



Data analysis: INGOs and research brokers

1. Data description

Data collection involved one webinar-focus group discussion (with eight participants), four interviews and five further written reflections. Together these datasets included 17 respondents from 10 international organisations based in the UK and Ireland, and four UK-based broker/capacity-providing organisations working nationally in the UK and internationally.

2. Awareness/participation in UK-funded partnerships

Only three respondents had not heard of the GCRF/Newton Fund (18%), with three aware of the programmes but not having participated. Four respondents had attended awareness raising and/or networking events for the GCRF. One webinar participant who had attended a Global Engagement Event said they went “with aim of meeting/connecting with Southern research institutes ... [but was] surprised to see peers from UK universities, not a huge number from Southern research institutes. Those that were there were from a huge range of disciplines but the focus and agenda was forcing us to develop proposals together which people weren’t ready to do ... Selection hadn’t been thought through. The participant list came just 2 days before the event, which wasn’t helpful.” Another webinar participant who had attended a similar event in another region agreed.

Eleven respondents had been involved in GCRF-funded applications as either ‘Co-Investigators’, ‘Partners’ or ‘(Sub) Contracted Researchers’ (and in one case as a technical consultant advising on bid development but not actually a partner), with six noting that they had been approached by multiple academic applicants since the launch of the GCRF. As one respondent said “we have discussed potential bids with around nine universities/institutions though none resulted in either a successful bid, or a submission in which we retained the role initially proposed. In one instance we were due to be a partner ... but when the bid went to the director /institutional management there was a clear wish to keep those roles in-house and we were dropped.” Five further respondents spoke of being used as a tokenistic “add-on” or approached at the last minute by UK-based academics and with limited input into the application.

The participants in this group also mentioned experiences with other funders of research partnerships, including DFID, Wellcome Trust, Irish Aid and USAID.



Box 1: INGO partner experiences in research review

Last June I was approached to be part of a moderator panel for an AHRC led ‘network plus’ bid – which was a bid for around £3m. When I was approached I was told there would be 8-10 shortlisted proposals and it would involve one-day preparation time and three days in panel. I was offered expenses and an honoraria fee of £450.

In actual fact, 12 proposals were invited for interview; each proposal included over 100 pages of information including six moderator comments and the PI response to those. And it took me a good week to read the material. It was the first time I had done anything like this and there was no support offered, so it was overwhelming and intimidating. I turned up at the panel, and the chair was lovely, as were the other panel members, but no one made any effort to explain expectations to me; I don’t think anyone had considered what it might be like as a practitioner to be in that space. There was no real introduction of who we each were or the skills we brought, or clarification as to whether I was there as ‘the practitioner’ and should comment extensively on the practice-based elements, or if each panel member was to be expected to contribute across the whole discussion. Being the only practitioner among a group of four academics meant it was quite difficult to get my voice heard, again not because they weren’t listening, but because I was speaking a ‘foreign language’ and there was no one else on the panel who could respond from their experience and build with me.

As a practitioner, although I have a good academic training, my day-to-day is not focused on academic endeavour, I rarely write or read academic materials. So the leap from my practice to reading the academic proposals was enormous and probably slowed my reading speed and my ability to pick up salient points quickly, it also made it hard to judge the quality of proposals from a research perspective. I felt that more time should have been given to forming the panel and sharing what we each brought, and assigning roles and so on. I felt that the academics needed to be trained on ‘understanding impact’ (more recently in another event we talked about ‘bureaucratic impact’ on one end of a continuum and ‘real world change’ at the other and discussed different conceptions of impact along the way) and on practitioner perspectives and engagement with research; I felt that as a practitioner I needed basic training on what the role and expectation should be; I needed to be clear about my space for operation – how much could I challenge a tender which was academically tight, but seemed naïve in terms of impact and unnecessary in terms of practice – was I there in a token position or to really challenge, were the bids really considering impact, or just academic quality with a bit tagged on the end, and so on; and we should have had proper time allocated both before the panel and afterwards to reflect on process.

In terms of participation in funded research projects, nine respondents (53%) had taken the decision not to participate in a partnership after being approached. The following reasons were given:

- **Lack of time** to respond to tight deadlines for calls.
- Proposal was not closely enough aligned to the **organisation’s strategic priorities**.

- **Insufficient budget allocation** or changes to budget (three respondents mentioned the 80% FEC as a deterrent to participation).
- **Lack of capacity** – either at main office or country level – to adequately engage with the application stage.
- **Nature of the call criteria** meant they couldn't take a leadership role as PI (or even sometimes CI) even when the partnering academic organisations were supportive of them taking these roles.
- **Too many organisations involved** and budget/roles therefore too diluted to be meaningful for individual partners.
- **Stringent ethical boundaries** which in some cases discounted certain academic research approaches.

3. Experiences in UK-funded partnerships – key messages

Positive experiences included:

- Respondents highlighted the positive nature of those partnerships that **responded to practice-based agendas** and that focused on impact beyond dissemination of research findings (i.e. 'research into action').
- Respondents also highlighted the importance of **existing networks and strong relationships** as essential for working well together, ensuring trust and being able to turn around rapid research applications.
- While some found investment in proposal development to be a waste of time when funding was unsuccessful, others argued that **collaborative application processes** had created a space for sharing ideas and negotiating common values and interests as well as 'testing the compatibility' of different partners. They suggested that ideally, this would be funded through seed-funding or networking/proposal development events such as 'sand pits'.
- Respondents also lauded funded research that included a compulsory **inception phase** with a funded coordinator. One respondent felt it should also be a requirement by funders that all partnerships have a 'research-into-use' plan from the outset. This could be negotiated in the inception phase through the use of tools such as stakeholder maps and outcome maps. INGOs and brokers/capacity providers are well placed to facilitate this. Others emphasised the importance of face-to-face meetings as well as regular virtual communication.
- Models that **included joint Principle Investigators from the UK and global South** (with INGOs playing a brokering role between Southern-based academics and civil society) were also seen to have been more successful, though respondents acknowledged that this absorbed a lot more time.
- Respondents also highlighted projects that generated **wide-ranging outputs and outcomes**, including toolkits, training manuals with opportunities for engagement often before the research has ended: "though this is harder to write up it is crucial for influencing policy; engagement in a process matters more than the write-up."
- Respondents also lauded efforts to **involve 'on-the-ground' communities** and civil society groups not just as data sources but also as vehicles for knowledge use and crucially as advisors on how knowledge should be used.

Respondents also identified several barriers to participation, including:

- **Insufficient time and resources for meaningful collaboration:** If research partnerships are to be genuinely meaningful and lead to real on-the-ground impact

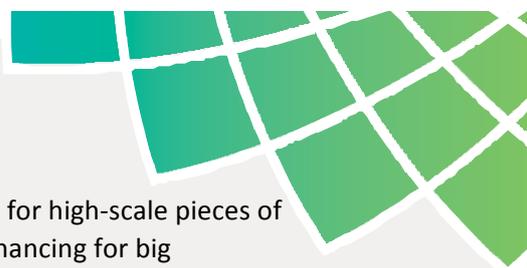


“the level of effort and time to bring the researcher team together with the implementing team to speak similar language, to understand each other, is exhausting. All additional costs have to be covered, and the practitioners have to be fully involved in conceptualisation, design, methods development, and so on. So having a model where your costs are capped or you are even expected to contribute your own resources doesn’t work.”

- Related to the above, respondents critiqued **transactional relationships** shaped by funders’ definitions of ‘partners’ as those who make financial contributions: “we were shocked on the day of submission to get an email asking us ‘how much money are you putting in?’”
- **Inappropriate methods/appropriate** that are determined by the profiles of individual academics or their specialist units rather than by appropriateness to the specific needs of the challenge area.
- The **assumption that conceptual/theoretical work is exclusively academic** and exclusion of practitioners from these activities and/or from contributing to peer-reviewed articles.
- **Involvement of multiple partners as small players in a large project.** “It is hard to staff and feel you can properly contribute if you have only 20 days a year budgeted over a three to five-year project. It is inevitable that it is not going to be full priority and momentum is also lost when you dip in and out of it.” Respondents suggested, however, that this can be offset if the project builds on existing relationships or responds to ongoing, shared agendas, which link to ongoing work.
- **Impossibly tight timeframes for grant applications** and lack of notice of calls so INGOs often have to wait to be approached by universities as opposed to defining a proposal themselves.
- **Conflicting incentives/approaches/schedules.** “Academics have strong incentive to publish in top journals so want to follow rigid methods and keep results secret; review process can be really lengthy and this goes against everything we need as practitioners – especially when they are not even open access publications.”
- **Authorship and ownership** (including intellectual property) granted exclusively to the UK-based academic/university with implications for onward distribution of research as well as attribution of impact.
- **Political economy of research funding.** As one respondent noted, “I think our overall experience has been of a limited wish of universities to engage with NGOs, if they believe the work can be done in-house. In part I think this reflects the economy of the grants – namely that they want to retain as much of the income within the UK’s HE sector.”

Respondents had the following recommendations:

- **Learn from the partnership experiences of INGOs.** Respondents noted that many INGOs already have tried-and-test models of working with partners in the global South through their broader development work. This includes understanding of contexts, responsively generated needs and priorities, experience working remotely and with multiple types of organisations, infrastructure and systems to support remote working, experience brokering collaborative work and experience generating a diverse range of targeted outputs.
- **Make better use of existing INGO data systems.** Respondents argued that more could be done with “solid high-quality monitoring/evaluation data and rapid analysis of that ... So more natural creep and control with a phased approach [to refine the



research] over time. That would potentially open up space for high-scale pieces of research at national level, assuming you can match with financing for big programmes. Research might not provide the capital but aligning it to other institutional funding mechanisms could be a way to go.”

- **Better understanding of the complexity of impact pathways.** Several respondents argued that academics often equate dissemination of findings with impact and lack awareness of the complexity of evidence-informed change: “There is an invisibility of the structures necessary to affect change, for example, if you want to submit research at side event in UN meeting, to be able to apply for the side event you have to have status in the UN and interest of a number of country delegations so that you can get rooms. This doesn’t happen overnight. A lot of infrastructure is needed for effective advocacy as well as longer-term
- relationship building with decision makers.” At the same time, respondents argued that there was a tendency for academics to take on impact work themselves rather than bring in external expertise: “There is something of a ‘how hard can it be’ style to thinking – so [impact is seen as] an easy ‘bolt on’... The fact that so many big development projects have failed to deliver their potential ‘impact’ over the years seems to have been missed.”
- **Stakeholder engagement is pivotal.** Respondents suggested that this often only happens when it is an explicit requirement set out by funders. “We would like to see that expected from outset [and more thought about] how to engage the stakeholder from outset ... Better guidance around that from both sides would be good.”
- **Better recognition of the time and cost of meaningful collaboration** and better compensation (including for relationship-building and learning as well as travel, admin and so on).
- **Question the centrality of UK-based academics.** Some INGOs (and consultancy firms/think tanks) are completely bypassing UK-based or Northern academics to work directly in partnership with academics from the global South. Different types of expertise, facilities and infrastructure will be necessary for different types of research but the supremacy of UK-based academia should not necessarily be taken for granted and funders/academics should carefully consider their value-added.
- **New sources of funding specifically for practitioner-led consortia.** Respondents suggested that in order to take advantage of practitioner expertise (and provide fair and equitable access to research funds) there should be new funding calls targeted specifically to practitioners that don’t require the same level of writing or time.
- **Transparency** and explicit recognition of different incentives and objectives of different partners was seen as vital, with some respondents arguing that transparent practice (including around budget) should be made mandatory by funders.
- **Flexible/adaptive research design and funding** was a recurring suggestion, with respondents arguing for more dedicated funds for negotiating collaboration and learning.
- **More networking opportunities** to develop new collaborative agendas, generate key research questions and start to form new partnerships as well as to improve understandings of the other sector.
- **Consider the importance of research that may not be ODA-ble** but can have an impact on the success of ODA. For example, research on donor processes, delivery systems, organisational structures and internal incentives is ineligible as this

requires studying donor activities that are situated in non-ODA countries (i.e. in donor capital cities).

- **Engage more explicitly with the political economy of the GCRF.** Some respondents suggested that some UKRI agendas (e.g. encouraging 'new entrants' into the development sector, promoting REF-driven incentives, institutional competition, and so on) is at odds with its stated aims of achieving genuine impact. They argued that without a preparedness to grapple with that tension at a strategic and operational level, the GCRF is doomed to achieve less than it ought to.