Data analysis: civil society based in the global South

1. Data description

Data collection involved one webinar-focus group discussion with three participants based in Asia, five interviews and ten written reflections. Together these datasets included 18 respondents from civil society organisations or networks based in 11 countries (Bangladesh, Cambodia, Egypt, Ghana, India, Nepal, Pakistan, Senegal, South Africa and Tanzania) and three regional network organisations and/or social movements working across Africa (Africans Rising for Justice, Peace and Dignity), the Horn of Africa (Pamfork) and Asia (Community World Service Asia).

2. Awareness/participation in UK-funded partnerships

15 respondents had not heard of the GCRF or the Newton Fund (83%). A further two (based in South Africa and India) were aware of the programmes but had not participated, while the final respondent (based in Cambodia) was aware of the programmes and had participated both in peer review and as a partner in a successfully funded project. The participating partner said: "the experience was rewarding but the expectations and time requirements were too high." Ten respondents (56%) had also participated in UK-funded research partnerships with funders including UK AID, DFID, the Commonwealth Youth Programme, the British High Commission and internally funded by UK-based universities and UK-based INGOs.

Of those who had participated in UK-funded partnerships; one had played a contracting role while two were classed as 'Research Anchors', a further two as Co-Investigators, and four as 'Partners'. Five were involved in proposal development (56%); seven in research design and implementation (78%); five in analysis and writing outputs (56%); five in capacity building of members of the research team (56%); four in budget development and/or negotiation (44%) and four in project management (44%). One partner described an additional role as "being an interlocutor; in particular supporting the main actors to parse the theoretical framework so they can relate it to their lived experience."

None of the respondents had chosen not to participate as a partner in a UK-funded research partnership. As one respondent based in South Africa said: "As a researcher based in the global South with a very difficult funding environment, it is not really an option to choose not to be involved in a research collaboration if there is a relatively good prospect of funding."

Finally, three of the respondents praised this initiative and UKRI's efforts to elicit a partners' perspective: "I would like to laud the effort of RCUK to take this initiative of reaching out to agencies or NGOs like us to find out what we have to say. It is always helpful to provide Southern agencies a platform to amplify their voices on global forums."

3. Experiences in UK-funded partnerships – key messages

The respondents offered several examples of positive experiences in UK-funded partnerships.

- These included recognising the benefits of UKRI research funding and motivations to participate in schemes and partnerships, such as:
- **Better funding opportunities.** As one respondent noted, funding provides "overall larger budgets for research and funds for research topics and themes that would be difficult to be funded at the same level through national sources."
- **Learning and capacity strengthening** were identified by 60% of respondents as a key benefit of engaging in partnerships (for example, the opportunity "to work jointly with a renowned British research institution" and "address research questions … through research rigorous methodologies." The ability to learn, reflect and adapt was also seen as a key ingredient of successful research partnerships.
- Respondents also said they had benefited from "**opportunities to network** and collaborate with organisations from diverse countries … learn how different circumstance in differing partners' settings where action research is carried out influence results and impact … share lessons learned with others and appreciate differences … [and] travel to other countries and gain new insights from such instructive travel experiences."
- Around 90% of respondents said they had benefited from **strong and sustained relationships** and flagged good communication, trust and ideally a history of working together as key for successful partnerships. One partnership had benefited from reciprocal exchanges between researchers and practitioners to improve understanding of each others' context.
- Finally, the **opportunity to influence disciplines or subject areas** and link research with teaching was also identified as a benefit of partnerships. As one respondent based in India observed, "working with Faculty from these institutions is valuable not only in terms of the opportunity to research collaboratively and learn from each other, but also because the research can be applied directly in educational spaces. The same Faculty that have collaborated on this project have also expressed an interest in applying it in teaching…the research now has an opportunity of contributing to enhanced understanding of business and human rights issues within businesses."

Respondents also attested to positive experiences in partnerships, including:

- **Good communication,** which was seen as essential with respondents benefiting from monthly and quarterly reflection meetings and regular comprehensive updates.
- **Basic respect** was also seen as an underrated positive influence. As one respondent said: "It was very enriching and empowering because even though we were junior partners, we were never treated as that. It's largely to do with attitudes and that defines how we treat each other with dignity and respect."

Respondents also identified several barriers to participation, including:

- **Inequitable access to funding opportunities**. As one respondent noted, "we just don't seem to have the contacts, social networks and even the 'language' needed to engage. We understand the context and can do a better job [than many UK-based or international organisations] but we don't go to the same cocktail parties and don't have the networks that the other 'usual' agencies do."
- **Exclusion from project leadership**. Another respondent suggested that "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."

- **Exclusion from decision-making**. Several respondents also felt excluded from decisions: "Many of the key decisions about the research focus [e.g.] which partners to involve, how research will be framed … are taken by the UK-based partner. As a researcher in the global
- South, treated as 'providing case study data', rather than having a more influential role in setting the agenda for research, we were not as involved as we would have liked to be."
- **Lack of clarity/transparency about roles and responsibilities**. Respondents also argued for more transparent practice: "We needed a specific ToR. We had created the idea but… our role was all very conceptual and not on paper … it got delayed but till today, we don't know about the report. (Research happened but hasn't reached where it should have)."
- **Lack of transparency about budgets.** Three participants also noted that this was a key area of exclusion in the partnerships they had been involved in.
- **Lack of awareness of the constraints and realities of working as a researcher in the global South.** Respondents also argued that UK-based funders and academics were often ignorant of conditions in southern-based contexts, for example, one stressed that "the level of precariousness in institutions here is much greater than in the UK."
- **Conflicting timetables.** Respondents also noted that academic and funding schedules often conflict with practice-based agendas and policy opportunities: "Framing of research needs to be based on a more realistic assessment on whether the time is right for a specific kind of data point and message."
- **Conflicting understandings**. Another issue related to the lack of space given to practitioner understandings or even theories. As one respondent noted: "The partnership has been consultative and collaborative from the onset … Having said that, and while understanding the imperatives and the constraints behind it (including the ogre of submitting a competitive proposal to a given deadline), the concept of 'intersectionality' came out of the blue. The concept opened up the horizon for reflecting on the central challenges of participatory development, but it may, conversely, also have constricted them. This might have been avoided if there had been more time (that ogre again!) to interrogate the concept. In particular, translating it not only linguistically but also intellectually to make it accessible to our main participatory research actors was a challenge. This in turn limited their ability to enrich the concept."
- **Conflicting audiences.** Respondents also recognised the inequitable involvement of practitioners in the selection/prioritisation of key messages when there are many different audiences, with implications for the appropriateness of different types of research output.
- Several respondents had also struggled with the **inconsistency of 'research quality'** across different approaches to research/competencies/data validation across large consortia.
- Finally, most of the respondents stressed the **inadequate compensation** allocated for partners' time as well as institutional overhead costs

In response to these barriers, respondents had the following recommendations:

- Around 80% of respondents highlighted the importance of **understanding and responding to the ultimate beneficiaries of the research**. This included conducting a 'stakeholder analysis' and 'power mapping' at the start of the research to identify on-the-ground' target groups and clarify their relationships with the research partners and then incorporating the needs and priorities of these groups 'into research design/communication/evaluation and generating useful outputs for these groups. As one respondent suggested: "Begin the collaboration from the onset with the most affected, the so-called 'beneficiaries' of change. Involve them in the ideation, in the definition of the research question/s." Another proposed that "Academicians might also see themselves as 'development doctors', not PhDs but MDs – and begin to move into the direction medicine is taking…: to preventive rather than curative and holistic rather than prescriptive approaches." And a third suggested that stakeholder analysis could be used at the earliest stage of proposal design to identify the very partners in the partnership: "Partners (academia) are not always ideal ... If the modality
- of stakeholder analysis was adopted while choosing partners, we may have a better combination of agencies involved."
- **The sustainability of both research and partnerships** was also highlighted. Respondents were critical of short-term collaborations: "Strong collaborations take time to build as they require trust and mutual understanding beyond the alignment on paper presented for bids. This means that research collaboration, to be meaningful, should be over the medium to long term." Another respondent suggested: "The commitment from both sides of the partnership makes the programme last over a long time [so] commitment of co-funding from both sides is often useful." And another argued that in many challenge areas, more longitudinal research is needed and academics are often not best-placed to support this. Instead a community-based or CSO researcher "could be engaged/embedded for at least five to 10 years and teams should be attached for a long term rather than project-to-project (we just lose time and energy if that a person leaves)."
- Respondents also recommended **more cyclical approaches to funding**. "I would have liked to have more roles established for initiating ideas for future work, building on own
- achievements and offer these to donors for financing, rather than vice versa, waiting for announcements and requests for proposals from donors." This also has implications for building the capacity of funders to learn from research and to channel research findings into new cycles of agenda setting: "If the RCUK 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, RCUK needs to consider the way the entire research funding pipeline is structured and how research collaboration can be strengthened at each point."
- Respondents also identified a need for **better promotion of research funding**, with some arguing for a regionalised strategy: "RCUK need to approach different institutions for creating more awareness, [through] regional research committees."
- **More funded time** was also seen as fundamental to develop shared understandings and ways of working and accommodate learning/capacity building as well as the flexibility to adapt the research and develop more appropriate outputs. Some practitioners also said they would appreciate salaried time to contribute to joint publications. This also implies the need for more opportunities for face-to-face

engagement or "more synthesis workshops along the collaboration course to further enhance learning and exchange of experiences."

- Respondents agreed that UKRI should encourage **innovation in measurements of impact,** asking them to "Consider process-related impacts as well as those that occur after the input has been delivered. Support research approaches that seek to assess the kind of 'hard-to-measure' value that has been ignored, or marginalised, by policy thinking historically."
- Another request was to **improve the accessibility of application and reporting systems** by minimising "bureaucratic hassles" for under-resourced partners.
- Some respondents also felt that UKRI might play a stronger role in supporting the **consistency of data.** One partnership funded by USAID had particularly benefited from their data quality assessment approach.
- Others proposed that there should be a **limit to the number of partners in a consortium**, noting an increase in tokenistic inclusion of multiple partners in bids and stressing that it often wasn't worth their investment where they were 'bit players' in a large consortium.
- Finally, several respondents suggested that **better use should be made of "modern tools"** for collaboration and data collection; including "electronic tools and remote/web-based servers."