capacity was very well built. And in a number of ways, some were simple but made a difference. How do you develop a questionnaire? We use questionnaires. When we do a training needs assessment, we always do a questionnaire. We went with them through that, and there was a lot of knowledge we gained on ways, for example, of how to do a focus group discussion. We are getting the skills. We always do this in our work. Other simple ways like mobilisation, talking to the community, how do you develop a questionnaire, how do you negotiate, issues around report writing, and how do you develop a report? Our staff were trained around that. Presentation skills. We went into the field with them when they were doing the presentation and you could see the professionalism in it, and we can imitate that and copy that. It is also a skill… so these are simple, simple skills, but they make a major, major difference in our lives. (DPO member)

The quote above highlights how research skills that are commonplace in academic work, such as survey methodology, report writing, and scientific communication are of immense value to DPOs in their day-to-day work (e.g. training need assessments). Thus, the key learnings for DPOs engaged in research collaboration is being able to equip their staff with these skills.

4 What are the positives and downsides of collaboration?

One academic panel discussant stated that DPO collaboration was particularly useful for community entry:

When it came to working on disability, we found it valuable that we had to work with an organisation that already has ground presence, so in terms of community entry, [the DPO] became useful in that sense – that we could connect with the various networks of the community, which makes it much easier to work. In terms of trust building, we didn't have to invest too much because we were [al]ready working with people with disabilities as our guide at a community level. (Academic partner)

In some settings, it can be very difficult for researchers to identify and collect data from people with disabilities. Part of this issue is a lack of good-quality disability data. Despite the availability of a short set of disability questions designed to generate an internationally comparable prevalence estimate of disability, poor measures of disability (e.g. a binary yes or no question) continue to be employed in censuses and other population-level surveys as means of gaining disability data. This means that it is often very difficult to identify disabled people within communities. However, DPOs can constitute an extremely useful link in this respect and as such, a partnership with a DPO can assist researchers by (purposively) identifying people with disabilities. The panel discussant also mentions the concept of 'trust'. In some low- and middle-income settings, certain communities are over-researched or else feel that they are frequently involved in initiatives which do not ultimately benefit

them. Feelings such as these may be accentuated amongst people with disabilities who generally encounter more exclusion and marginalisation, in comparison to people without disabilities. Consequently, partnership with DPOs signal to communities and people with disabilities in particular that projects are working to benefit the community.

Related to this, nationally based academics – particularly those who are not specialists in disability – have an important role to play for DPO members as they are often closer to the seat of power, and also bring a different perspective to issues that, for example, DPOs may have been grappling with. They may also be more sensitive to local contexts, history, politics, and other factors. This is illustrated by a DPO panel discussant who describes how their organisation can benefit from such collaborations:

> For us as advocates, one major strategy – ensuring we achieve our goals – is to build allies. They are people who can speak on our behalf and it was very exciting to see the professor here going into meetings and presenting evidence and recommendations on our behalf. These people are so used to us, the government, but here, the [university] was speaking on issues of disabilities. It makes a difference in terms of when the same message comes as opposed to various messages. That was the most exciting part. (DPO member)

Here, the DPO member outlines how such partnership generates new allies that can communicate crucial information around disability issues. In particular, he highlights the key role of academic partners in helping craft a cohesive message around how to empower people with disabilities and address marginalisation. This may be useful, because messages from DPOs may be bracketed by those resistant to change as special interest issues. Conversely, the addition of new voices from different sectors helps to mainstream issues and ensure that disability is considered as a cross-cutting issue. The panel discussant also describes academic partners as people who can speak on the behalf of DPOs. Academic partners are trained in the communication of evidence to the general public; for example, being able to distil the findings of complex statistical models into a set of clear-cut recommendations. These skills are useful in supporting DPOs through amassing both good-quality evidence on disability and action points from it.

However, while there are positive aspects of a more inclusive partnership, there are of course challenges. A common problem, highlighted by a colleague from Uganda, is that of research roles:

> In the area that we did, we felt that we were short-changed because it was basically just about assisting our colleagues in terms of collecting data, and data was actually sent after we did the data entry. It was analysed, and then they want to come to us, and later, the report was published, so when Bridging the Gap came around, I think we were a little bit cautious on that, and I remember when we had the meeting and we made it clear in the first meeting that we do not want to be taken in as research assistants. We want to be partners in business. (Academic partner)

In this, the panel discussants highlight two of the most common challenges – the extent to which capacity is actually built (taking raw data for analysis, rather than working with national partners to analyse and interpret the data), and the degree of equity within and between partnerships. Such inequities are all too common between many North–South academic partnerships, and are exacerbated by a range of factors, including funding structures, grant restrictions, and teaching load, amongst other factors. This is compounded by the fact that in both the global South and North, 'disability' is rarely seen as a high stakes subject – something reiterated by the relative lack of funding distributed to disability-related projects.

Bucking this trend, our ESRC-DFID-funded project, 'Bridging the Gap: Examining Disability and Development in Four African Countries', had as one of its aims not only to explore the extent of the gap between disabled and non-disabled households in four selected countries (Kenya, Uganda, Zambia, and Sierra Leone), but also to bridge the gap between academia and DPOs. However, as evidenced by the panel discussants' comments, their experiences led to an initial cautious feeling towards the project that tempered their expectations of the collaboration. This suggests a rule that can be extrapolated for such collaborations in general. That is, international research partners should not be conceptualised as research assistants, but rather as equal partners in the business of research. This is an oft-repeated aim but reiterates the point that all partners should be involved in each stage of the research process.

Another academic panel discussant expanded on this as a potential downside of collaboration if implemented incorrectly:

> [Panel discussant] *was mentioning colonialism. The economic component is important, which is also to do with my relationship with DPOs. People will agree to anything to have the capacity built, to do this, to do that, to puppet shows. People need to feed themselves and their families. It is a difficult thing to think about. We can provide you with the raw material so you can take photographs and so on. I have been told that they didn't want a picture of me in the room because the funders would like to see me under a tree.* (Academic partner)

The 'puppet shows' that this panel discussant mentions are collaborations where the partnership is implemented in such a manner so as to reinforce and emphasise existing inequalities or stereotypical depictions of the cultural contexts of the research partners. The example provided by the panel discussant (a South African) highlights the need to represent the process of actually doing research in such settings accurately, which in many cases will be almost the same as conducting research within high-income settings.

5 What does disability-inclusive research and development achieve in the long term?

Several of our project partners mentioned the benefits of creating consultancy, knowledge exchange, and internship opportunities for students:

> *Now there is an arrangement we have of* [university] *and that is the School of Law, whereby they attach students doing law to a DPO. I'm looking forward to continuing this collaboration with the professor, whereby she can attach students from the university in our department to be able to learn issues around disability data and we train people in disability issues.* (DPO partner)

> [Internships] *also happened in our case during the time of our survey because we could get to know the organisations and there was a request to place some students in our organisation for internships. In our university, students are expected to do internships, but because of that collaboration, we could ask them to place our students there, so in that way, some collaboration can be strengthened, and probably some element of capacity building.* (Academic partner)

> *I have also opportunity to talk to students of the universities of Liberia… sharing with them my learning experience and also providing to them knowledge that will enhance activities with people with disabilities.* (DPO member)

One of the best ways to guarantee the inclusion of people with disabilities in mainstream society globally is to ensure that individuals are educated on disability issues. The placement of university students within internships at DPOs helps achieve this by providing them with exposure to disability issues. Concurrently, these students are also able to build the capacity of DPOs through offering technical skills. As such, this is an example of how disability-inclusive research can create opportunities beyond the scope of specific projects and contribute to wider change around disability issues.

Another method of building opportunities for students to learn about disability issues is for it to be taught as part of the wider curriculum (for example around rights, equity, exclusion, or other issues of social justice) that form part of their higher education. One panel discussant described how she applied new knowledge about disability gained through the Bridging the Gap project to other aspects of her university role:

> *Within the school of public health, where we do a master's programme, we try to incorporate this within our lectures, and there are discussions around disability. We don't have a main course on disability as yet, and our programmes are developed as a response to what is in the market. It is almost like a cyclic thing. Once we begin to make disability so visible at many levels, we can now advocate for a fully fledged clause that brings that around, but we try to use within our teaching to synthesise students around disability, at least at undergraduate and postgraduate levels.* (Academic partner)

The panel discussant describes the process as cyclic, suggesting that disability must gradually become more prominent within other subcomponents of the academic curriculum before dedicated disability courses can be introduced. Panel discussants also noted some of the continuing challenges to disability inclusion, notably around stigma and discrimination:

> *For us, in terms of how this is conceived, at a community level, we continue to see a lot of discrimination and negative attitudes.* (Academic partner)

> *In the community, this is a major barrier to inclusion. The attitude of people. The way you define people. There is a lot in the terms and the language that you use. You can use language that doesn't empower people, and it can isolate people, and we have numerous examples of that.* (Academic partner)

But panel discussants also commented on the role of disability-inclusive research and collaboration in challenging and changing the marginalisation of disabled people, again with the acknowledgement that achieving such equity will take time.

> [People with disabilities] *have human rights and they need to be empowered, so we are seeing some good and positive changes, but we are not yet there*. (Academic partner)

6 Discussion

As the preceding examples highlight, there remains a tension within the disability and development sector, whereby disability issues are still seen wholly (or at least to a large extent) as either a very minor issue due to the lack of data, or as a specialist issue requiring a specific set of specialist skills. Our project partners drew attention to how the partnership models adopted in the Bridging the Gap and Liberia research built their capacity through the transfer of specialist knowledge and skills (i.e. on disability for academics, on research methodologies for DPO members). Partners also highlighted the longer-term partnerships that have resulted from the projects (e.g. internships, further funding, and consultancy opportunities), particularly their perceptions of how the partnerships formed within the duration of the project were able to challenge stakeholder notions of disability as a specialist area (i.e. through finding national expert allies through the projects). Furthermore, if the partnership model adopted by the Bridging the Gap and Liberia research projects have begun to shift attitudes towards disability-inclusive research and raised the visibility of students with disabilities within the wider academic field, then we have also achieved one of the stated aims of the research.

Although academia is certainly not always inclusive and many people with disabilities training as researchers may encounter serious barriers (e.g. Brown and Leigh 2018; Horton and Tucker 2014), much of the research and writing on disability, at least in countries with strong disability movements (e.g. the UK, USA, Australia), is now conducted

by disabled people themselves. Disability studies are also taking root in other areas of the world; for example, through the African Network for Evidence-to-Action in Disability (AfriNEAD) and the *African Journal of Disability* (AJOD). Given these promising efforts, it seems that global disability research – including that focused on development issues – will feature the voices of more disabled researchers, not less.

However, a number of challenges remain, including issues of capacity, resources, and reputation. At the start of this article, we referred to several articles critiquing the concept of participation (White 1996; Cornwall 2008). Neither of these authors suggest for a moment to not be participatory in approach; on the contrary, participation that has as its goal a transformation of existing social inequalities is an essential goal. This mirrors much of the discussions of the past decades about disability-inclusive research (Albert 2006), whereby the process of the research itself – as much as the findings – should be emancipatory and liberating. It is perhaps debatable whether we have fully achieved these laudable aims but we believe that by being as inclusive as possible across the research process, we can, as Sarah White argued, create tensions and conflict which in turn create genuinely transformative inclusion, whereby all actors have voiced their opinions, seen each other's worldviews, and the results lead to these transformations.

This requires researchers to fully engage with the politics of what and how they are researching, not just offering a 'checklist' on how to do 'inclusion'. There is as much to learn from the (sometimes painful) processes of doing the research as there is from the findings – this is a key point, and one that cannot be underestimated. Understanding constraints on local academic and DPO partners, as well as their strengths, and working together to overcome the constraints and enhance the strengths collaboratively can lead to changes in the way disability is taught to university students, or the way evidence is perceived; for example, by government ministers who hold decision-making powers. Ultimately, in order to keep this a political issue, and not just a 'tick-box' technocratic exercise, there is a need to actively engage with and include national and local partners – disabled and non-disabled – to ensure that these political aspects of inclusion are tackled head on and eventually overcome to achieve the desired societal transformations.

Notes

(Principal Investigator: Dr Maria Kett). ESRC-DFID Joint Fund reference: ES/L008785/1 'Bridging the Gap: Examining Disability and Development in Four African Countries' (Principal Investigator: Professor Nora Groce; Co-Investigators: Dr Maria Kett and Dr Mark T. Carew).

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2 Leonard Cheshire Research Centre, University College London, UK.

3 Makerere University, Uganda.

4 University of Zambia, Zambia.

5 United Disabled Persons of Kenya, Kenya.

6 National Union of Organisations of the Disabled, Liberia.

7 University of Nairobi, Kenya.

8 Stellenbosch University, South Africa.

9 Leonard Cheshire Research Centre, University College London, UK.

10 www.un.org/development/desa/disabilities/convention-on-the-rights-of-persons-with-disabilities.html.

11 NUDIPU was a partner in the Bridging the Gap research discussed here.

12 www.theimpactinitiative.net/project/bridging-gap-examining-disability-and-development-four-african-countries

13 www.theimpactinitiative.net/project/understanding-political-and-institutional-conditions-effective-poverty-reduction-persons

14 The Washington Group Short Set is a set of questions designed to identify people with a disability in a census or survey format, currently considered the most robust way to generate comparable international disability data. See: www.washingtongroup-disability.com/about/.

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Layered and Linking Research Partnerships: Learning from YOUR World Research in Ethiopia and Nepal[*][†][◊]

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Abstract This article draws on learning from the YOUR World Research project in Ethiopia and Nepal, which uses the socioecological Change-scape framework to understand how participants in research need to be understood within a landscape of changing institutional, environmental, and political contexts. The article explores whether trustful relationships, ownership, and commitment can bring about more effective societal change through research. Through group discussion and reflective perspectives, the authors draw out possible indicators of successful partnership from the different contexts in which YOUR World Research was working. These include histories of interpersonal relationships; shared vision and motivations; building ownership; shared platforms and spaces for dialogue; and flexibility to respond to shocks and changes in context. The article suggests that whilst being realistic about the power and politics of partnership, there are mechanisms in partnership models that can help support high-quality rigorous research whilst creating impact at local, national, and international levels.

Keywords: youth, power, marginalisation, street-connected, civil society organisations, community, interpersonal relationships, Change-scape.

1 Introduction
For many readers of this *IDS Bulletin* involved in research in the global South, the desire to work with partners to create impact has for decades been a fundamental reason motivating us to undertake research. More recently, however, in the twenty-first century, governments and funding bodies in many Western nations now require social science researchers to provide evidence that funded research has achieved economic and societal impact using specific criteria (Bastow, Dunleavy and Tinkler 2014). This has implications for research partnerships as researchers experience challenges involved in adopting certain practices, often

prescribed by funders and governments, to achieve, measure, and report on impact.

This article discusses some of these challenges as experienced by the partnerships formed through the process of research in an ESRC-DFID piece of research known as YOUR World Research.[6] The partners involved in YOUR World Research include universities, both in the global North (the University of Brighton and Goldsmiths, University of London) and in the global South where the national research leads have institutional links (Addis Ababa University and Tribhuvan University). Also included is the civil society organisation (CSO) ChildHope UK and a national non-governmental organisation (NGO), CHADET, which supports applied research in Ethiopia, as well as ActionAid Nepal and a small organisation called HomeNet, also in Nepal.

Youth Uncertainty Rights (YOUR) World Research (the popular title for the ESRC-DFID-funded research) is about how marginalised youth navigate uncertainty and negotiate their rights in conflict-affected and fragile environments in Ethiopia and Nepal. National research teams worked with 500 youth in each country and carried out co-construction of methodology in the early participatory phase of the research. In later phases, across four rural and urban research sites, detailed in-depth interviews were conducted with 150 youth, and then focused interviews with a further 100 youth on particular emerging issues of importance to young participants in each country. Regional/provincial and then national youth seminars were then held in order to verify youth perspectives and feed youth evidence and voice into policy and practice. This article discusses how the partnerships in YOUR World Research in both Ethiopia and Nepal have proved to be platforms from which to amplify the voices of marginalised youth to achieve impact.

In this article, the directors of our key CSOs and the Principal Investigator (PI) present reflective perspectives on their experience of partnerships. We use these perspectives as one source of material alongside the discussions that partners recorded in a focus group to analyse the common threads in our analysis of partnership. The focus group involved partners from universities and CSOs in the UK, Ethiopia, and Nepal coming together face to face and following up remotely. We drew diagrams of relationships, defined questions to dig deeper, and recorded our discussion. To facilitate and fully represent partner voices in the text, each civil society partner was asked to consider the PI's perspective and the findings from the focus group and then in the perspective presented in this article to outline their motivations for involvement in research, indicators of good partnership, and some of the significant challenges to partnerships in supporting research to be impactful. Each partner considered a central question in writing their perspectives that emerged as a key issue in the focus group discussions: *whether partnerships aiming to achieve impact require trustful relationships, ownership, and commitment to action to bring about societal change?* In brief, through focus group discussion and commenting on each

other's perspective, we agreed that our shared motivation behind the YOUR World Research, from all partners, was ultimately to improve the lives of the poorest and most marginalised. Our initial discussions indicated that we also agreed that the basis of successful partnerships for impact lay in the interpersonal relationships, common goals, and shared vision we discuss below.

We present information about how our different global and local partnerships were formed and what different partners feel has contributed to success. In our analysis and our conclusion, we link these reflections on partnership to our conceptual framework, Change-scape (see Section 2 for description and references). We discuss how this has helped us to build and sustain partnership by putting in place space for dialogue, mechanisms, or strategies such as team sharing, sustained communication, and support between global North and South, alongside securing funding that enables us to build on previous interpersonal and institutional relationships. Approaches to partnership and applied research have, as well as maintaining our initial intention to involve marginalised youth in applied research, proved successful in achieving impact in rapidly changing political and environmentally fragile environments.

Working with the Change-scape framework, we have been able to draw out partnership indicators and mechanisms in this article, and these are offered as ways to achieve better partnerships and impact. Involving youth and communities in the global South in developing the conceptual framework is an approach that aligns with findings of projects examining partnership-based research undertaken in the UK. Proponents of a community approach to partnership that works on a basis of coproduction argue that involving community partners and people in all stages of the research lifecycle, including design and conceptual thinking, allows research partnerships to challenge existing power relationships and make a difference to the communities of geographies, identity, and interest that are connected to the research (Banks *et al.* 2019; Martikke, Church and Hart 2019).

2 Change-scape – an approach to building partnerships for applied research

A distinct aspect of this article is that we offer insights into how the conceptual framework that we use in the overall approach to our research and impact helps us to both work in this fast-changing environment and keep our focus on the children and young people we are working with. This framework we refer to as a Change-scape (from Johnson 2011, 2017, for example), a landscape of change that is in constant flux and that is changing over time. It is a socioecological model, informed also by critical realism (for example, as expressed by Robson 2002), that places people/youth at the centre of research. In keeping with a critical realist approach, a series of mechanisms is suggested to build the agency of research participants and researchers to interact with other relevant actors in different contexts to create impact.

The Change-scape has, therefore, in YOUR World Research given us ways to link the young people at the centre, who have multiple and shifting identities, ideas, and interests, with the broader social norms and power dynamics in families and communities, and in turn with often fast-changing broader natural, cultural, political, and policy environments. The article argues that this conceptual framework has been key to YOUR World building more collaborative and impactful research together, as the people in partnerships are embedded in the research. We also suggest that these mechanisms in our applied research clearly link to partner motivations to facilitate changes in the lives of marginalised youth and in their broader contexts.

Change-scape, as employed by YOUR World Research, includes mechanisms such as: creating safe spaces for youth, as well as researchers and partners working with them to develop confidence and to interact with policymakers; strategies of communication across the research partners to share learning and build capacity; and continued communication to build trust between people involved in the research. Partners have discussed in their reflections below on how we have worked together to achieve meaningful and transformational changes in young lives and in the families, communities, and societies that they live in.

Impact is also understood beyond direct changes in young lives, at the following layers or levels: the policies and practices of partners with whom the project formed trusted relationships; policies of broader stakeholders interacting in the research including government and non-governmental service providers; and in informing rights advocates amongst youth, in communities and civil society for transformational societal impact. This notion of impact being layered fits with a socio-ecological Change-scape framework that recognises youth as agents of change in constantly changing contexts, as described above (Johnson 2017).

We go further to then ask, on the basis of the partner discussions and perspectives presented, how these fit with or extend our Change-scape. We discuss in this article: how we have established trust and achieved shared motivations for research; what mechanisms or strategies have been useful for building our partnership; and how this has translated into different outcomes and impact. All of the partners appreciate that we have our own different personal, organisational, social, and political agendas that layer on top of this desire to achieve transformational societal impact that can help young people to realise their dreams and attain better futures. Working with marginalised youth enabled the team to better understand their views and to feed these into a research process that aimed to have impact. To what extent youth were treated as partners or participants in the process is not discussed (see, for example, Johnson *et al.* forthcoming, 2019). In this article, we keep the focus on how partners in CSOs in both countries have worked together with researchers to engage young people and change their contexts and lives.

3 Different perspectives on partnership

We write this section from the different perspectives of the partners in YOUR World. Each reflective perspective below was written by individuals, using a set of headings agreed in discussion by the project team. Although we talk about all being part of a broader YOUR World partnership, in reality the partnership comprises many layers and formations of relationships that are older or newer, and are in different stages of building trust and shared values. The reflective perspectives set out below first include the PI, from a UK university base. We then provide two perspectives from the global South, one from two NGO partners linked to YOUR World Ethiopia and one from our NGO partner from YOUR World Nepal. These describe the way in which partnerships formed between this team and the research teams linked to universities and NGOs in the global South.

The perspectives of the NGO partners focus on what motivated them to be involved in the research project and how their partnerships have developed with research teams that are based in their offices and working with them to achieve impact. These draw out indicators and mechanisms for achieving what we see as a good partnership and impact. They also reflect on the importance of the spaces that we have all created for South–South learning and the South–South partnerships that have strengthened through the period of YOUR World Research. Finally, we provide a reflective perspective from our Ethiopian NGO partner who specifically discusses how partnership has informed impact.

3.1 The reflective perspective of the PI

As a practitioner researcher for over 20 years before entering academia, my research has always needed to feed into policy and practice. So for me the impact agenda was welcome. I have gained important learning from within academia and now as a PI for YOUR World Research, funded by ESRC-DFID's Joint Fund for Poverty Alleviation Research. Beyond instrumental impact where we seek to change policy and practice and impacts on capacity building and networking, conceptual impact is vital. Conceptual impact is about creating new knowledge and insights that help us to leap over challenges in the reality of poverty and to negotiate different pathways out of poverty together.

I see partnership and impact as happening in a Change-scape or landscape of change, in rapidly evolving political, fragile, and conflict-affected environments, changing social norms, and global and national economic and political systems. And with this, changing commitments to different potential pathways out of poverty. Processes of building partnerships also link to the shifting and multiple identities of the people we conduct our research with, but also to our own shifting situations and identities as researchers. All this is set within a complex network of relationships and connections, inside and outside specific research processes, some positive and some negative, which are then sometimes built into partnerships that can facilitate impact. As in our research, we need to navigate uncertainty in a positive way together.

Partnership includes negotiating power dynamics, acknowledging different agendas, and a commitment to each changing ourselves. To listening to each other, sharing values, and collaborating on approaches to working with poor and marginalised people. It is a two-way or multi-way set of relationships and dynamics. In YOUR World Research, it is not just about changing the context in which youth live their lives, but creating conditions that enable young people to change their own contexts. I cannot imagine how this would be possible without strong national organisations that have trusted relationships with marginalised youth, without which we could not even carry out our research. They work tirelessly to change not only their own programmes, but also to influence thinking amongst other local services and provincial and national youth policy.

This reflective perspective, along with research team discussions, have helped us to structure this article. We have used perspectives from partners in Ethiopia and Nepal to draw out indicators and mechanisms for achieving better partnerships. Understanding the layers of partnership working in different contexts and the way in which individuals interact within their institutional power dynamics is similar to our approach to our research in the Change-scape conceptual framework. We draw out indicators and mechanisms that help to link researchers and practitioners in partnership to the institutional and political systems that surround them. Part of our person-centred approach to research and creating impact through the Change-scape framework links people in research processes into partnerships and into broader social, cultural, environmental, and political environments.

4 Reflective perspectives from partners

Through initial discussion at a workshop organised by the ESRC-DFID-funded Impact Initiative at the Institute of Development Studies, we noted our different layers of partnership, and that partnerships are built over time. We decided to reflect further and planned for partners to write reflective perspectives from Ethiopia and Nepal from which to draw out indicators and mechanisms for building better partnerships. Partners from the two countries examined the way in which partnership has been formed and asked the question: *Do partnerships require trustful relationships, ownership, and commitment to action to bring about societal change?* We did not have a set format for these perspectives, but more of an open forum so that indicators could emerge and then we could further analyse to draw out key mechanisms that would be useful to share for broader learning.

Our key assumption in all of these discussions was that partnership had been important in achieving impact in the YOUR World Research project. When interrogating this, we decided that partnership had served as a platform from which marginalised youth views on their strategies to navigate uncertainty could be at the core of impact. In turn, by working with broader stakeholders, the research had informed policy and practice and this was seen as a step towards transformative impact in youth lives and their communities.

Evidence has been collected throughout the project that demonstrates impact in a number of different contexts. For example: the academic capacity of researchers from the global South has increased, demonstrated by progress in doctoral studies; local partner policy papers and how they define the most marginalised has been influenced by the research project; research into policy and practice seminars on discourses around youth and marginalisation have been set up with national universities and ministries in both countries. Relevant government ministries in each country are engaging with the research partnerships and have asked for evidence about marginalised youth to feed into particular papers on the status of youth and of youth policy. There have also been spaces created for discourse between policymakers, practitioners, marginalised youth, and researchers in YOUR World and in the broader national academic community. For example in both countries, ministries have been keen to work with YOUR World national research teams on provincial and national youth seminars to understand how youth voices can feed into youth policies (in March 2019).

5 What are you looking for in partnership? Indicators for positive partnerships

The partners have identified indicators of success for building partnership that we feel have been critical to making our academic research more applied. In this section, we provide two jointly written reflective perspectives based on discussion and co-writing between the authors. The first is an example of South–North three-way partnership and describes how this partnership was established between YOUR World Research team and donors, the UK-based NGO ChildHope, and the Ethiopian-based NGO, CHADET. Both ChildHope and CHADET work on child rights and poverty. ChildHope facilitates funding from UK-based donors and provides capacity building and sharing of knowledge with national partners, such as CHADET.

The second joint perspective is built on a long-standing South–North relationship between ActionAid Nepal and the PI in which there has been a research relationship for over 20 years. ActionAid Nepal is now a national Nepali charity that arose out of the international NGO, ActionAid. This second perspective also focuses on the South–South partnership that has been built during the research process between the national YOUR World Research Nepal team and the national NGO, ActionAid Nepal. The two perspectives reflect on the network and history of trust through interpersonal relationships. From the reflections, we have further analysed and presented an emerging set of indicators that are key components of positive partnerships and impact.

5.1 Reflective perspective from ChildHope and CHADET (Jill Healey, ChildHope and Anannia Admassu, CHADET)

The 'web' of links between the universities and agencies involved in this partnership are complex and have evolved over time. CHADET and ChildHope have worked in partnership since 2001, and both organisations have evolved

and grown over that time. Both were established as an immediate response to the visible street and working children in mostly urban settings, focused on meeting core needs and survival – food, shelter, clothing, first aid, and basic health care as well as to enhance the active participation of communities and other stakeholders in the protection of vulnerable children. As each organisation came to understand the children better, the focus extended beyond the immediate, looking at education and training, life skills, and basic psycho-social support.

The children and young people were increasingly consulted about their situation as both CHADET and ChildHope developed awareness of the importance of children's participation in explaining their problems and identifying solutions. This in turn led both organisations to start considering the causal factors behind street involvement. What pushed or pulled children to the cities from their (usually rural) homes? Did they attain the opportunities they had hoped for when they arrived and, for those who wanted to return home, was reconciliation with their parents, families, and communities possible? CHADET and ChildHope began to explore the feasibility of preventive strategies, so that children were less tempted to take the risks of making such hazardous and uncertain journeys and saw opportunities in their home villages.

As the thinking grew, so too did the size and scope of both organisations, both recognising the potential to reach many more children and young people, while maintaining a focus on those at very high risk. They were also aware of the danger of operational growth if this wasn't matched by strengthening the infrastructure underpinning activities. The nature of the partnership had always been one that had been aware of – and discussed – the fragile power dynamics between 'Northern' and 'Southern' partners. Both had witnessed the problems faced by Southern organisations that had delivered large projects devised and funded from the North only to be left with inadequate infrastructure unable to sustain projects independently when the money for the project dried up. Unfortunately, the drive towards large-scale, results-driven development popular with major donors in the early to mid-2000s offered little choice to many agencies.

ChildHope and CHADET were fortunate to receive a six-year strategic grant from Comic Relief in 2006, which enabled them to simultaneously grow the reach of CHADET's programmes and give the attention and resources needed to strengthen internal policies, systems, and structures. This in turn prepared the ground for the two organisations to secure UK Aid Girls Education Challenge (GEC) funding in 2013 as part of the fund's 'Step Change' programme. The funding was the largest single grant secured in each of the organisation's history and ChildHope was a much smaller lead partner than the others in the programme (Save the Children, Plan, Mercy Corps, Aga Khan Foundation, Care International, etc.).

It would be fair to say that the experience of managing this programme, now in its second phase – itself intensely results-focused with heavy compliance requirements – has both tested and strengthened both organisations and the relationship they have with one another. It is important to describe the long journey that the two organisations have taken together to get to this point because

it illustrated not only their shared and evolving vision for the children and young people they work with but also the commitment to the partnership and the organisations themselves. Over a period of almost 20 years, they have built a strong platform that enabled the Ethiopian component of the YOUR World Research project to be developed.

Importantly, this platform was not only made up of policy and processes but also of people and time. Vicky Johnson, PI and lead of YOUR World Research, had previously worked for ChildHope as Head of Partnerships and Programmes and was therefore well known to both organisations, as well as supporting CHADET's Director to take forward his aspirations to study for a PhD. The limited funding available for the YOUR World Research, combined with some of the delivery requirements and expectations of the grant, would have made it very difficult for CHADET to participate in the research as a standalone project. Similarly, ChildHope would not have been in a position to support CHADET, or any other partner, if this were their only piece of work together. However, by building on existing resources, connections, and infrastructure, and working with people who knew each other well, the Ethiopian component could be co-created by drawing on the strengths of its different participants and what they could bring to the table.

From that base, further essential elements could be brought in as part of developing impact – experts from academia and government officials, for example – essential to the effectiveness of the research. Moreover, access to communities and ability to identify and work with the young people involved was made possible by the fact that the project was being run by an organisation with recognised integrity and understanding of the community, and known to deliver quality support to children and young people living in high-risk and hazardous contexts. That this organisation was coming to talk to the young people about their aspirations and rights was likely to be much less threatening and seen as a logical step in the organisation's programmes.

To make the partnership work in a research context and to create impacts, the relationships needed to be adjusted. ChildHope, often a lead partner, took on a more facilitative 'back seat' role. This meant quite significant involvement in the setting up phase, a much lower profile during implementation, and increased involvement again as the project closes. The ongoing GEC programme, still being implemented by CHADET and ChildHope, will enable the research partners to explore potential application of the learning in different contexts, as there is continuity of connection between them.

As a local implementing partner, CHADET has been able to establish new partnerships and widen its existing reach for impact with government bodies and other institutions at local, regional, and federal, i.e. ministerial offices. Over the latter stages of the project period, there have been fast and fundamental changes in the Government of Ethiopia with the inspired new prime minister asking for policies to be redeveloped, and in turn the Ethiopian YOUR World Research team being invited to comment and help develop policy at national level to include the most marginalised youth perspectives into youth status reports and youth national policy. The team has also been asked to set up a research into

policy and practice forum by the former Ministry of Youth and Sports. This builds on CHADET's experience of setting up a similar forum for children's evidence to influence the Ministry of Women and Children's Affairs.

5.2 Reflective perspective of ActionAid Nepal (Sujeeta Mathema and Vicky Johnson)

This perspective demonstrates another layer of relationships and reflects on the South–South partnership between the YOUR World Research team and ActionAid Nepal. It presents how this partnership has formed during the research process and then how it serves as a platform to work with government and international players on issues of youth marginalisation and rights.

In June 2016, ActionAid Nepal took up the opportunity to work with the University of Brighton and then later Goldsmiths, University of London, as a research partner on YOUR World Research. With other Southern partners in Ethiopia, the then Director of ActionAid Nepal, Bimal Phnuyal, provided input into the proposal to ESRC and DFID, helping to shape the research and provide details about the context, and where and how to access the most marginalised youth. The research is about youth, their motivations, their desires, their hopes and aspirations, and their uncertainties. ActionAid is keen to learn and understand more to implement effective work to bring changes in young people's lives and livelihoods.

ActionAid Nepal is a non-governmental, non-denominational, non-partisan, and national social justice organisation, rooted and working locally in different parts and regions of Nepal. We are also a part of both national and global social justice movements and other civil society networks, alliances, and coalitions. Shaped and driven by our values, vision, and mission, we work for transformative and structural social changes through people's active agencies. We believe in human rights and embrace human rights-based approaches to fight against not only the symptoms but mainly the structural causes of poverty, injustice, and inequality. In alignment with this, the YOUR World Research project took a rights-based approach that used the Change-scape which links youth voice and agency to our rapidly changing political and environmental context in Nepal.

As the Nepal team of Youth Uncertainty Rights (YOUR) World Research were progressing in their research process, ActionAid Nepal wanted to ensure that the research approach and emerging findings as part of the impact process were shared with the rest of the organisation and its members and networks. It was important to set up regular meetings in order to understand YOUR World findings, and how in response, ActionAid Nepal could change its strategy and approaches where relevant. By being fully informed, different members of ActionAid took ownership of the outcome and amplification of the results, something that ActionAid Nepal regards as an important part of partnership.

The YOUR World partnership between academics and practitioners has brought a vibrant interest in the organisation. In mid 2017, when ActionAid Nepal was in the process of formulating its Country Strategy Paper, a debate took

place on the centrality of recognising young people/youth and actions needed with them to improve their lives. This youth-centred approach is characterised by the Change-scape that places youth at the centre of YOUR World Research and at the centre of any action that seeks to improve their lives in the midst of intergenerational relationships and cultural, political, and environmental contexts.

Suggestions came from each corner of the organisation about the value in recognising young people as the driving force and energy to bring the changes in our communities. Therefore, it was decided that ActionAid Nepal would work with young people, while keeping women and girls at the centre, amongst all the people living in poverty and exclusion. As a result of this debate that was informed by YOUR World Research, ActionAid Nepal's strategy now clearly and explicitly talks about working with young people and recognises them as change agents/change makers.

In our work on YOUR World Research, we felt it was equally important for academics to initiate a knowledge-sharing process. ActionAid Nepal, with the team of YOUR World researchers, worked to build on the partnership the lead researcher in Nepal had with Tribhuvan University – specifically with the Research Centre for Education, Innovation and Development (CERID). The intention was to facilitate the critical discourses on alternatives in youth education and training, and to advance young people's propositions towards a just and democratic system that will promote a more dignified life. Political spaces were created around these discourses for practitioners, educators, academics, CSOs, and for all those who wanted to debate social justice through movements, and to promote young people's rights. These platforms are spaces where the findings of the research processes, such as YOUR World Research, can influence and create critical mass to fight for justice and democracy.

Social research needs to have action-orientated processes embedded so that research impact can feed into solutions that are sustainable. For any kind of sustainable transformative change, it is important to work at different levels of policy and to work towards young people-friendly policies. In this way, implementation will be more youth focused and impacts longer lasting. Hence, partnerships between academics and practitioners are very vital in terms of sustainable development.

6 Lessons learned to draw out indicators and mechanisms to improve partnerships and impact

Lessons learned from the focused discussion recorded between partners and the three perspectives above demonstrate the importance of partnership and impact of interpersonal relationships in building trust, either through experiences of working together over periods of time or by ensuring regular face-to-face meetings.

In both countries, there was also an emphasis from partners about how shared motivations for research were a basis for good partnership. If different researchers and practitioners in organisations have common goals and shared vision, in this project about youth rights and social justice, then there was more likelihood that a partnership could be built

or grow in strength. The sustainability of funding in order to build long-term interpersonal relationships and institutional partnerships was also raised in both countries. For example, in Ethiopia, the reflective piece by ChildHope and CHADET suggests that organisational growth and maturity due to long-term funding was important for building experience and allowing agencies to engage in partnerships more confidently and effectively.

It was also suggested by NGO partners that if there is an understanding that research has the potential to achieve impact, then the partnership between researchers and practitioners can be stronger. In YOUR World Research, due to the history of the PI as a practitioner for many years, this helped in forming the initial partnership. Although in theory, NGO partners wanted to support the research, at first they did this to varying extents; individuals had to be convinced of the value of the research as opposed to, for example, long-standing intervention strategies or participatory action processes that were seen as an alternative to different forms of research in communities. YOUR World Research had elements of co-construction and participatory action research combined with larger-scale qualitative research which helped different people across the NGOs to come on board with the evidence presented. It was most effective when presentations were given and regular meetings with different teams in NGOs were set up. It also helped when teams visited each other, the Nepal team to Ethiopia, and vice versa. This approach fits with the Change-scape process in that teams, whilst understanding their particular contexts, can share in mechanisms or strategies for ensuring that their research engages with youth and ultimately achieves transformation change. They felt that learning from each other in a very practical way was part of building trust, shared approaches to applied research, and pathways to impact.

Platforms and spaces for discourses and dialogue with research participants, service providers, and policymakers built together by researchers and practitioner partners proved to be effective and to make the research impactful. These spaces that link researchers, and indeed the youth that we work with, to decision makers in communities, service providers, and local and national policymakers are key mechanisms suggested in our Change-scape that was applied in our research. When these platforms and spaces for dialogue were set up early in the research process, they helped to engender interest and ownership of the research findings. For example, a national reference group of academics, policymakers, service providers and, in Nepal, leaders of youth movements and media met throughout the process. An initial meeting was set up during the planning phase to engender ownership and encourage interest in the findings.

By working together in a broader network or sea of relationships, different policymakers and service providers felt part of the process (as suggested by Johnson 2017). The partnership between YOUR World team researchers and partners grew through this process of creating

participatory spaces, and strong relationships have also been formed with other stakeholders such as government; for example, between the research team, CHADET, and different government ministries and organisations concerned with youth in Ethiopia (see Section 7.1). As also suggested by Morton (2015), research users have a deep understanding of context and are significant players to involve in research processes to achieve impact.

Due to the fast-changing fragile environment and political systems in both Ethiopia and Nepal during the project, the teams and partners had to be flexible and respond to local and national events. This relied on the trust that had been built through interpersonal relationships between the PI and the partners so that the UK team listened to the wisdom of when and where to carry out research. Plans had to change constantly. The Change-scape, applied as a conceptual framework, helped all the partners to pay particular detail in their research design to changing context, and the project trusted the partners and national teams to respond to these changes in as flexible a way as funding allowed. The uncertainty in context was not limited to the global South and changes of positions of researchers in the UK also relied on trust from Southern research teams and partners.

The team has, however, worked together and has been able to be flexible; for example, in Nepal, changing focus from national to provincial decision making at government level due to changes in government structures. The YOUR World Research team in Ethiopia has responded to requests from their new government to comment on and contribute to the annual youth status report and to include the voices of the most marginalised youth in the development of their new youth policy. The Director General of Youth Participation in Ethiopia is collaborating with the research team to involve marginalised youth in national seminars as a way of enabling them to impact on national policy. In a similar way, provincial government is collaborating with the YOUR World Research team in Nepal on provincial and national youth seminars to influence policy most effectively. Such flexibility to respond to political and policy context and new opportunities has been supported by the qualitative and explanatory nature of the reporting for the fund, and also the emphasis from both ESRC and DFID on making research impactful.

To summarise, some of the indicators of good partnership that YOUR World Research partners have drawn out of the project data analysis and reflective perspectives are as follows:

- A network/history of interpersonal relationships formed together;

- Shared motivations for research;

- Shared visions on political issues of youth rights and social justice as goals of development;

- A belief that research is important to inform policy and practice; and

- Ownership of the research process and findings by partners so that they are confident to amplify impacts in their own programming with marginalised children and youth, in new bids to donors, and in advocacy work to influence provincial and national youth policy.

The kinds of mechanisms or strategies that fit with our Change-scape approach and also make our research applied and supportive of our goal to achieve transformation are as follows:

- Meetings to share approaches between partners in the global South and North whilst still paying attention to how the research and impact initiatives would be applied differently in order to respond to particular contexts;

- Platforms and spaces for dialogue and discourse based on research created together to agree findings and discuss potential impact with participants of the research, including youth, and a broad range of decision makers and policymakers;

- Flexibility to respond to shocks and changes in the environmental, institutional, and political contexts;

- Continued contact, remote and face-to-face mentoring, capacity building, and communication to ensure trust is maintained and issues resolved; and

- Sustained sources of longer-term funding and support to build interpersonal and institutional relationships that form research partnerships that can lead to impact.

These mechanisms or strategies for making research more applied were identified in the perspectives above and through our analysis, and is the kind of practical learning that we think is useful to share in this collection of articles. From the beginning of the research process, there were relationships built between individuals due to co-construction of the proposal and design of the research. It was also important to jointly develop budgets and accountability measures specifying how to manage resources. In this way, when there were any contractual delays or misunderstandings about finances, there was a common starting point for discussion and processes that had been agreed upon.

It was noted in the partnerships that there was growing trust through the research process by ensuring regular face-to-face meetings and, when this was not possible, remote meetings. For example, the NGO partners in Nepal set up weekly meetings with the team. Communication systems were also a priority so that all team members and partners were on the same page. As also mentioned above, which is an indicator and a mechanism, spaces and platforms were created for discourses with service providers and policymakers locally, nationally, and internationally. The project originally planned to involve service providers at local and provincial level; set up national reference groups;

and have South–South sharing with the all-team inception meeting held in Nepal, the all-team analysis meeting in Ethiopia; and the dissemination and research uptake in the UK. These forums were found to be important, both for ownership and research uptake for broader stakeholders, but also to build the strength of the partnerships.

Throughout the process of the research, the team has also sought further funding from new opportunities that arose; for example, national youth seminars held with broader stakeholders in Ethiopia and Nepal, and partners travelling to present and further collaborate on impact, supported by the ESRC-DFID-funded Impact Initiative and by ESRC and DFID. At a conference to celebrate the ESRC-DFID joint fund in Delhi, both country teams also made new partnerships which are building: in Ethiopia to mainstream disability into inclusive policies in sub-Saharan Africa (see Kett *et al.*, this *IDS Bulletin*); and in Nepal with a project working with youth, sport, and culture.

7 YOUR World/CHADET partnership as a platform for creating impact
This section presents a reflective perspective that helps to understand one of the layers of the multifaceted partnership of YOUR World Research. The perspective demonstrates how strong partnership can help us to learn from youth about their strategies to navigate uncertainty in their lives, to create more impact by supporting them instead of acting on adult assumptions about their lives. It also shows how research can lead to transformation of programmes, policy, organisational attitudes, and behaviour and eventually societal change. The motivation for CHADET and researchers from YOUR World Research is the transformation of marginalised youth lives, communities, organisations, researchers, and the broader context. This is ambitious but this section provides details of how steps towards this are being achieved through partnership and by sharing our experiences of partnership in YOUR World Research with others.

7.1 Reflective perspective of CHADET (Anannia Admassu)
The research, in the case of CHADET, has helped to strengthen its existing relationship with the Technical and Vocational Education and Training (TVET) agency, a government body that focuses on skills development of young people. By demonstrating how we've listened to the views of young people, we are now able to make plans to develop new projects jointly, at local and regional levels, attracting other institutions and stakeholders to be part of these efforts.

The nature of the research has demonstrated the benefit of pulling together expertise and collaboration between agencies that are involved in carrying out research with children and young people. This was particularly found to be important for establishing and strengthening new partnerships and for sharing learning from the findings of the research that is being undertaken by other agencies. For example, both the Population Council and the Young Lives study in Ethiopia have joined the YOUR World Research national reference group and collaborated in the research into policy and practice seminars.

YOUR World Research has also had an impact on CHADET's implementation projects. This research undertaking is timely and instrumental for both CHADET and ChildHope in that learning will contribute to the development of new programmes to address the needs of children who are transitioning from childhood to adulthood, taking into account the local context. We will build stronger child-centred approaches like the Change-scape into projects to make sure they take children's voices, their interaction with adults in communities, and their changing political contexts, into account. As CHADET and ChildHope are both recipients of current funding from DFID to implement a project designed to address the educational needs of tens of thousands of vulnerable girls, we will look at applying the findings of YOUR World Research to that live project, too.

CHADET is looking at how best to make use of academic research to improve their work in the future through initiating collaboration with institutions, for example local universities, to undertake studies of a similar nature.

In countries such as Ethiopia, the relationship between the government and civil society organisations has been characterised by lack of trust and a limited level of collaboration. The fact that CHADET is part of this youth-centred research has helped it to provide evidence and hard facts that have convinced the government to better understand the challenges and prospects of its policies towards young marginalised people in the country. The Change-scape has helped to link youth voices to this changing political context so that young people can be seen as agents of change.

When the doors are closed, you have to use the windows to get in!

Now with the new government in Ethiopia, there is even more opportunity to work together in partnership and create impact. The recently formed Ministry of Women, Children and Youth [formerly the Ministry of Women and Children's Affairs, and the Ministry of Youth and Sports] *is now also collaborating with YOUR World Research and CHADET on the final youth seminars for the project and in redeveloping its youth policy.*

CHADET has an opportunity to use its existing networks, for instance, the Consortium of Civil Society Organisations in Ethiopia, to disseminate the findings of YOUR World Research in different platforms and working groups across its operational areas.

There is also a better chance for creating impact by strengthening networks and exchange of skills and knowledge between higher learning institutions in Ethiopia with that of the UK.

8 Conclusions across the partnership

The key points that we have tried to illustrate through partner-reflective perspectives answer our question: *Do partnerships require trustful relationships, ownership, and commitment to action to bring about societal change*? The indicators and mechanisms we have drawn out in the article and summarised below, along with growing evidence of impact (for example, provided in the CHADET reflective perspective) suggest that the

answer is yes. From the perspective of YOUR World Research partners, these indicators and mechanisms were what we regarded as important to both keep the research going in challenging political and fragile environments, and to make steps towards achieving our shared goals of transforming youth lives.

A key indicator was that the partnership has many layers which consist of interpersonal relationships that need to be fostered, nurtured, and sustained. This may be through the experience of working together over time when trust is gradually built, but in new relationships, in order to build trust, space and resources need to be incorporated into bids. The related mechanisms included face-to-face meetings within organisations, between organisations, and between country teams, for example, so that the researchers and partners can establish trustful ways of working together. Indicators of good partnership include interpersonal relationships alongside shared values and visions about development.

Fitting with our conceptual framework of applied research, Change-scape, good partnerships in fast-changing political and environmentally fragile contexts also require mechanisms that enable people, projects, and funding to be flexible and responsive to changing institutional, environmental, and political situations so that research can be carried out safely and effectively, but also so that teams can take unexpected opportunities to create impact such as those arising from a change of government in Ethiopia. These have arisen throughout YOUR World Research in times of rapid political change, and as relationships and trust with broader stakeholders grows as they get to know researchers and partners and see the research findings. Partnerships emerge, develop, and grow as research projects progress and they therefore need to be able to respond in the anticipation of bringing about impact. Indeed, in both the countries involved, Ethiopia and Nepal, significant changes in national and provincial government provided an opportunity for the partnerships to impact on societal change through new and emerging policies for marginalised youth. This required mechanisms that allowed the partnerships to be flexible and willing to adjust activities as part of the commitment to bringing about societal change.

The reflective perspectives also recognise that the YOUR World Research partnerships and the marginalised youth that we work with function in Change-scapes, landscapes in continual flux and change. There may be fast-changing fragile environments and political systems but also slow-moving embedded social norms and discrimination that sometimes take generations to shift. In this context, partnership is recognised in YOUR World Research at every level, with the marginalised youth, their families and communities, and the broader environmental, cultural, institutional, and political context. Therefore, YOUR World Research planned processes follow our socioecological Change-scape conceptual framework that is also informed by critical realism. Based on the Change-scape, mechanisms are therefore built into research to address power dynamics and help research users to

listen to the perspectives of children and young people, and so inform policy and practice and ultimately achieve transformational change (Johnson 2015, 2017).

In this Change-scape, spaces for dialogue and mechanisms to support collaboration and commitment to change as a result of participant perspectives were planned. This included mechanisms to co-construct meanings and methods to explore uncertainty with young people so that they found the research interviews meaningful and wanted to continue to engage with us and community members, service providers, and policymakers who might listen. Planning local and provincial verification sessions were key mechanisms in which youth and adults in communities and service providers could debate what is or is not possible to support youth strategies, as were reference groups at national level that have engaged, provided advice, and are now keen to engage in research uptake. We recognise that youth are linked to their context but that they can also be agents of change and create impact.

Partnership building and transforming is impact in itself and the Change-scape conceptual framework is designed to develop partnership and this impact in each stage of the research lifecycle. The depth and breadth of community–university partnerships has grown within and across countries (Banks *et al.* 2019) and we welcome this article as an opportunity to celebrate that. The different layers of the YOUR World partnership have served as a platform to make steps towards creating impact in a number of areas. Immediately, with academics and practitioners working together on seminar series for discussion about marginalisation and youth with national universities in Nepal and with ministries in Ethiopia; our own partners' programmes in both countries; and in informing policy documents in NGOs and government.

In the longer term, our work with youth and adults in participatory spaces and in dialogue with service providers informs other levels, but will eventually transform the lives of the youth we work with. There are some signs of transformation from youth action; for example, in Nepal as early as one year before project completion, a group of youth from Kathmandu went to demand their rights and services from providers, who were willing to listen. Just as partnerships are layered and change over time, influence and impact are also layered and need to be connected to the realities of the research participants and the changing political systems that we work within.

Notes

* This issue grew out of the Impact Initiative for International Development Research which seeks to maximise impact and learning from ESRC-DFID's Joint Fund for Poverty Alleviation Research and their Raising Learning Outcomes in Education Systems Research Programme.

† 'Insecurity and Uncertainty: Marginalised Young People's Living Rights in Fragile and Conflict Affected Situations in Nepal and

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Fundamental Challenges in Academic–Government Partnership in Conflict Research in the Pastoral Lowlands of Ethiopia[*][†]

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Abstract The Ethiopian government continuously calls for policy-relevant research. However, this admission of policy challenges and attempts to fill the gap cannot ignore the political economy and power dynamics in Ethiopia. This article discusses challenges to an impactful partnership with government, drawing from the experiences of the 'conflict working group', the ESRC-DFID-funded project 'Shifting In/equality Dynamics in Ethiopia: from Research to Application' (SIDERA). We argue that research should empower communities; however, to government, research is a tool to buttress efforts to 'secure' and 'pacify' the lowlands to eventually facilitate extraction. The article also addresses the lack of consensus on basic concepts such as conflict. We argue that it is a rational response to environmental change and state-led dispossessions, while to government, it is an expression of 'backwardness' and 'irrationality'. The development of a meaningful partnership in this context was dependent on navigating meanings and power relations.

Keywords: research partnership, policy impact, conflict research, pastoral conflict, South Omo Zone, Ethiopia.

1 Introduction

The discourse and promotion of evidence-based development policymaking has become more entrenched since the 1990s (Pawson 2006; Georgalakis *et al.* 2017; Nelson 2017). Evidence generated from university research is more trusted than other sources, although the former is less read (Shucksmith 2016), and the desired engagement with policy and decision-making is often opportunistic and mainly used to re-confirm existing policy ideas (Newman *et al.* 2013). Changes in research funding schemes – which puts emphasis on the 'elusive "impact"' – push researchers towards collaborating and partnering with practitioners. Similarly, practitioners are pushed towards researchers

in search of reliable and trusted sources of knowledge to inform the decisions they make. Despite this, policymakers have an occasional interest in 'buying' new ideas and are more open in times of crisis or reform (Green 2017).

Moreover, despite this emerging interdependence, the struggle of policymakers engaged in research to maintain their autonomy and the other researchers to get heard leads to the continued presence of an 'impermeable barrier' between researchers and policymakers (Sen *et al.* 2017). This research-to-policy gap is increasingly being bridged through the co-production of knowledge in processes of action research, and of building trust and channels of consistent communication (Georgalakis *et al.* 2017). It should be emphasised here that 'research to policy processes are largely social. Technical capacities matter… but not nearly as much as the social factors' (*ibid.*: 17). The way to handle the 'social matters' and 'turn research into action' is by 'strengthening relationships between researchers and local government officials', differently put as investing in the building of networks and partnerships (Georgalakis 2016).

This, however, is not a straightforward process. In the first place, context matters a lot and the individual relations between representatives of the different stakeholder institutions have a pivotal role in determining the success of the partnership/impact (Wessells *et al.* 2017). This will become crucially visible in cases of research on sensitive topics which need careful navigation of domestic and/or local politics (*ibid.*). Wessells *et al.* (2017: 91) go to the extent of concluding that 'researchers who want to have a significant impact on policy should identify and cultivate a positive relationship with a well-positioned person who can serve as both a power broker and a trusted adviser.' This, however, invites informality and reduces the institutionalisation of changes and the sustainability of impacts. Secondly, creating networks and building partnerships is not a technical process; rather, it is a process fraught with questions of power. This has been recognised for a long time in the literature, especially in cases of partnerships between donors from the North and implementing non-governmental organisations (NGOs) in the global South (Crawford 2003; Harrison 2002; Lister 2000). This makes the task of building trust and participation in decision-making – crucial components of partnering – trickier.

Based on a unique case of South–South within-country partnership-building efforts, this article argues that the challenges inherent to North–South partnership are replicated in South–South partnerships. These 'impermeable barriers' (Sen *et al.* 2017) are related to the very aims that research should achieve, the divergent conceptions and views on the local community, and constraints emanating from contested power relations between the partnering institutions. These challenges are manifested despite the possession of an insider perspective on contexts and dynamics by the research team. The uniqueness of the case is from two perspectives. First, most of the available literature on partnerships and impact focus on collaborations between institutions

based in the global North with those in the global South. Questions of the discourse of partnerships concealing power relations across the global North–South divide abound. Thus, our contribution looks into similar dynamics within South–South partnership dynamics, within a similar broader cultural context. Second, the available literature focuses on partnerships over 'soft' issue areas, such as health, participatory environmental conservation, and child protection (social issues) (Boaz, Baeza and Fraser 2011; Murthy *et al.* 2012; Oliver *et al.* 2014). This article discusses a case of conflict research, a more sensitive issue on which governments tend to be less willing to partner (particularly so in Ethiopia, as will be shown in the next section).

We are basing our argument on the long-term engagements of the first two authors in South Omo Zone, Southern Nations, Nationalities, and Peoples' (SNNP) regional state of Ethiopia (see Mercy 2016, 2017; Asnake and Fana 2012, 2014; Tewolde and Fana 2014). This more informal engagement was further crystallised by becoming part of the Omo-Turkana Research Network,[5] which culminated in an ESRC-DFID-funded research 'Shifting In/equality Dynamics in Ethiopia: from Research to Application' (SIDERA).[6] This research project created the platform for researchers based in Addis Ababa University at the Institute for Peace and Security Studies (IPSS) (Mercy Fekadu Mulugeta, Fana Gebresenbet, and Yonas Tariku) to partner with researchers based in the UK and US. The latter are responsible for two working groups of the project: environmental sustainability/resource dynamics and wealth/poverty dynamics. This article is more focused on a third working group, the Conflict Working Group (CWG), which was implemented exclusively (without reducing the importance of cross-fertilisation across working groups) by the team from IPSS.

The CWG is tasked with mapping new inter-group violent conflicts that have emerged in South Omo and identifying key issues in the conflict. It also investigates how changing resource access has affected conflict dynamics and how the interplay between environmental sustainability, inequality, and conflict is affecting socioecological resilience at the scale of communities and at the level of the Omo Basin. In addition to activities related to the CWG, the IPSS team also took the lead in facilitating access and good offices of relevant government officials for the other two working groups (starting from December 2017). As such, the SIDERA activities created the platform for a better institutionalisation and formalisation of the working relations between the IPSS and government, federal, regional, and zonal. In addition to the procedural issues, selected government officials are involved in the different stakeholder mapping and other processes (in Addis Ababa (federal, regional, and zonal government officials) in February 2017; in Jinka and Kangaten (zonal and district government officials) in July and August 2018), and are planned to be included in the synthesis workshop in May 2019. As such, the plan was to create a strong partnership over the course of the project's lifetime.

Despite the desire of higher officials to involve academics in the development of policy tools and knowledge (*Ethiopian Broadcasting Corporation* 2018), several challenges hinder effective cooperation between academics and policymakers in Ethiopia. This article attempts to better understand these fundamental challenges impeding the application of knowledge produced by academics in policymaking. The key question to be answered is: What are the challenges of academics–government research partnership on development and conflict resolution in South Omo Zone? These challenges emerge as academics try to inform government perspectives with evidence on pastoralist reactions, aiming to contribute towards a more appropriate government response in conflict prevention and management. This article is a qualitative analysis based on interviews of key government officials, analysis of government annual reports, and a critical assessment of the experiences of the CWG (including before the project life of SIDERA).

The SIDERA/CWG sees research as empowering, and has therefore adopted qualitative interpretative methodology. Contrary to traditional views, rooted in positivist quantitative approaches, on research as an impartial endeavour, quantitative as well as qualitative research can be empowering to communities and its audience (Canessa 2006). For both moral and scientific reasons, the CWG/SIDERA researchers openly advocated for the selection of a community-relevant research agenda and the voicing of local voices in the process (Herbert 1996; Schwarzer, Bloom and Shono 2006). This philosophy has shaped both the research process and the development of this article.

The remainder of this article is structured in three parts. Section 2 gives the national and local context within which the SIDERA/CWG project was implemented. Section 3 presents three barriers to forging a strong/ impactful partnership. The first dwells on the differing definitions and conceptualisations of what research is and should achieve. The second highlights the incongruent views of researchers and government actors towards the local community and the rationality of its acts, specifically in conflict. The third presents moments of clashes/contestations of differing forms of power possessed by researchers and government officials. Section 4 concludes the article.

2 SIDERA/CWG in the partnership landscape of Ethiopia

The South Omo Zone is located in southwestern Ethiopia and is home to 16 pastoralists and agro-pastoralist ethnic groups. Ethiopia has been a federal state since 1993 and is divided into nine regional states. South Omo is one of the zones in the Southern Nations Nationalities and People's Region of Ethiopia. Before it became a federal state, Ethiopia was a feudal state (late nineteenth century to 1974) and a socialist state (1974–91). Feudalism has been a major socio-political feature of large parts of the country, even before the creation of the modern Ethiopian state in the late nineteenth century (Clapham 2002). The political capital, Addis Ababa, of the last feudal emperor, continues to be the capital of present-day Ethiopia.

Despite the practice of federalism in Ethiopia, the importance of a strong centre is crucial in explaining the nature of governance and the policymaking landscape. The former centre, Addis Ababa, is also the current centre, where both political and economic power is concentrated. The South Omo, one of the last additions to the federal state, continues to be the political, geographic, and economic margins of the country (Yntiso 2012). The type of governance practised by the dominant party coalition, the Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF) centralises decision-making in the political capital in a way that the decision-making power of the regional states and local governments is retracted.

The policies of the EPRDF are tuned by the developmental state model whereby poverty is defined as the main national challenge, and economic development is the remedy. This is done through centralised and often oppressing methods that are implemented at the cost of regional autonomy and individual liberty. The 2009 Charities and Societies proclamation, and 2008 Freedom of the Mass Media and Access to Information proclamation effectively curtailed any debate on rights-related policy issues. As such, conflict management is in the hands of government institutions and to some extent traditional practices – often argued to be co-opted by the government.

The SIDERA project itself is aimed at contributing towards positive change by bringing about a shift in perspective that would be reflected in changes in narrative, to be expressed both in policy and discourses. State-led development initiatives are transforming the zone into a hub of sugar production and export, aimed to increase national sugar production from 17 million to 42 million tonnes, at social, cultural, and environmental costs. Such production will produce an annual income of US$661.7m and alternative energy, 304,000m^3 of ethanol per year, and 607MW electricity (Tewolde and Fana 2014). Close to half of the new sugar production at national level is expected to be sourced from the 125,000 hectares allocated for sugarcane plantation and industry in South Omo. According to the federal government, this land is 'underutilised' by the inhabitants of South Omo who practice pastoralism as a mode of livelihood (Eyasu 2008; this view is also confirmed by various interviews at the Ethiopian Sugar Corporation).

The South Omo Zone, while geographically located in the SNNP region, is usually listed along with what the federal government calls emerging regions (Afar, Somali, Gambella, and Benshangul-Gumuz), which are known to be 'lag[ing] behind the rest of the country' due to marginalisation, and which have several 'harm-inducing customs' (FDRE Government Communication Affairs Office 2015). These 'emerging regions' are predominantly lowland areas, and are conceptualised as 'the last frontiers' (Markakis 2011). These constitute territories yet to be fully mastered by the Ethiopian state.

We conceptualised the SIDERA project with the expectation that research and research-based evidence that cultivates the right partners and modes of partnerships feeds policymaking and benefits target communities by bringing their voices into policymaking platforms far from where they could otherwise reach. The partnership stands to benefit about 300,000 people living in the South Omo Zone. Most of these potential beneficiaries are poor and marginalised pastoralist communities whose livelihoods and social dynamics have been greatly negatively affected by the development projects, i.e. sugar plantation/industrialisation and villagisation.

This article addresses challenges that lie beyond the most cited academic–non-academic partnerships in the literature, including barriers related to physical and bureaucratic distance, cultural difference, and lack of time and funding (Nelson 2017). In other words, it addresses what lies ahead once academic and non-academic groups are in touch, having found the interest, time, and funding and, relatively speaking, are within the same cultural and political context. Setting aside the bureaucracy that lies between any government official and citizen, there is relatively little or no physical barrier between the research team and non-academic partners at the regional and federal government. The CWG research team is based in Addis Ababa, the capital city of Ethiopia, where the partner at the federal government level, i.e. the Ministry of Federal and Pastoral Development Affairs is based. Policymakers at the regional (sub-national) and local level also travel to the capital city frequently. In addition, the research team has an institutional partner, the South Omo Research Centre, through which it can make contact with the zonal and *woreda*[7] (hereafter, district) governments. The data collection journeys also facilitated face-to-face contact. Moreover, the informal networks of the first two authors since the early 2010s smoothed relations.

In terms of language, the working language of all three levels of governments, Amharic, is also the mother tongue of all three research team members. However, it is only a small section of the Nyàngatom, i.e. the local community at district level – who have done some years of schooling (and invariably work for the government) that could speak in Amharic. Furthermore, the difference in research and policy language is apparent between government and academics. While all partners are based in the same country, their priorities and culture of knowledge production, vocabulary, and objectives created some challenges.

SIDERA/CWG aimed to forge partnerships with non-academic institutions at the federal, regional, and zonal levels in Ethiopia. This process was unique due to (1) the country's political landscape, (2) the nature of public institutions, and (3) the centre-periphery dynamics. Besides these features, to be discussed in detail below, some key contextual issues make analysis on this particular process unique from the literature on partnership and policymaking.

The first contextual factor is Ethiopia's political landscape. The policymaking sphere is dominated by governmental actors and is restricting to research institutions and civil societies working especially in the fields of conflict and peace research. Dissent is rarely tolerated in Ethiopia's political culture, and the country's political order has been dominated by the EPRDF since 1991 and several restrictive laws since 2009. The challenge of conducting emancipatory research in such a hostile context while maintaining the necessary objective distance from government influences is clearly big.

The second contextual factor relates to public universities in Ethiopia. There is a dramatic increase in higher education institutions and intake. This, however, is not matched by research and publication outputs, due to a drop in the quality of education, high brain drain, and inefficient use of resources (Teshome 2005). Like most public sectors in the country, besides meeting the growing demand for higher education, the increase in the number of such educational institutions has been attuned to producing the required manpower to meet national 'developmental' goals. These goals are specified in the national five-year plans, Growth and Transformation Plans I and II, among others, and have been met by disproportionately investing in the natural and computational sciences. Higher education institutions are expected to directly contribute towards government-led development initiatives throughout the country, rather than critiquing it.

The third contextual factor is the historically established relations between a powerful centre and a weaker periphery, especially the pastoral frontier. Unlike other federal states, Ethiopia's practice of federalism, so far, lacks the quality of decentralisation and power balance expected between federal and regional institutions. What the constitution decentralised is centralised through the ruling party (Belay 2012). In practice, this dynamic is characterised by Ethiopia's centre-periphery relations, within which the federal institutions, based at the geographic and political centre, Addis Ababa, define and control the peripheries. The relation between a powerful centre that actively subjugates and exploits is more expressed in places such as the South Omo Zone. This is due to the geographic distance from the centre, the small numerical size of the ethnic groups, and the dominance of pastoralism as a mode of production (see Markakis 2011).

Public institutions need official channels that facilitate access to data, and form research and data-sharing partnerships with governmental institutions. This process involves fulfilling certain institutional formalities, such as formal written communications from department heads but with no binding framework agreement or the signing of formal agreements, such as MoUs. Once started, the process builds on informal structures and communications which would be impossible without the formality.

After winning the ESRC-DFID grant, the IPSS initiated formal communication with the relevant government offices aiming to ensure

Figure 1 The 'FIT Model': partnership as an iterative and dynamic process
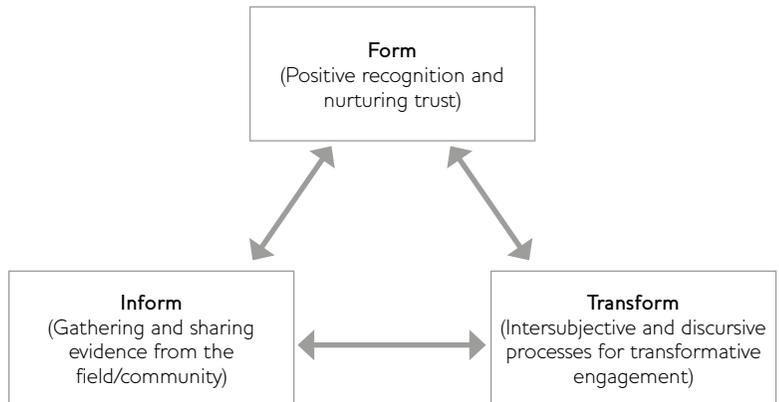
Source Authors' own, based on their experience.

the smooth running of the fieldwork, meaningful engagement of policymakers at all levels of the research, and to ensure policy uptake at a later stage. However, a binding agreement was not developed or signed. The letter, written by the IPSS, introduced the project and invited government institutions – such as the Ministry of Federal and Pastoral Development Affairs, the SNNPR's Pastoralist Affairs Bureau, and the Zonal Administration Office – for planning and launch, and facilitated continuous engagement. The IPSS also sent formal letters to the district government at the very local level. Such formality is possible because the IPSS is part of a public higher institution, Addis Ababa University, which is mandated to conduct problem-solving research and provide evidence to policymaking institutions.[8] The initial working relationship of the first two authors meant that this was primarily a formalisation of an existing relation, reducing frictions at the very start of the project. Besides being involved at the planning level and the sharing of data, at a later stage these governmental organisations will be part of a synthesis and findings presentation workshop.

3 Challenges of government–academia partnership
3.1 Contradictions on the objectives of research
Ideally, and as set out in the context of SIDERA, the CWG research process incorporated three major components having a triangular flow, which we call the 'FIT Model' (see Figure 1). The first component is gathering evidence from the field/community which then contributes to *informing* our stakeholders' (at the district, zonal, regional, and national levels) decisions related to the perspectives of the pastoralists. The second component builds on the first one – through iteration – and aims at *forming* or consolidating networks and non-formal partnerships by mutual recognition and nurturing trust. Finally, the third component would be a product of the other two in which the evidence-mediated intersubjective and discursive processes result in *transformative* engagements between the academic and non-academic partners.

The process is not linear and unidirectional as presented above, however. At the heart of this iterative process is that the research does not just end at the point of uncovering, analysing, and filling the knowledge gap. Rather, it goes beyond that and serves as a conduit through which local voices are reverberated and heeded, and decision makers' perspectives are accordingly shaped or influenced. Therefore, it is through this process of *informing* (via empirical evidence), *forming* (networks and partnerships as a result of recognition and trust), and *transforming* (through intersubjective and discursive processes) that the CWG sought to generate impact.[9] Also, it is, in the main, this engagement that would empower, if not emancipate, pastoralist communities.

In reality, however, the divergent view of academics and policymakers, in regard to what research ought to achieve, happens to be quite a challenge. To the academics informed by the Critical Research Paradigm, research should produce empirically grounded knowledge which empowers communities; while, to the Ethiopian government, research is a tool to buttress efforts to 'secure' lowlands and facilitate extraction by confirming the government's fundamental assumptions. Obviously, these views are on a collision course as they seek to achieve different outcomes *vis-à-vis* the existing structures of relations between the pastoralist communities and the government or its functionaries who are busy with the ongoing 'development' interventions in the area. Put differently, the researchers' efforts to bring the pastoralists' voices to the fore and the policymakers' firm interest to 'extract' from and control the latter end up in a head-on confrontation.

To try to bridge this gap in the 'what' and 'why' of research is indeed a trying enterprise for the apparent reason that policymakers often operate on what they have decided are national priorities, rather than on the researchers' fanciful ideas of empowerment and emancipation, which, according to the view of government officials, lack any practical relevance. This should not be construed to mean that policymakers are completely oblivious to the plight of pastoralist communities; rather that the state-led 'developmental' policies (see Fana 2015) are the remedy. Thus, it is the government who should be heard by the pastoralist community, not the other way around. And, it is here where, from the policymakers' perspective, research ought to prove its relevance as a tool to realise national policy priorities. In this case, therefore, the most common challenge is the 'conflict between research recommendations and policymakers' priorities' (Greengrass 2017: 24). This is how 'the ideology of government ministers (i.e. if fixed) may prevent engagement even where empirical evidence supports a policy change and this can hamper research findings from contributing to instrumental impact through change of policy or practice' (*ibid*.: 24).

It is under these circumstances that the degree of politicisation and subsequent securitisation of an issue can easily entangle issues in unsolicited political interpretations. Empirical evidence suggesting that

such complications are most common in the social sciences than in the hard sciences is lacking; however, politicisation and securitisation of issues is easier to warrant in the social sciences (Balzacq 2005). Since, compared to policymakers, the researchers have literally no power to depoliticise and/or desecuritise an issue, they have to rely on promoting positive recognition and nurturing trust which requires ample time and intersubjective understanding. This, in turn, will be built on the long-term contacts and non-formal networks the researchers and IPSS have established with officials and experts who are in charge of Pastoralist Affairs and Security and Administration desks at various levels and branches of the government. As the supposed end-users of research findings and recommendations, it is through these long-term acquaintances and the non-formal partnership with these individuals and their offices that the research is expected to eventually empower pastoralist communities. At the moment, shifting the perspectives of these government functionaries appears the most plausible path to eventually impacting policies.

3.2 Contrasting views on pastoralism and pastoralists' responses

The ministerial bodies at the federal government have identified four major issues as the source of conflict in South Omo Zone: these are the lack of good governance, issues related to land claim, self-determination, and harmful traditional practices such as cattle raiding and payment of bride price.[10] Of these, cattle raiding is the most frequently mentioned cause of conflict by South Omo officials.[11] The high number of cattle to be paid as dowry, as high as 40 in some communities, is mentioned as the 'irrational' reason behind these raids, while economic interest, environment, and other development-related wealth dynamics are not mentioned. These practices are labelled 'harm-inducing social practices' rampant in 'backward' regions such as the South Omo Zone and to be addressed by awareness-raising campaigns that supplement government-led development projects (FDRE Government Communications Affairs Office 2015).

To the government, the local community's resentment and resistance of 'development' interventions such as the expansion of farmlands, resettlements, and private investment projects is for no particular reason. The 'irrationality' of such resentments is best presented by the words of the security administration head: 'The Mursi demand appointment of one of their own as managers and payments (as a salary even if they don't work). This demand is not limited to projects but also administrative structures'.[12] In some parts of the zone, the act of violence targeting vehicles is seen as the ultimate 'irrational' act also.[13]

Solutions proposed by the government naturally address these concerns. For instance, self-determination has been addressed through the restructuring of district administrative territories on the basis of ethnicity; in practice, this move has reframed land claims into administrative entitlements. For example, the Nyàngatom district was founded in 2006 in response to frequent violent incidents with the

Dasanech, when the two groups were administered jointly under the then Kuraz district. On the other hand, 'development' interventions are expected to solve all other ongoing sources of conflict in South Omo, including good governance, largely defined as the lack of public services, and harmful traditional practices.

Assertions by researchers that conflict is a rational response to state-led dispossessions are completely disregarded. To government, conflict is an expression of 'backwardness' and 'irrationality' to be solved through 'development' and sometimes with the 'necessary' and 'inevitable' punitive security measures. This takes place in the form of regular 'security campaigns' during which suspected individuals, mainly young men, are targeted. In addition to this, the campaigns serve as a display of force and create an atmosphere of fear, which makes communities subservient. The experience in certain areas in the zone such as Salamago shows that government interventions advanced in the name of development and security bred more insecurity. The attempt of scholars to bring this to the fore is at the very least ignored. At the extreme, the government blames foreign researchers for fuelling the conflicts by misguiding the local community (Meles 2011).

A close and systematic analysis of events in pastoralist communities shows that conflict is a rational act of survival closely tied in with physical and livelihood security. Pastoralist conflicts, for instance those frequent between the Nyàngatom, the Dasanech, and the Suri, are a means to gaining livelihood items through cattle raiding or sorghum theft (Mercy 2017; Glowacki and Wrangham 2013). Similarly, territorial conflicts, such as one between the Nyàngatom and the Kara or the Turkana and the Nyàngatom, are a means to the nourishment of these livelihood items as territorial conquest ultimately serves as grazing land for cattle and flood retreat agricultural land to produce sorghum (Greiner 2013; Girke 2008; Tornay 2009). The ambushes and arson in Salamago district is also an expression of resistance to dispossession of land, paternalistic handling of communities, and an attempt to maintain their autonomy (Buffavand 2017).

Pastoralist communities in South Omo have narratives of historical constructions of conflict with neighbouring communities (existential 'enemies') and have lived through perennial conflicts their entire living memory. The situation is further complicated and the security of these communities threatened even more as their territory shrinks due to land-intensive government-led development projects such as sugarcane plantations. Their livelihood and way of life is threatened as well. The 'development' initiatives and the villagisation projects encourage a shift in lifestyle and discourage the pastoral transhumant method, calling it 'a life of one that follows the tail of a cow'. Pastoralism is taken as anachronistic, a thing of the past and unproductive. Flood retreat agriculture, though not discouraged like pastoral cattle herding, is currently impossible due to the tremendous decrease of floods after the construction of the Gibe III dam (Kamski 2016). Within this context,

pastoralist conflict has become a deliberate act of resistance and survival that stands in the face of dispossesive development projects.

Such difference between government and academia on the definition of pastoral conflict is not merely a 'semantic acrobatics' but a conceptual contradiction at the heart of a nation's political economy. For this reason, the main impact objective envisaged through this partnership is a conceptual shift that is slowly but surely progressing through years of engagement of researchers (not just SIDERA but others as well) with government officials. As one former district government official ascertained, 'I used to see revenge as the sole reason for pastoralist conflicts… I now understand [through interaction with researchers] that the main reason for pastoralist conflict is economic.' Government–academic partnerships should help bring such change in perspective, noting that the culture of raiding, dowry ambushes, arson, and other supposedly 'irrational' practices are in fact ways to economic security and access.

3.3 Power contestation
The SIDERA partnership was an iterative process in a field of power. The partnering process was conditioned by the balance and negotiation of differing forms of power. The academic partners possess 'soft powers' of producing evidence-based knowledge and articulating it within broader national/local economic and historical processes. Non-academic partners on the other hand have 'hard powers' related to bureaucratic red tape, power over the accessibility of state records and archives, and the potential limitation of where the researcher could go and who she could talk to. Government officials, as non-academic partners, are crucial to the actual implementation of the research and the quality of data generated.

This occurred with the South Omo Research Center (SORC) in late 2012 and early 2013, at the start of the sugar industrialisation and villagisation activities, amidst increasing resistance by the local communities and the ensuing tension. The government did not properly consult the local communities (Yidnekacew 2015), and blamed the failure to get the allegiance of the pastoralists on the SORC and the researchers (mainly foreign anthropologists) operating there. This, *inter alia*, led to the deportation of the SORC's Director and the closing of the SORC temporarily.

Therefore, the earliest work of the CWG team members was mainly based on informal networks and with low-key engagement with the SORC and researchers affiliated to it. In due course, after gaining the trust of the zonal administration and partnering with the new leadership of the SORC, now based at Arba Minch University, the team was able to more easily work directly with the zone government and communities. Members of the CWG now face practically no significant barriers from the zone government to conduct researches there, even in collaboration with individuals the government suspects

of being 'anti-development' and feeding the 'wrong' stories to international organisations, such as the Oakland Institute and Human Rights Watch.[14]

Not all power dynamics are resolved amicably though. For example, in late 2012, at the peak of intense international criticism (see Human Rights Watch 2012) of the Ethiopian government for alleged human rights violations in the name of promoting land investments, the IPSS initiated a research project which looked into the socio-political and conflict implications of such investments (see findings in Mulugeta 2014). The primary national actors in this process were the Agricultural Investment Support Directorate (AISD) within the Ministry of Agriculture and the Ethiopian Sugar Corporation. The AISD at the time insisted that they become stakeholders in the research, and that the IPSS and AISD sign an MoU. The IPSS did not welcome this, fearing encroachment into the freedoms of researchers, and this initial friction led to a difficult start. Both actors viewed the other suspiciously, and without steps being taken to resolve this mistrust, that project ended up with a limited working relationship.

Similarly, our working relationship is much more advanced and trust-based at lower government levels, in zone and district, than at higher levels. Power relations become more limiting as one goes up, to regional or federal levels of government. To get the attention of government officials and to build a genuine partnership at these levels, a much higher scope of funding and activities are needed – be it in funds generated, geographic areas concerned, and time period for the research. These senior government officials appear to be more interested in more general and high-impact issues. Considering the limited scope of our funds and work experience therefore, the rational thing to do was to mainly focus at lower levels of government.

This, however, also comes with a cost to potential impact. The characteristic centre-periphery relations in Ethiopia, further buttressed by the logic of developmentalism, essentially means that resources could be extracted from the peripheries with little consideration of the costs there (Fana 2015; Markakis 2011). Moreover, the state aims to expand its power and hegemony to the pastoral lowlands through these 'development' schemes (Fana 2016; Lavers 2016; Lavers and Boamah 2016). As such, policy decisions are made in the centre with little consideration other than promotion of rapid development and security (see also Mercy 2016), while the lower government officials implement whatever comes from the centre with little scope for resistance and adaptation to local realities (Markakis 2011). As such, partnerships with significant impact on policy should involve representatives from higher levels of government. If one partners below, it will at the very best take a long time for the impact to be felt at higher levels of government and induce a change in policy.

4 Conclusion

Government calls on researchers to contribute to national development on various occasions, presuming that 'national priorities' and 'reality' are uncontested, and that researchers will naturally subscribe to the state's conceptualisations. Thus, to government, partnering with academic institutions is like having a branch of government that provides evidence-based knowledge to further the state's defined interests and approaches to deal with a certain socioeconomic/political challenge, not to contest it. A serious and fruitful partnership between academics and policymakers needs to navigate this contradiction in view of reality and the objective of research.

Moreover, the Ethiopian government presents itself as the vanguard of the masses, and as such defines the problem, solution, and the way to do it. In this process, the views and understandings of sections of the population, in this case the pastoralists, can be overlooked. The latter are viewed as 'irrational' 'backward' actors, who do not know and cannot make a rational decision, be it in development or conflict management/resolution. The researcher here is well positioned to articulate the thinking and rationality of the 'underdog' and in the process empower the pastoralists. These two challenges in the partnering process – the final objective of research and view of local community – is further complicated by power dynamics. Academics have 'softer' power in leading the partnering process. Negotiating these power dynamics, although much easier than North–South partnerships, is crucial in building partnerships between Southern actors; even amongst institutions located in the same country.

The partnership process should not be viewed as unilinear or unidirectional. It is, rather, an iterative, dynamic, and evolving process which involves three major forms of interaction which we labelled the 'FIT Model'. One pertains to the generation of data from the field/community and sharing them with the government with the aim to *inform* policies and decision-making considerations. This, in other words, relates to addressing the challenge of having a rapport with the government concerning the goal of research (i.e. emancipation and empowerment). Then comes the need to address the challenge of having agreed conceptions and views so as to nurture trust and positive recognition. Positive recognition and trust are thus stepping-stones of *forming* the partnership with the government.

Once these two forms of interaction are attained, the partnership could take a *transformative* course and there will be meaningful impact. As a result, building an academic–government partnership is not a one-step act (say signing an MoU and doing a few formal engagements), especially in politically sensitive areas. Partnerships are nourished, (de-)constructed, and (in)formalised in their lifetime. As such, studies on academic–government partnerships should adopt a processual and more comprehensive view, rather than aiming to understand a particular moment in the partnership.

Notes

* This issue grew out of the Impact Initiative for International Development Research which seeks to maximise impact and learning from ESRC-DFID's Joint Fund for Poverty Alleviation Research and their Raising Learning Outcomes in Education Systems Research Programme.

† The authors gratefully acknowledge the funding provided by ESRC-DFID under its Development Frontiers Research Fund Call 2 2016/17 for the research project 'Shifting In/equality Dynamics in Ethiopia: from Research to Application' (SIDERA) ES/R002460/1, from which this article draws its partnership and data.

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4 Kuraz Sugar Development Project, Ethiopian Sugar Corporation.

5 For details, visit the Network's website: www.canr.msu.edu/oturn/.

6 www.theimpactinitiative.net/project/shifting-inequality-dynamics-ethiopia-research-application-sidera.

7 *Woreda* is the second lowest administrative unit in the regional government structure, hereafter referred to as district.

8 An individual independent researcher would need to seek affiliation at a public institution; the Institute of Ethiopian Studies at Addis Ababa University provides affiliations for foreign researchers coming to Ethiopia. See Addis Ababa University Vision and Mission, www.aau.edu.et/mission-and-vision/.

9 From the perspective of the Copenhagen School of security studies, intersubjectivity is instrumental in facilitating what aspect or issue of a national policy should be politicised, depoliticised, securitised, or desecuritised (Buzan *et al.* 1998).

10 Ministry of Federal and Pastoralist Development Affairs, Conflict Early Warning and Early Response Directorate, MoFA Conflict Analysis 2007 EC; Ministry of Federal and Pastoralist Development Affairs, Conflict Prevention and Management Directorate, MoFA Conflict Analysis 2008 EC; Ministry of Federal and Pastoralist Development Affairs, Conflict Early Warning and Sustainable Solutions Implementation Director General, MoFA Conflict Analysis 2009 EC.

11 Security and Administration head of South Omo Zone, interview, August 2018.

12 Security and Administration head of South Omo Zone, interview, August 2018.

13 Injuries and deaths resulting from car accidents in these pastoralist communities have become a source of grievance. Such accidents, now taking the lives of fellow pastoralists, were previously unheard of in these communities and are seen as a violent act from the government, to be settled by an act of revenge. This act of revenge

might target any vehicle using the road – not necessarily the one that caused a particular accident.

14 Senior Expert, South Omo Zone Security and Administration Bureau, interview, August 2018.

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Regional Research–Policy Partnerships for Health Equity and Inclusive Development: Reflections on Opportunities and Challenges from a Southern African Perspective[*][†][◊]

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Abstract This article critically reflects on the experience and lessons from a health-focused social policy research project (PRARI) involving a partnership spanning multiple countries across southern Africa and Europe. It asks what factors condition the efficacy of the partnership–policy nexus. The PRARI-SADC partnership case study used participatory action research (PAR) to create a regional indicators-based monitoring 'toolkit' of pro-poor health policy and change for the Southern African Development Community (SADC). The article addresses the partnership drivers, features, methodological context, and process of the project, and the wider implications for constructing partnerships for social change impact. Lessons drawn from this case study underscore the importance of PAR-inspired partnership structures and working methods while querying assumptions that the relationship between PAR and policy change is 'seamless'. We argue that greater focus is needed on the wider institutional context conditioning the work of partnerships when considering the efficacy of the partnership–policy nexus.

Keywords: regional integration, regionalism, international partnerships, Southern Africa Development Community (SADC), health, poverty, social policy, participatory action research, monitoring and evaluation systems.

1 Introduction
This article critically reflects on the experience and lessons of an international partnership established under the auspices of an ESRC-DFID-funded[5] international social policy research project that examined the scope for enhancing the effectiveness of regional integration

processes in reducing poverty, and promoting social equity and inclusive development ('PRARI', 2014–15).[6] PRARI was inspired by the substantial and growing significance of multilateral cooperation on a regional scale in shaping development processes and their outcomes. The predominant share of attention accorded to trade, finance, and security by academic public policy analyses of the regionalism–development nexus had, however, significantly obscured the ways in which wider *social* policy mandates, goals, and programmes are pursued by multilateral regional partnerships. For example, many regional organisations around the world have developed institutional mandates on health, social protection, education, food security, and labour rights, yet little attention had been accorded to how these mandates are *in practice* being progressed through regional cooperation structures. In this context, the aims of PRARI as a whole were, first, to substantiate the relation between 'positive' regional integration measures and poverty reduction and, second, address the issue of how regional cooperation can be productively harnessed to reduce poverty and promote social equity.

A major plinth of the project was the creation of a regional policy monitoring 'toolkit' capable of tracking pro-poor regional health policy and change within the Southern African Development Community (SADC).[7] It is the experience of the international partnership established to create this 'toolkit' that is the subject of this article. The construction and working methods of the partnership are discussed later in the article, so suffice for now to highlight that this was a distinctive form of international partnership for social change in three respects.

First, it was extensively multinational and multi-institutional. It combined a North–South structure consisting of academic researchers from Europe (Belgium/UK) and government officials and non-governmental actors based in eight southern African countries including from the SADC Secretariat.

Second, the process of producing the 'toolkit' by the partnership was informed by the principles and tenets of *collaborative modes* of participatory action research (PAR). Methodologically, this work frames all participants from the policy and practice spheres – traditionally categorised as 'stakeholders' – as *co-researchers*. This framing and mode of research equally valued the knowledge and expertise of all partners during the toolkit creation process, and all partners – whether from academic, policy, or practice spheres – were equal to each other. All were actively engaged in the key decisions taken collectively about the research trajectory and research design as well as in all analytical components.

Third, the ambitions of the partnership were oriented towards socio-institutional change. The deliberate extension of the partnership into the practice and policy spheres, as highlighted above, was deemed essential to meet the goals of the partnership. The work of the partnership itself was also of direct policy relevance, aiming to lever a key innovation in policy practice. Thus, the academic partners' prior

research had highlighted the absence of a reliable basis for measuring the outcomes of regional processes as a significant obstacle to the prospective innovations that policymakers could make in tackling structural social and health inequalities on a regional scale.

PRARI accordingly sought to develop a policy monitoring tool that was context-specific, addressed a major priority regional social issue, was relevant to the work of diverse constituencies of state and non-state actors, and could subsequently be used by them to lever innovations in policy and practice. Although the 'toolkit' was the principal defined output of the partnership, it was not an end in itself. Indeed, it was envisaged as a step in the process of supporting regional policy development and, ultimately, greater democratic accountability for regional development outcomes.

It was envisaged that the 'toolkit' could be used to inform a regional strategy. Providing a means for identifying regional-level comparative evidence on the scale, scope, and depth of poverty-related health issues and their changing composition over time could, in principle, support the SADC to realise its pro-poor regional health mandate. An indicators-based regional tool with repeated rounds of data collection could, in time, help identify effective policies and programmes that make a real difference to population health, as well as those areas in which intended progress was not being made due to implementation challenges or failure. In this, it could be used by country-level and regional stakeholders to inform their policy formulation and delivery. It could help support improved efficacy of 'vertical' coordination (between local–national–regional), supporting better evidence for policymaking – nationally and regionally – and for better coordination among actors within the region. Ultimately, such a toolkit would be a shared resource, to be used by SADC states, the regional body, and other policy actors in myriad ways to refine, develop, strengthen, or even change their approach to tackling poverty-related health burdens.

The central question we address in this article centres on the partnership–policy nexus, and asks: what are the factors conditioning the efficacy of partnerships for social change? As Georgalakis and Rose discuss in the introduction to this *IDS Bulletin*, critics claim that there is a lot of 'partnership rhetoric' in development (see also Morse and McNamara 2006). We aim to decipher such rhetoric by discussing this nexus through the lens of a 'deep dive' into context-specific analysis of the experience of, and lessons from, the PRARI-SADC partnership in southern Africa. We discuss how the partnership was constructed, the dynamics of the partnership, and the positive outcomes that can be attributed to this way of working, as well as some of the challenges. We position our reflections in relation to the theme of this issue's focus on partnerships for realising wider social change, explored here in relation to the interlinked research–policy challenges of realising health equity and inclusive development in a low-resource regional context comprising low- and middle-income countries.

The discussion is organised around five principal sections. We first review how the partnership was constructed – its key drivers (Section 2) – and how these shaped its aims, composition, scope, and methods of work (Section 3). The article then turns to the dynamics of the partnership in practice – its achievements and some key challenges. Section 4 considers linkages between the work of the partnership (including its ways of working) and its contributions to leveraging impact. We discuss the partnership in terms of different forms of impact commonly associated with partnerships, such as changes in capacity to use evidence, changes in critical relationships and connections, and changes in evidence-use behaviours within policy. Section 5 discusses some challenges of the partnership. In particular, we consider sources of tension as well as prospects that an institutional analysis of partnership work helps reveal. Section 6 concludes, returning to the overall question of the article, and considers implications of the experience of this partnership for realising policy innovations at scale that lead to sustained improvements in access to health care and associated social entitlements. In particular, it reflects on the implications of the learning for both how partnerships are understood and constructed for impact.

2 Drivers of the PRARI-SADC international partnership

The PRARI-SADC partnership and its work of creating the regional pro-poor health policy monitoring 'toolkit' responded to three sets of specific drivers. The first of these was the significant social and economic costs of the high disease burden within the region. SADC member states include low- and middle-income economies that face health and social development challenges experienced by many developing countries – namely a high burden of communicable diseases, and a growing non-communicable disease burden associated with urbanisation and lifestyle changes. The SADC region remains the epicentre of the global HIV epidemic with the highest HIV prevalence rates globally, and with over 15 million people living with HIV accounts for about 40 per cent of the global total of people living with HIV (authors' calculation based on WHO 2017 data; see also UNAIDS 2016, 2018). The epidemic is further compounded by its association with TB.

With the tropical and subtropical climate of the region, malaria is a major health challenge, responsible for a significant part of the disease burden in the region and is estimated to reduce economic growth by up to 1.3 per cent in affected countries (Gallup and Sachs 2001). Maternal mortality remains very high compared to the global average, despite a declining trend in a number of member states. High overall disease burdens are unequally distributed, such that social determinants of health, such as high levels of unemployment, income disparity, and gender inequality, are contributing factors that result in the poor, women and young girls, and other vulnerable groups being disproportionately adversely affected with respect to access to health services and health outcomes.

In addition to the high overall disease burden that has altered the trajectory of socioeconomic development in the region, the state of development and performance of health systems pose major challenges for the delivery of, and equitable access to, quality health services and the attainment of desired health outcomes. Even with the vastly different levels of health system development within the region, common challenges across the region include significant and often critical shortages of health workers, uneven distribution of scarce skills between the public and private sectors, weak health information systems, and poor health infrastructure (including equipment maintenance). All of these combine to present significant systemic challenges for effective service delivery. The wide variation in the strength and performance of economies in the region, ranging from low- to upper-middle-income, adds significant complexity to the context in which member states are able to address extant health challenges, including a high disease burden, within the context of a holistic regional integration agenda.

The second driver of the partnership and its work was the 'live' opportunities within the SADC region to address these major societal issues. Regional partnerships of nations, aligned around common visions and goals, are recognised as important institutional frameworks for mobilising financial and political resources capable of enabling collective responses to key development challenges that are beyond the scope of any one country to address unilaterally. Compared with global agreements, they involve fewer negotiating countries and they afford, in principle, the possibility both of raising social standards more quickly and in a way that is more attuned and responsive to the circumstances and needs of the member countries (Yeates and Deacon 2010; Yeates 2014, 2018).

The concerns of regional economic communities, such as the SADC and others across Africa are not limited to trade and investment (Yeates and Surender 2018). Indeed, ambitions to enhance social standards by extending social provision, strengthening health systems, and improving access to health and medicines, thereby boosting population-wide health outcomes, have been taken up as key regional social and economic development issues – albeit variably (Deacon *et al.* 2010; Taylor 2015; Yeates 2014, 2018; Penfold 2015). A concerted regional approach to health policy becomes especially salient in the light of Agenda 2063 which incorporates health as a key feature of sustainable development (African Union Commission 2015), and Agenda 2030 which envisages regional partnerships as a means by which health and related goals can be realised in context-specific ways (UN 2015; Yeates 2018). Given all of this, a key question is: how can regional partnerships contribute to realising tangible 'pro-poor' social change and in particular policy reforms conducive to health equity?

The nature of the health challenges in the SADC region highlights the necessity of the SADC's regional health policy being demonstrably

'pro-poor'. This is an issue to which the SADC has responded for two decades. Since 1997, its health programme has recognised that a healthy population is a necessary catalyst for social and economic development in the region. It has collectively set common public health goals, defined strategic frameworks to improve the standard of health for all citizens in line with international health declarations and targets, and instituted a range of initiatives (SADC 1999; SADC Secretariat 2015). The SADC Secretariat has also taken a keen interest in research to better understand how poor health and poverty coincide, are mutually reinforcing, and are socially structured (Amaya, Kingah and De Lombaerde 2015; Amaya *et al.* 2015a).

SADC health frameworks provide important normative and institutional structures for the development of pro-poor health policy, but there remains somewhat of a 'disconnect' in implementation. In theory, regional instruments are operationalised through the national-level policy frameworks of member states. However, the existence of regional health policy frameworks and protocols do not necessarily generate enhanced regional and institutional capacity for policy initiation and implementation; nor do they guarantee compliance by all member states. This is by no means a problem unique to the SADC, but the perceived efficacy of the SADC *is* an issue, insofar as the pace of the domestication of SADC policies has been slow and a region-wide mechanism to monitor this has been absent. There is insufficient evidence either way about the impacts of SADC regional policies on pro-poor health change. Consequently, progress in dealing with diseases predominantly affecting poor and disadvantaged populations in the SADC (notably HIV) is often attributed more to national and international investments than regional ones.

The third driver of the PRARI-SADC partnership was the prospective value of creating and instituting a *regional* indicators-based monitoring mechanism. National approaches invariably suffer from lack of comparability across countries, whether due to inadequate mechanisms for data sharing, monitoring and evaluation of health activities, or due to different national priorities as to what should be monitored. This is a problem when it comes to region-wide action, as national mechanisms do not serve well the realisation of a common (regional) health strategy.

PRARI's analysis of previous experiences of regional monitoring systems highlighted two key points. First, was the potential of metrics and indicators in monitoring initiatives to provide additional precision, transparency, and policy relevance. In a context where all too often, progress in regional integration is restricted to measures of economic (market) integration (De Lombaerde, Estevadeordal and Suominen 2008; De Lombaerde *et al.* 2011), the use of social indicators-based policy monitoring instruments can capture the characteristics and effects of 'positive' regional integration policies, such as in relation to health and social protection policies, and the extent to which regional-level policies are impacting upon social (in)equity in practice.

Second, local and regional ownership is essential to the success in developing embedded regional monitoring policies and instruments that are durable. Previous efforts funded and developed by donors and actors external to the regions using conventional research methods had invariably not taken hold.

3 Structure, goals, composition, and working methods of the partnership

As a project concerned with the scope for greater cooperation and coordination on a *regional scale* to address serious health challenges as matters of common concern to all members of the regional community, the structure established to create the toolkit was also necessarily international in its goals, scope, and composition.[8] The Open University, working in close collaboration with the SADC Secretariat and others in southern Africa (notably the Botswana Institute for Development Policy Analysis) from the outset, led the application to secure DFID funding to initiate and manage the project, and, in collaboration with research consultants from the United Nations University Institute on Comparative Regional Integration Studies, to organise the logistical aspects of the partnership and work with the partners over the two-year lifetime of the project (2014–15).

All parties agreed from the earliest stages of the research cycle (prior to the formal grant application) on the potential benefits of a modest but potentially impactful initial project on the measurement and metrics of regional pro-poor health policy success and change. The scope of the work of the partnership was defined as identifying what input, process, output, and outcome indicators could effectively capture regional policy change and especially pro-poor regional health policy success and failure. It had four principal broad goals. First was to support the SADC countries and the regional Secretariat to identify gaps in their action on the poverty–health nexus. Second was to help strengthen the link between the regional body and member states to help facilitate integrated policy change in the region. Third was to help identify better mechanisms for data sharing, and monitoring and evaluation of regional health activities. Fourth was to enhance efforts to hold political actors accountable for realising regional commitments on the health–poverty nexus.

During the early stages of the 'live' project, partners were recruited from southern African state and civil society organisations. The core academic partners deliberately extended the partnership into the practice and policy spheres as this was deemed essential to meet the goals of the partnership. Partners from these spheres were equal members to each other and to academic partners. The partnership was not a representative structure, and partners were not deemed to be national representatives. Rather, they brought complementary expertise and diverse perspectives on health systems, the health–poverty nexus, monitoring and evaluation, and/or regional governance in the context of the SADC region.

In addition to the PRARI team, the partnership consisted of an extended multinational team (17 partners in total) spanning eight SADC member countries, including the SADC Secretariat and two international organisations operating within the SADC region. Partners comprised officials and senior officials in the health division within their organisation (national ministries of health and/or social development; research institutes; international organisations) or working in health organisations (e.g. health-focused non-governmental organisations (NGOs)). The partnership's work progressed through three face-to-face research workshops in different SADC country venues over a 15-month period during 2014–15. International conferencing and documentary facilities in between the meetings were used extensively to overcome geographical separation and maintain work progress.

Although the key goals, outputs, and broad impact of the project – namely, to create an indicators-based regional monitoring system which could catalyse support for larger-scale work – were necessarily decided at the point of the project funding application, no specific design was imposed *ex ante* on the indicators toolkit/s. This decision was made in advance of the 'live' project, at the point of application for funding, on the basis that the specific content and form of the partnership's work should maximally respond to the needs of key stakeholders and be defined in collaboration with them. In this, the partnership structure and methods of working were inspired by the tenets of PAR.

As an *orientation* or *approach* to research rather than a specific method, PAR is based on a commitment to egalitarianism, pluralism, and interconnectedness in the research process (Yeates and Amaya 2018).[9] PAR affirms the value of research participants ('stakeholders') in bringing diverse knowledges and experience as well as commitment to research findings and policy change (Yeates and Amaya 2018; Amaya, Yeates and Moeti 2015; Greenwood, Whyte and Harkavy 1993; Cornwall and Jewkes 1995; van Niekerk and van Niekerk 2009). The distinguishing features of PAR centre on the intrinsic and instrumental value of co-created research and the 'virtuous' relationship between knowledge, ownership, and action. PAR affirms all stakeholders in the research process as equal agents bringing diverse knowledge and techniques. This affirmation is both instrumental and outcome-oriented: in theory, participation on the basis of inclusiveness and equality brings a commitment to the research and its findings. Because participants are more likely to take 'ownership' of the research findings, its outputs are more likely than 'conventional' research using consultative processes to be translated into concrete action, which in turn helps effect social change in ways that are empowering (Bergold and Thomas 2012; Loewenson *et al.* 2014).

In the PRARI-SADC partnership, the full participation of a wide range of partners from the outset and throughout the development of the regional monitoring instrument was vital to realising a high-quality toolkit and in fulfilling its wider impact potential. Indeed, this would,

in principle, bring many benefits: share information, pool skills, and bring together diverse knowledge and expertise which, in turn, could uncover extant good practices, generate awareness of the need for socially equitable health policies, and incentivise the development of significant regional initiatives in the interests of inclusive development. Furthermore, a regional monitoring instrument designed through inclusive participatory methodology and data gathered through it that are widely accessible would be an important means for holding political actors to account for the progress (or lack of it) in realising the regional health mandates, goals, and plans to which they had formally committed.

Because all partners needed to ensure that the eventual toolkit would be feasible in supporting the region to address its health challenges and institutional priorities, it was important that officials from key SADC member states, the SADC Secretariat, and NGO service providers and advocacy actors in the health sector worked together from the start and throughout the process. The co-created monitoring toolkit, and its effectiveness as a tool for levering policy (and wider social) change, required 'regional ownership'. In the context of the project, this meant active participation, not just of national experts within the region, but also of regional-level actors. In this regard, the SADC Secretariat's (through the Social and Human Development Directorate) membership of the partnership was key.

Indeed, the project was seen by the Secretariat as well aligned with its programme of work on poverty-related ill-health (Amaya, Kingah and De Lombaerde 2015; Amaya *et al.* 2015a). In this, the institutional leadership from the SADC Secretariat and the support from its member states was a vital plinth of support for the partnership, its work, and working methods throughout the duration of the partnership. After all, the strength of a regional body lies in the relevance that member states see in it addressing their needs, including addressing major social disparities. Having the means to 'measure' policy change and success (for example, in terms of the domestication of regional initiatives which leverage improvements in health) could be an important 'tool' by which to demonstrate the 'value added' by regional social (health) policy cooperation. This could, in turn, help garner support for greater regional health investment and policy innovation.

The PRARI-SADC partnership deployed a mode of participation most closely correlating to the *collaborative* mode of PAR (Cornwall and Jewkes 1995), with significant elements of the collegiate mode also present.[10] This is the case insofar as academic researchers, public officials, and NGOs across the SADC worked together as colleagues, based on equality in a process of mutual learning, to co-create the regional monitoring toolkit using methods and techniques negotiated within the partnership. We hesitate to identify the partnership as having operated purely in the collegiate mode because although participation extended throughout the research cycle in all the components of

analysis and determination of proposed solutions and actions, the broad goals, outputs, and desired impacts were pre-defined by the terms of the grant, while the work of the partnership was initiated, coordinated, and managed by PRARI academic researchers.

Nevertheless, the role of the academic researchers was defined – and actually operated – in a way that sets the working methods and nature of interactivity within the partnership apart from 'weaker' (contractual, consultative) modes of PAR and the hierarchical relationships between academics and participants seen in conventional academic research. Academic researchers' role was limited to managing the logistical and processual aspects of workshop organisation, providing specific technical expertise (e.g. identifying data sources and gaps), suggesting potential solutions to specific problems encountered by the partners during the construction of the toolkit, coordinating the completion of the toolkit within the project's lifetime and, where requested by the partners, to take specific follow-up actions in terms of its wider institutional interfaces. For all intents and purposes, however, the 'centre of gravity' of the partnership was decidedly southern African, and the determination of every component of the toolkit, from its concrete focus to its presentational form, across all stages of the research cycle was the outcome of myriad decisions taken collectively by all of the partners. In this, the partnership structure was decidedly southern African in its composition and dynamics. It shifted the locus of power to determine the process and outcomes away from (European) academic researchers to southern African colleagues.

The confluence of drivers of the partnership's work, the mutuality of agendas among the different partners and the participatory principles underpinning the partnership's work were in theory auspicious circumstances for this initiative. The next section turns to discuss the dynamics of the partnership as they played out in practice. In particular, we identify the positive outcomes achieved and consider how the interactive social processes generated by and through the partnership contributed to realising the project goals and other impacts.

4 Encounters, contributions, and impacts

The written outputs of the partnership were a Policy Brief (Amaya *et al.* 2015a) and the monitoring toolkit (Amaya *et al.* 2015b). These were borne of participatory working methods and consensual approaches to collective decision-making among the partners. The strengths of the partnership and its working methods were seen in that, through an interactive and iterative process unfolding over 15 months, there was agreement among partners on the key issues that: the major health issues prioritised within the SADC regional health agenda were those that most significantly affected those living in poverty; full implementation of extant SADC regional health policies had the potential to improve access to health services and medicines by disadvantaged majorities in the countries of the region; there was considerable scope to demonstrate the positive impacts of SADC

regional initiatives, especially in relation to maternal and child health, effective health service policy implementation, and health systems-strengthening; and there was a real potential to significantly strengthen regional capacity to improve health outcomes.

The impacts of the partnership were seen in changes in capacity to use evidence and in evidence-use behaviours within policy. The project's evaluation highlighted that, on the first of these, a key learning benefit was the sensitisation of participants to the prospective value of strengthening the regional dimensions of pro-poor health policy. Government officials in the partnership highlighted that the deliberative process around the poverty–health nexus and the policy and planning implications was an invaluable 'take away' of the project. They highlighted how this process supported their decision-making and planning capacities, and helping to expand domestic and regional capacity in monitoring and evaluation. They also highlighted that the process helped them to think more analytically about the purposes of, and scope for, regional-level action on health, as well as the distinctions between the regional and national scales of governance and policy – and the relation between the two (issues of 'vertical coordination').

The partners more generally emphasised that the partnership of regional-level actors, country officials, civil society, and academic researchers to discuss regional organisations' contribution to successful health policies was invaluable, suggesting that this mix of partners working together in a deliberative process was intrinsically valuable. The consensus-based decision-making and joint collaboration on publications generated trust and was seen as an opportunity for self-reflection by the regional organisation and governments alike regarding the efficacy of their health programmes. The deliberative process also stimulated better understanding of the need for better mechanisms for data sharing, and monitoring and evaluation of regional health activities. Collective authoring was particularly mentioned as a source of the learning, and the written outputs stand as a lasting legacy of the collective endeavour.

What happened after the creation of the toolkit had been completed was always going to be a key indicator of the success of the partnership as far as policy impact and changes in evidence-use within policy are concerned. In this, the toolkit proved to be a major stimulus in the SADC Secretariat's Results-Based Regional Monitoring and Evaluation (RBME) initiative. Introduced two years after the completion of the PRARI-SADC work, this takes up PRARI's indicators-based regional monitoring toolkit. The RBME initiative includes health and poverty, but actually is progressively extending to *all* areas of SADC priority areas.[11] In this respect, we can confidently assert the tangible policy-level impacts of the PRARI-SADC partnership.

The Secretariat is currently rolling out the RBME system amongst the SADC member states, and has just finalised the translation

of the system into French and Portuguese. By March 2019, eight member states will have completed their on-boarding (SADC 2017, 2018). The RBME system is aimed at enabling real-time tracking of performance, the documentation of results at member state level and the facilitation of evidence-based decision-making and learning. In this, it is an important initiative to strengthen regional–national links that the Secretariat has long been keen to see progressed. Making the results of RBME widely available and strengthening the capacity of the SADC as a whole, as a regional body, to use those results to inform policy formulation, will be important steps towards greater democratic accountability.

5 Constraints and challenges

There were a number of factors possibly militating against the partnership initiative reaching greater potential earlier on, during its active lifetime. One factor is to do with timing. The toolkit work was of great interest to SADC officials at the timing precisely because they were engaged with prospective revisions to the Regional Indicative Strategic Development Plan (and the SADC Health Programme), but in practice the toolkit work was too late to enable it to meaningfully inform and be integrated into the key regional policy instrument for which it would have been relevant: the SADC Revised Regional Indicative Strategic Development Plan (R-RISDP).[12] The work of the partnership got underway at the end of 2014 whereas the RISDP was already at a very advanced stage by 2015. There was insufficient opportunity to formally introduce the project through the rounds of SADC regional meetings and for it to be officially supported as a SADC project. The SADC Secretariat's own capacity to make use of the learning and work of the partnership was also hampered by uncertainty arising from the planned reorganisation of the Secretariat as part of the revised regional development strategy.

A second factor relates to resources. The modest project budget and grant conditions could not have supported the series of discussions and meetings across diverse SADC structures necessary, either for the formal adoption of the toolkit and/or to facilitate its roll-out, even on an initial basis. The post-grant 'impact acceleration' funding mechanism of the ESRC did not support the modest initial post-toolkit developmental work that the SADC Secretariat required to take the toolkit forward at that time. The Secretariat was not in a position to fund the much-needed follow-on technical assistance work from its extant budget, and it could not sponsor (financially or otherwise) the work of securing SADC's formal support for the toolkit.

We conclude that the mutuality of agendas, including demand for the programme of work by the regional organisation (the SADC Secretariat), and the interactive processes engendered during the partners' work, were clearly important conditions for realising the policy impacts that the partnership did achieve (albeit with a two-year time-lag before demonstrable results were seen). However, they were insufficient

in and of themselves in propelling the impact dimensions of the work of the partnership. The research–impact relation – and the role of the partnership as a 'bridge' between the two – was far from seamless. In this regard, we now turn to identify some critical challenges.

One challenge revolves around the extensity of the 'ownership network'. Ownership of the collective work by the partners directly involved is clearly essential, and this was partially achieved in the PRARI-SADC partnership structures for the duration of the work. The partnership had support from the regional Secretariat through the Social and Human Development and Special Programmes Directorate, and tried to mirror SADC structures through inclusion of participants from the Troika countries as members of the partnership. However, the somewhat informal nature of PRARI partnership in relation to SADC structures[13] was not in itself sufficient.

Given the highly formalised institutional setting and the policy-oriented goals of the partnership's work, a more expansive ownership network, extending beyond direct participants in the partnership structure to also include wider networks of allies, such as senior policy stakeholders nationally (in the SADC member states) and regionally might well have been beneficial to the uptake of the toolkit at the time. That said, securing formal sponsorship of a regional 'toolkit' among all SADC countries in parallel with the process of co-researching the toolkit would have placed significant additional (and largely unattainable) demands upon a modest research budget, as well as on participants' capacities and resources – demands which, realistically, could not accommodated. Choices were made interactively and iteratively with the information available at the time according to the priorities of the partnership.

A second challenge concerns the necessity of locating partnership work in relation to the wider institutional structures governing policy formulation. Engagement with these structures is essential if the work of the partnership is about addressing structural social inequalities and the political governance of them. In the SADC context, like other regional groupings around the world (whether in low-, medium-, or high-income settings), such engagement involves pluralistic multi-level policy and governance structures which make up complex dynamics of regional policymaking and reform. Although the regional policy process and routes by which new initiatives may be proposed or introduced is generally well defined,[14] the 'informal' (tacit) rules and structures conditioning the regional dynamics of regional policymaking in practice are not always necessarily well understood.

There is also an issue about the efficacy of regional policy structures through which initiatives may be proposed. It is recognised, for example, that the SADC National Committees[15] are functional to greater or lesser degrees across the region, and that many member states are still struggling to fully embrace non-state actors in these committees.[16] Substantially engaging with institutional structures of

regional policy formation spanning numerous countries in ways that also take account of the international dynamics of regional integration and development requires having a 'big picture' view, especially in a context where 'vertical' coordination (between national and regional governance) is a known problem and non-state actors' involvement in SADC policymaking is a highly contentious political issue.

This 'big picture' view also extends to having a longer-range time frame. A third challenge thus arises from managing the tension between, on the one hand, the necessity of 'deep engagement' with institutional structures and formal policy formulation processes over time and, on the other hand, the (comparatively) short-term nature of projects (and partnerships for change). The PRARI-SADC partnership did so by limiting itself to the creation of a specific policy product – the toolkit – as a means of catalysing policy change processes. But however useful the toolkit (and the process of creating it) was deemed to be, achieving institutional impact on such a large (regional) scale is realistically beyond the scope of what any single partnership operating over such a short timespan can achieve within its lifetime. In the PRARI-SADC case, it was two years after the end of the project and completion of the partners' work that the most tangible and prospectively durable impacts were manifested.

There are three principal corollaries of this. One is that, as far as partnerships seeking policy impact are concerned, unless these are established by state structures to undertake specific work helping to resolve a state policy problem and are formally 'owned' by them, these need to be planned and resourced over durations exceeding what is standard for most funded research projects. In the PRARI-SADC partnership, follow-on resourcing to support embedding the toolkit in policy and practice within the region would have enabled the partnership to continue, gain further momentum, and respond in a timely way to windows of opportunity as and when they become available.

A second corollary is that concrete and tangible policy impacts of partnerships, especially those on a larger scale and/or in complex institutional environments, are (probably) going to be, at best, most fully evidenced over the medium term, typically after the end of the research grant. A third corollary, and perhaps most importantly, is that access to the spaces and resources from which policy innovations can emerge probably requires, in practice, a different kind of entity than an international donor-funded partnership structure of the PRARI-SADC kind.

Addressing the deep-rooted, structural causes of high disease burdens and societal impacts requires responses that are more akin to a regional coalition campaign for regional health policy reform founded on social equity. A longer-term research–policy *programme* that can sustain the interest and support over time of myriad partners within and across different countries that are members of the regional development

community may well prove very effective for achieving long-term social change of the kind that this partnership was ambitiously concerned with highlighting.

6 Conclusions

Through a 'deep-dive' case study of the PRARI-SADC partnership, this article has considered the range of factors conditioning the efficacy of this partnership in terms of realising its social (policy) change ambitions. We highlighted the distinctive features of this partnership including auspicious circumstances for successful partnership work. This work was from the outset fully aligned to the key policy priorities of the regional grouping, which are addressed to the challenges of health inequity adversely impacting upon the region's social and economic development. There were clear opportunities – and demand – supportive of a strengthened regional approach in addressing severe health and wider social challenges. The mutuality of agendas – arising from academic policy research, regional and national imperatives to respond to key health issues, and demands by engaged communities of policy practitioners from the state and non-state sectors – combined with the beneficial interactive social processes arising from the PAR-based working methods were conducive to realising the goals and work of the partnership. Yet these were in themselves insufficient for 'predicting' how the partnership–policy nexus would manifest itself in this instance.

Amongst the many valuable lessons that emerged, we have drawn attention to the critical importance of the wider institutional context in which the work of partnerships is embedded, including the necessity of engaging with policy formulation structures and processes throughout the research process. One difficulty is that the timing and nature of tangible policy impacts, including institutional changes in evidence-use within policy, tend not to be within the control of any of the partners or the partnership as a whole. This is an inescapable truth. It was certainly the case for the PRARI-SADC partnership, however inclusive and ethical, and whatever the amount and quality of social learning gained. This difficulty shines a light on endemic dilemmas facing partnerships seeking to effect social change, such as the balance struck between looking 'inwardly' to realise work on time and to budget versus pursuing the costly, 'messy' work of looking 'outwardly' to influence policy formulation where results and outcomes are uncertain. In a results-based research funding culture, this is a generic issue.

Despite the constraints and challenges facing the PRARI-SADC partnership in realising these in practice, there were nonetheless real achievements. The partnership innovated the use of PAR in a multinational policy-oriented partnership involving government bodies, civil society organisations, and academics working together on the basis of inclusiveness, equality, and deliberative methods among all partners at all stages of the research process. The work of the partnership proved to be a catalyst in learning and reform within regional policy

communities, most tangibly in informing the intersectoral regional indicators-based RBME system as part of the revised regional development strategy. Learning from this case study can create opportunities for the implementation of initiatives with modest budgets and high return on investment for all parties involved.

To conclude, what are the implications of the experience of the PRARI-SADC partnership for constructing future partnerships aiming to catalyse or actually realise policy impact at scale in ways that lead to sustained improvements in access to health care and associated social entitlements?

First, we underscore the importance of PAR-inspired partnership structures and working methods but at the same query assumptions that the relationship between PAR-inspired partnership working methods and policy change is 'seamless'. This article has gone beyond the skills and knowledge of individual participants in analysing the efficacy of the partnership–policy nexus to emphasise the necessity of attending to the institutional framework in which partnerships are embedded. We have highlighted how opportunities for impact are conditioned by engagement with policymakers *and* policy cycles (and the 'windows of opportunity' that these generate) from the outset and throughout the lifetime of the partnership. Our experience firmly underscores these institutional aspects as a principal determinant of whether any single partnership realises its policy impact goals. In essence, whether the work of such partnerships take hold, institutionally, is *contingent*, and highly context-specific. Good impact design can be structured into the partnership, but actual impact is ultimately as likely to be by a serendipitous coincidence of mutual interests and opportune timing.

This conclusion is not a fatalistic one. One of the implications of this case study is that it is incumbent on each of those involved in the research partnership to engage with their respective communities. This includes identifying and leveraging opportunities and openings throughout the research process, rather than waiting until the research is completed. In this, the *action research* segment of PAR is worth emphasising because it highlights the mutually constitutive relation between research–social change during a research project's lifetime. The importance of structuring resources to match this alternate conception of the research–policy nexus cannot be overestimated. We have to recognise that this carries significant risks that research funders, looking for demonstrable results and impacts within finite time periods, may not be willing to bear.

Second, it may be important to re-conceive the very idea of partnerships if the goal is to make significant in-roads into the sources of structural social and health inequalities. Partnerships working on specific projects cannot substitute for long-term resourcing and investment of the kind that states have a monopoly over. International donor funding through applied research projects taking up particular

issues can support capacity building and catalyse changes within policy, whether in expanding the horizons of policy actors, supporting the development of new initiatives, or stimulating changes in evidence-use, as the PRARI-SADC partnership did. However, the question of what happens after donor priorities change or project funding ends remains a live one.

At best, partnerships (whether PAR or non-PAR-inspired) can address themselves to concrete projects to offer a solution to specific problems. All the partnership working in the world, even with the concrete aims and work of the PRARI-SADC one, cannot substitute for state responsibility. An important implication may be that in future, collaborative initiatives of this kind are led by coalitions of Southern actors in their implementation, if not in their funding. In low-resource contexts, this does not get around the question of long-term resourcing, but it does open up questions about the degree of openness and closure in (regional) policy formulation processes, and the kinds of institutionalised forms of participatory policymaking that will support partnership for development initiatives in contributing to make universal access to high-quality affordable health care and better population health outcomes a reality.

Notes

* This issue grew out of the Impact Initiative for International Development Research which seeks to maximise impact and learning from ESRC-DFID's Joint Fund for Poverty Alleviation Research and their Raising Learning Outcomes in Education Systems Research Programme.

† ESRC-DFID grant awarded to The Open University. Grant Reference: ES/L005336/1. This article does not necessarily reflect the views or opinions of the ESRC, DFID, the Health Systems Trust or the SADC Secretariat.

◊ The authors thank the anonymous reviewers and James Georgalakis for their helpful comments and suggestions on an earlier version of this article. The development of the article also benefited from interactions with other participants at the *IDS Bulletin* workshop in October 2018, and from subsequent conversations with Rachel Hinton (DFID).

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4 All authors were directly involved in the PRARI-SADC partnership that is the subject of this article. Dr Luwabelwa was not a SADC Secretariat official during the period of the project.

5   Economic and Social Research Council-Department for International Development.

6   Poverty Reduction and Regional Integration: www.open.ac.uk/ socialsciences/prari/.

7   SADC is an inter-governmental organisation whose overall goal is to further socioeconomic cooperation and integration as well as political and security cooperation among 16 southern African states (Angola, Botswana, Comoros, Democratic Republic of Congo, Eswatini, Lesotho, Madagascar, Malawi, Mauritius, Mozambique, Namibia, Seychelles, South Africa, Tanzania, Zambia, and Zimbabwe).

8   Anonymised data from this toolkit project are available from the UK Data Service (Yeates 2017). This data set provides further details about specifics of the work and processes by which it was realised.

9   www.open.ac.uk/socialsciences/prari.

10 Participatory research maps across a continuum of different modes and sorts of participation. Cornwall and Jewkes (1995) distinguish between four principal types of participation in research projects: contractual, whereby people are contracted into projects directed by researchers to take part in their enquiries or experiments; consultative, where people are asked for their opinions and consulted by researchers before interventions are made; collaborative, where researchers and local people work together on projects designed, initiated, and managed by researchers; and collegiate, where researchers and local people work together as colleagues with different skills to offer, in a process of mutual learning where local people have full control over the process. Each mode implies different degrees of participation in a given research project, and, with it, different degrees of researcher control and ownership.

11 The SADC RBME is informed by a number of indicators that have been selected in line with the Revised Regional Integrated Strategic Development Plan (R-RISDP) at intermediary and short-term outcome levels to assess improved human capacities for socioeconomic development, improved and integrated regional infrastructure, and sustainable industrial development, trade integration, and financial cooperation. Poverty indicators are mostly cross-cutting under the issues from employment; food security; education and literacy levels; and employment and labour issues. The SADC Statistics Unit also produces poverty-related information. Health indicators are monitored under Health and Pharmaceuticals, under the intermediate outcome of 'Increased availability and access to quality health and HIV and AIDS services and commodities'. There are in total 12 intermediary indicators on health issues. All indicators have been uploaded into the M&E system and will be informed by reports from the member states. The first report on the indicators was prepared and submitted during the August 2018 Council and Summit Meetings.

12 The Revised Regional Integrated Strategic Development Plan (R-RISDP 2015–20) aims to integrate health as a priority within the context of social and human development, poverty, and food security

(SADC Secretariat 2015). Member states continue to implement the SADC Protocol on Health (SADC 1999) with special focus on the agreed priority areas of disease control, child and reproductive health, health education and communication, and health systems strengthening.

13 There was no formal expectation by SADC structures for a report from the PRARI-SADC partnership that would have created accountability at the level of the Secretariat for the project and its outcomes.

14 They emerge from political or developmental issues of concern to the entire grouping, individual member states' needs that potentially impact on or are a concern to the entire bloc, or significant groupings of its membership. Alternatively, regional or international initiatives may be taken up within the bloc as part of the region's commitment to development for the benefit of their citizens or to meet global obligations. The perceived ownership of such initiatives in terms of the member states of the grouping, recognised constituencies in the member states or the Secretariat fulfilling its role to advance the regional agenda are often important approaches to ensuring that new initiatives take hold and secure member states' support. In terms of formal processes, the main actors in health policy formulation within the SADC region and its institutions are the member states of the SADC represented at various levels of the policy and strategy development process through SADC structures, beginning with SADC National Committees and extending through a hierarchy of structures including the Standing Committee of Senior Officials, the Sectoral and Cluster Ministerial Committees, the SADC Council of Ministers, to the Summit of Heads of State or Government as the supreme policymaking body.

15 Article 16A of the SADC Treaty defines the role of the SADC National Committees as providing inputs at national level in the formulation of regional policies and strategies, to coordinate and oversee the implementation of programmes at national level, and initiate SADC projects and issue papers as an input to regional strategies. To ensure broad ownership and multi-sectoral input, the National Committees comprise key stakeholders from government, private sector, and civil society in each member state.

16 There is renewed hope for support for the National Committees with particular emphasis on including non-state actors as provided for by the Treaty. So far, seven member states have functional National Committees, with three of them being fully functional and four nearing the stage of functionality. The plan is to extend to ten by the end of 2019.

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How Did Research Partnerships Contribute to Bangladesh's Progress in Improving Lives?*†

Mushtaque Chowdhury[1]

Abstract The last few decades have seen tremendous progress in improving the lives and livelihoods of people around the world. In almost all sectors of development, Bangladesh has done enviously well. One of the important change agents in this impressive development has been non-governmental organisations (NGOs). This article looks at BRAC as an important actor in Bangladesh's development and how it contributed to the changes by working in partnership with likeminded entities. Such partnership has spanned across governments, NGOs, research and academic institutions, and development partners. It presented an example of how an independent research outfit contributed to improving BRAC's programme quality and its delivery, leading to spectacular results.

Keywords: partnership, NGO, BRAC, research, implementation, poverty, health, Bangladesh.

1 Introduction: Bangladesh in recent decades

The last few decades have seen tremendous progress in improving the lives and livelihoods of people around the world. However, this progress has been uneven. Some societies have gained more than others. Bangladesh is one of the countries that has gained significantly. In almost all sectors of development, Bangladesh has done enviously well. Starting with a high base, the headcount poverty has reduced from about 60 per cent in the 1980s to just over 20 per cent now. In social development, progress has also been spectacular. Over 95 per cent of children now enrol in primary schools. The fallen dropout rate means that more children now complete primary education and move to secondary education than before.

The infant and child mortality rates have also fallen. At the time of Bangladesh's independence in 1971, one in five children would not see their fifth birthday, which is now only a part of history. The infant mortality rate is now less than 30 per 1,000 live births. Equally, the

maternal mortality ratio has also been reduced from over 600 in the 1990s to less than 200 per 100,000 live births. The number of children a woman bears in her lifetime, represented by total fertility rate, has dropped from over six in the 1970s to 2.3, which is just above the replacement level. Life expectancy, a composite indicator, has increased by over 40 per cent to over 70 years.

Of special note here is the gender dimension. Until about the 1980s, Bangladesh was one of the few countries in the world where women lived a shorter life than men. Fortunately, this has been corrected with women living two years more. With affirmative actions taken by the government and NGOs, many women have been brought into the mainstream of development, not only as passive receivers, but as actors in their own development and empowerment.

A few years ago, *The Lancet* devoted a full series on the Bangladesh story (*The Lancet* 2013). According to its editors, Bangladesh represents 'one of the great mysteries of global health'. The series, which traced some of the reasons for this, also identified challenges that the country and the society will have to confront in the future. It identified NGOs as an important actor in this and BRAC was often referred to in most of the papers and commentaries. BRAC's interventions have spanned across many areas of development including primary education, health care, women's empowerment, and microfinance, and are thought to have touched the lives and livelihoods of the majority of Bangladesh's 160 million people. As alluded to later, for example, BRAC's health programme on tuberculosis (TB) control is implemented in two thirds of the *upazilas* (sub-districts) of Bangladesh, and its microfinance programme has over 6 million borrowers. It is considered as a 'learning organisation' in the sense that it learns from its own experiences and scales up to reach as many people as possible (Korten 1980).

2 BRAC in partnerships
BRAC believes and works in partnership with likeminded entities. Such partnership has spanned across governments, NGOs, research and academic institutions, and development partners. The following gives a quick run-down of the types of partnerships that BRAC has forged in implementing its development interventions.

1   **Partnership with other implementing organisations:** A good example is the work that BRAC does in collaboration with governments. Such partnerships happened especially in the areas of education and health. Since the 1990s, BRAC has implemented a programme to combat TB in Bangladesh. TB remains one of the major killers, particularly for those in their productive years. In a unique arrangement, the national TB control programme using the Directly Observed Treatment, Short Course (DOTS) is implemented through NGOs. In this, NGOs implement the programme at the grass-roots level while the government supplies the drugs and diagnostics, and provides the oversight and supervision. As part of

its role as a principal recipient of the funds from the Global Fund to fight AIDS, Tuberculosis and Malaria, BRAC contracted out implementation of the programme in a third of the country to NGOs, while BRAC itself implements it in the other two thirds. This programme has earned global recognition for its impressive outcomes in terms of case identification and treatment compliance.

2 **Partnership between two research entities:** BRAC's Research and Evaluation Division (RED) has collaborated with other internationally known research outfits. An example is the partnership between RED and the London School of Economics. This collaboration measured the impact of BRAC's celebrated 'graduation programme' for the ultra-poor. Using a randomised controlled trial (RCT), the collaboration found measurable impact of the programme on the employment and income of ultra-poor households, both at short and longer terms. In another example, RED collaborated with the Bangladesh-based International Centre for Diarrhoeal Disease Research (icddr,b) over a ten-year period to measure the impact of BRAC's microfinance and primary education programmes on health outcomes. It made significant contributions in understanding the mechanism of health impacts triggered by actions in the non-health sector (the so-called 'social determinants of health'). A series of papers was published from this research collaboration.

3 **Partnership between two academic institutes:** The partnership between RED and the Institute of Development Studies (IDS) helped develop and improve the capacity of RED staff in specific skill areas. In the 1980s, RED and IDS forged a collaboration which helped RED staff gain skills on how to use participatory rural appraisal (PRA) and rapid rural appraisal (RRA) as 'quick and dirty' methods in social science research and programme evaluations. This led RED to become a hub for practising and promoting such methods in the country. In another example, the BRAC University James P. Grant School of Public Health has collaborated with a number of overseas universities in implementing its Master of Public Health (MPH) programme. Under this, faculty from universities such as Columbia, Harvard, London, Makerere, Stanford, Karolinska, and the Public Health Foundation of India (PHFI) have been co-teaching, which has helped raise the standard and prestige of BRAC University as a centre of excellence in public health teaching.

4 **Partnership between a research outfit and implementation programmes:** There is no dearth of good ideas but where the world of development struggles is in their implementation. However noble and nice the idea is, it is of limited value unless it is implemented well and shows good outcomes. In Section 3, I describe how a good idea that was identified and implemented well through a learning approach has led to impressive outcomes (Chowdhury 2014).

3 Partnership for better implementation of interventions: the case of Oral Rehydration Therapy (ORT)

Until the early 1980s, diarrhoea was a major killer in Bangladesh, particularly for children. According to an estimate, 250,000 children were dying every year from diarrhoeal dehydration. Oral Rehydration Therapy (ORT) as the treatment of choice for diarrhoea had already been discovered at the erstwhile Cholera Research Laboratory in Dhaka, but its use was confined only to within the four walls of hospitals, as the World Health Organization (WHO) was not recommending its use on a mass scale, fearing its misuse. In 1979, with support from the icddr,b, BRAC developed a home equivalent of ORT. ORT is nothing but a mixture of salt and sugar in water. Through some trial and error, it was discovered that a pinch of common table salt and two scoops of *gur* (local brown sugar or molasses) when mixed in half a litre of water made a solution which was very close to the WHO-recommended ORT.

As the ingredients of salt and *gur* were commonly available in almost every home, BRAC decided to teach this to every mother in Bangladesh. Women health workers were trained and sent to teach ORT to every mother through face-to-face sessions. Initial piloting concentrated on making sure that the mothers learned the preparation well enough as deviation in the recommended measures would render the solution either ineffective (if too little salt and/or sugar is added) or dangerous (if too much salt is added). BRAC introduced a number of innovative systems in implementing the programme. One of them was the incentive salary. A health worker was paid based on how well she taught the mothers. A month after teaching, monitors visited the mothers, asked them to prepare a solution in front of them, and saved a sample of the solution for analysing the amount of salt in it. The health worker received no payment if her solution was not within a 'safe and effective' limit. This way, the health worker devoted her maximum efforts in making sure that the mothers she taught remembered it correctly.

Over the decade of the 1980s, BRAC workers taught this method to over 14 million mothers in as many families. Called the Oral Therapy Extension Programme (OTEP), this was the largest ORT programme ever undertaken anywhere (Chowdhury and Cash 1996; Gawande 2013). The outcome is that it contributed significantly to the drastic fall in child mortality in Bangladesh. ORT is now a part of the local culture in the sense that mothers transmit this knowledge down to their children. And finally, Bangladesh now has the highest use rate of ORT in the world. According to the Bangladesh Demographic and Health Surveys, over 80 per cent of diarrhoeal episodes are treated with ORT! But what has been the contribution of research in this and what contributions did partnerships make? We discuss this in the following section.

4 Improving implementation: the role of partnerships

There are two critical markers for the successful implementation of an ORT programme:

- Mothers' ability to make a 'safe and effective' solution and its sustenance; and

- Use of the ORT solution in the case of diarrhoeal episodes.

RED played an important part in the implementation of OTEP. It is perhaps not an exaggeration to say that this partnership between RED and OTEP contributed immensely to the success of the intervention. From the pilot phase to the time it scaled up to reach the whole country, RED researchers carried out numerous investigations to understand the implementation and help OTEP instil mid-course corrections. It is perhaps worthwhile to mention a few examples of such contributions.

4.1 Changing the ORT formula

The original formula for homemade ORT that BRAC came up with, as mentioned above, was one pinch of salt, two scoops of *gur*, and half a litre of water. Staff monitoring the teaching found a high concentration of salt in the solutions prepared by mothers in a particular area. It was discovered that due to faulty teaching, the mothers were mixing the ingredients wrongly – instead of one pinch of salt and two scoops of *gur* they were mixing two pinches of salt and one scoop of *gur*, leading to a hypertonic solution. Obviously, mothers were confused. BRAC did some further experiments and found that if the mothers used one fistful instead of two scoops, it gave similar results in terms of the amount of sugar in the solution. OTEP thus changed the formula from 1+2 to 1+1. There was no confusion afterwards.

4.2 Research to understand the usage of ORT

Early studies found that less than 10 per cent of diarrhoea cases were treated using ORT. This was very frustrating for BRAC as the assumption was that once the technology was transmitted to mothers they would start using the solution without fail. This was particularly so when it was already known that mothers were making the ORT solution correctly, at least from a medical science perspective. There was, however, an imperative and immense need to understand the dynamics of use from a social science perspective and to find out why the know-do gap existed.

Gap in messaging: Water is a most important part of the ORT. The health worker while instructing a mother gave the following message: 'When your child has diarrhoea, give her ORT. This solution can be made by mixing one pinch of salt and one fistful of *gur* into half a litre of pure water'. In the 1980s, when OTEP was implemented, 'pure' water was not available to every household in rural Bangladesh. As the message emphasised 'pure' water, mothers who did not have ready access to it did not use it. This was a major issue and BRAC consulted Richard Feachem of the London School of Hygiene and Tropical

Medicine, an authority on ORT. He responded by saying that 'pure' water was not at all necessary to make ORT and indeed, any water (even dirty water) was better than no water. What was important was to replace the lost fluid. BRAC changed the message and instructed mothers to mix the ingredients into their 'drinking water' (instead of 'pure water').

Lack of male involvement: Another research study found that men were not supportive of ORT. OTEP was essentially a women-to-women programme (health workers were all women who taught only women inside houses) and men were hardly involved. This created suspicion among men, the traditional family decision-makers. Even when the women were fully convinced of the value of ORT, they hesitated to use it as their male members were not aware of ORT. This led to a total overhaul of OTEP, with male workers included in the team of health workers. While the female workers taught women, the male workers met the menfolk in bazaars, mosques, temples, and schools.

Increasing the trust of health workers: Research found that the health workers who were entrusted to teach mothers were themselves not convinced of the effectiveness of ORT as a treatment for diarrhoea. When they themselves had diarrhoea, they were found to seek a remedy from local village doctors instead of using ORT. This was important because if the teacher is not convinced of what she is saying and does not have trust in it, how can she convince others? As a response, all the workers were brought to the diarrhoea treatment centre of icddr,b in Dhaka for them to see how ORT worked in the body. Seeing is believing, and after this demonstration, they developed more trust in ORT and were able to teach mothers more confidently.

Cultural perception of diarrhoea: Ethnographic research found that villagers perceived four types of loose motions, all of which resembled diarrhoea. To them, they were separate illnesses with distinct causes and aetiology. One of the types, for example, was '*dud haga*'. In local terminology, *dud* means milk and *haga* means stool. The cultural belief was that if a mother's milk gets 'polluted' and her baby sucks it, the baby would have *dud haga*. Mothers do not consider this as diarrhoea. But how was this perception related to the use of ORT? In fact, there was a fourth type which the mothers call '*daeria*' which resembled severe cholera-like diarrhoea. When the health worker instructed a mother, she asked her to use ORT when her child had 'diarrhoea' but the mother perceived this to have meant *daeria* (severe watery stools). As the *daeria* cases were very small in number (less than 10 per cent of all cases), a high proportion of use in this category could not raise the average. The OTEP quickly modified the message to reflect the new knowledge: 'Use ORT when your child has *dud haga*, *ajirno*, *amasha*, or *daeria*'. The local terms for the different types of diarrhoea varied from region to region within the country, and one of the first tasks for the health worker teams when they came to a new village was to discover the local terms for use as they instructed on ORT.

5 Concluding remarks

According to BRAC, they do research not just for research' sake but to solve a problem or to improve delivery of interventions. The above example shows how an independent research outfit can contribute to improving programme quality and its delivery. This was possible because of a unique partnership between RED and OTEP. This partnership grew from mutual trust and respect, benefiting both. OTEP saw the value of the RED inputs and RED saw how their inputs were being valued by OTEP. Partnership may also mean pains. In the beginning, some of the OTEP staff were sceptical and sensitive of what RED researchers were saying about their programme and at times this led to some tensions. As trust was built, benefits triumphed and pains were forgotten. What is required is the determination and patience from the part of the partners.

Notes

* This issue grew out of the Impact Initiative for International Development Research which seeks to maximise impact and learning from ESRC-DFID's Joint Fund for Poverty Alleviation Research and their Raising Learning Outcomes in Education Systems Research Programme.

† This article draws from the inaugural keynote speech delivered by the author at the ESRC-DFID conference 'Power of Partnership: Research to Alleviate Poverty', held in New Delhi, 3–5 December 2018.

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Glossary

ABL activity-based learning
AfriNEAD African Network for Evidence-to-Action in Disability
AHPSR Alliance for Health Policy and Systems Research [Switzerland]
AISD Agricultural Investment Support Directorate [Ethiopia]
AJOD *African Journal of Disability*
BEE Building Evidence in Education
CERID Research Centre for Education, Innovation and Development [Nepal]
CI Co-Investigator
CREATE Consortium for Research on Educational Access, Transitions and Equity [UK]
CSO civil society organisation
CUPP Community University Partnership Programme [UK]
CWG Conflict Working Group
DAC Development Assistance Committee
DFAT Department of Finance and Trade [Australia]
DFID Department for International Development [UK]
DOTS Directly Observed Treatment, Short Course
DPO Disabled Persons' Organisations
EADI European Association of Development Research and Training Institutes [Germany]
EC Ethiopian Calendar
EPRDF Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front
EQUINET Regional Network for Equity in Health in East and Southern Africa [Zimbabwe]
ESID Effective States and Inclusive Development Research Centre [UK]
ESRC Economic and Social Research Council [UK]
EWF Education World Forum
GCRF Global Challenges Research Fund [UK]
GDP gross domestic product
GEC Girls Education Challenge
HEFCE Higher Education Funding Council for England
ICAI Independent Commission for Aid Impact [UK]
icddr,b International Centre for Diarrhoeal Disease Research [Bangladesh]
IDRC International Development Research Centre [Canada]
IDS Institute of Development Studies [UK]
INGO international non-governmental organisation
IPBES Intergovernmental Science-Policy Platform on Biodiversity and Ecosystem Services [Germany]
IPPF International Planned Parenthood Federation [UK]
IPSS Institute for Peace and Security Studies [Ethiopia]
M&E monitoring and evaluation
MoFA Ministry of Foreign Affairs [Ethiopia]
MoU Memorandum of Understanding

MP Madhya Pradesh

MPH Master of Public Health

NGO non-governmental organisation

NITI National Institute for Transforming India

NUDIPU National Union of Organisations of the Disabled in Uganda

ODA official development assistance

OECD Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development [France]

ORT Oral Rehydration Therapy

OTEP Oral Therapy Extension Programme

PAR participatory action research

PHFI Public Health Foundation of India

PI Principal Investigator

PRA participatory rural appraisal

PRARI Poverty Reduction and Regional Integration

RBME Results-Based Regional Monitoring and Evaluation

RCT randomised controlled trial

REAL Research for Equitable Access and Learning [UK]

RED Research and Evaluation Division [BRAC]

RED Research and Evidence Division [DFID]

REF Research Excellence Framework

RISDP Regional Indicative Strategic Development Plan

RISE Research on Improving Systems of Education

RLO Raising Learning Outcomes

RRA rapid rural appraisal

RRC Rethinking Research Collaborative

R-RISDP Revised Regional Indicative Strategic Development Plan

SADC Southern African Development Community

SIDERA Shifting In/equality Dynamics in Ethiopia: from Research to Application

SNNPR Southern Nations, Nationalities, and Peoples' Region [Ethiopia]

SORC South Omo Research Center [Ethiopia]

SRO senior responsible officer

SSA Sarva Shiksa Abhiyan [Education for All]

TARSC Training and Research Support Centre [Zimbabwe]

TB Tuberculosis

TEACh Teaching Effectively All Children in India and Pakistan

TIPPS Teacher Instructional Practices and Processes System

TVET Technical and Vocational Education and Training

UCL University College London

UKCDS UK Collaborative on Development Science

UKRI United Kingdom Research and Innovation

UN United Nations

UNAIDS Joint United Nations Programme on HIV and AIDS [Switzerland]

UNGEI United Nations Girls' Education Initiative [USA]

UNICEF United Nations Children's Fund [USA]

UNRISD United Nations Research Institute for Social Development [Switzerland]

UPEACE University for Peace [Costa Rica]
USAID United States Agency for International Development
WHO World Health Organization [Switzerland]
YOUR Youth Uncertainty Rights

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Transforming Development Knowledge

Exploring Research–Policy Partnerships in International Development

Editors **James Georgalakis and Pauline Rose**

IDSBulletin

Transforming Development Knowledge

'The dynamics of effective research–policy partnerships for research evidence uptake can be enhanced through the three interconnected qualities of mutuality, interactivity, and policy adaptability. All three qualities have been found to exist in different ways in ESRC-DFID-funded research.'