

Evidence & the Politics of Participation

International HIV/AIDS Alliance and London School of Economics

'Academic partner': Flora Cornish, and colleagues at the Department of Methodology, London School of Economics

'NGO partner': Jill Russell, and colleagues at the International HIV/AIDS Alliance

Background & nature of the research partnership

This is an organically evolving research partnership. It began with the International HIV/AIDS Alliance commissioning research about the evidence for community mobilisation, and research to inform a reworking of their Theory of Change. Flora Cornish and a group of colleagues at the LSE undertook the work, with positive outcomes, both in terms of usefulness to the Alliance and in terms of academic research. The partners co-authored a [systematic review](#) of the evidence on community mobilisation as a part of the HIV response, which critiqued the evidence base, and called for flexible and nuanced approaches to evidence use. This review made the case for further, well-designed research on community mobilisation, which the Alliance is taking forward.

The work on the Theory of Change informed the re-development of the results framework used to monitor and evaluate the work of 2000 NGOs around the world. This work opened up new questions, beyond the terms of reference of the originally commissioned research, about how social aspects of the HIV epidemic are measured and monitored, an area of the Alliance's expertise. Due to the academic interest of the topic, Jenevieve Mannell and Flora Cornish committed unfunded time to working on an [article](#) for publication, critically reviewing the various ways that social outcomes are measured in monitoring frameworks.

The partners' common interests have led to further work on problems of 'evidence', with a small-scale qualitative study, being undertaken by an LSE Masters student, on the implementation of a peer-led treatment intervention in Cambodia, and early scoping for further social scientific and reflective work on the workings of 'evidence' in the era of 'evidence-based everything'.

Things that worked well:

Common interests: The partners have shared commitments to advancing the role of community action in relation to HIV/AIDS programmes and policies. This common interest in community mobilisation, and set of values regarding participation, collaboration, and the need for an enabling environment somehow enables us to work well, even with different languages, expectations and timeframes. From an academic point of view, the interest of the Alliance in peer-reviewed publications (which are often not a priority of NGOs in our previous experience), has brought an alignment of our goals which makes collaboration MUCH easier.

Serendipity: The collaboration has been characterised by surprises! The academics had not been expecting their work on a Theory of Change to be as useful as it seemed to be. While it felt like we often spoke different languages, somehow, what we said could be interpreted in a useful way (both ways), to make interesting sense to the other partner. Moreover, we did not anticipate all of the

various 'spin-off' projects that have started to come together. These have come about as a result of discovering common interests, complementary skills and opportunities, and taking advantage of them.

Challenges:

Different jargons: Sometimes the effectiveness of the collaboration has seemed quite surprising, as we work under different structures, with different ways of talking about similar topics, but also quite different purposes and concepts.

Slightly different views of what useful research is: Academic researchers are thinking about research in terms of 'contribution to the literature', aiming for research that sheds light on broader conceptual or wide-spread issues. Sometimes, in a programme context, there is research that could be done that would provide useful, local level information about a programme, but that the academic might not consider publishable and thus worth putting time into. Or there may be innovations going on, which seem worth documenting, but that the academic cannot see how to frame as a contribution to the literature.