



Rethinking
Research
Collaborative

UK-based academics

Resource materials to support fair
and equitable research partnerships

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Introduction: Fair and equitable research partnerships

Collaborative research has become more popular in recent years, as emphasis on making research accessible and useful to different audiences has increased.

This way of working has been encouraged within the international development research sector, based on a recognition that understanding and responding to complex global development challenges necessitates knowledge held beyond the remit of a single type of actor or discipline. Academics based in universities in the global North are not only partnering with academics based in other institutions and countries, but also with actors from civil society, government and the private sector based in the global North and global South.

Recent UK-led research funding streams – specifically the Global Challenges Research Fund and the Newton Fund – have focused on making these partnerships ‘fair and equitable’.

The Rethinking Research Collaborative is an informal international network of organisations – academics, civil society organisations (CSOs), international non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and research support providers – who are committed to working together to encourage more inclusive, responsive collaborations to produce useful and accessible international development research.

We have identified eight principles to guide different research stakeholders in reflecting on what is needed to make research partnerships fair and equitable; underpinning them all is an emphasis on attitudes and behaviours, and the need to treat each other with basic dignity and respect. These principles are fully discussed in the introduction to this set of modules, but in summary they are:

1. Put poverty first.
2. Critically engage with context.
3. Challenge assumptions about evidence.
4. Adapt and respond.
5. Respect diversity.
6. Commit to transparency.
7. Invest in the relationship.
8. Keep learning.

This module, written for academics based in the global North, provides insights and ideas for translating these principles into practice. Five companion modules are aimed at CSOs and academics based in the global South, international NGOs, research brokers and research funders.



Our understanding of academics based in the global North

This module is aimed at academics working in institutions in the UK – although we believe that many of our assumptions will be relevant to academics based in the global North more broadly.

We define academics as individuals working in research roles in a university or higher education institute. There is considerable diversity among these academics. They have different degrees of autonomy and range in seniority from research students and precariously employed ‘early career researchers’ to emeritus professors. They are located in different faculties, and have many disciplinary backgrounds and divergent preferences for research methods and ways of working. For example, some may engage in social research while others work in laboratories and others still in archives. They may be experts in the field of ‘development studies’, or have little interaction with ‘international development’ but plenty with related fields (such as community development or public policy) in the UK. They may be originally from a country in the global South, or be British with no experience at all in the global South. They may have never been involved in a research partnership beyond the UK, or be deeply aware of the challenges of international collaborations and global power dynamics. Their research may be largely theory-driven, or they may have long histories of engaged community research. All these dimensions will impact on how UK-based academics understand and participate in international research partnerships.

Despite this, there are certain important attributes that are shared by UK-based academics and which influence partnerships. Academics have specialist knowledge and research expertise. Their motivation for entering into research partnerships is driven primarily by a desire to further knowledge and understanding in a specific interest area. In funded research partnerships it is generally UK-based academics who are the primary point of access to research funding, and they experience similar institutional pressures and incentives which will shape their practice.

More generally, UK-based academics experience similar power relations as others working in the international development sector. It is important to acknowledge historical colonial relationships and current global power dynamics, as these shape the



context and expectations of international development, meaning for example that those based in the global North frequently participate in the national development pathways of countries in the global South; and that institutional relationships and expectations mirror this wider context.

This module is designed to enable UK-based academics to reflect on their position and practice, to unpack the challenges and opportunities they face in partnering for development research and to consider how they can act to bring about fair and equitable research partnerships.


What do UK-based academics bring to research partnerships?

Specialist knowledge and expertise. An academic is positioned to have access to and familiarity with the body of literature associated with their research area, including awareness of current debates, research gaps and how to conceptualise and locate their research to contribute to global knowledge. Some UK-based academics, such as scientists, also have access to and expertise in cutting-edge technologies which can be usefully adapted to support innovation in the global South.

Access to the global academic literature and community. Academia follows certain norms and conventions which shape how research is published in academic journals or shared at conferences. This has implications for the way that research is presented, the types of language used and the stylistic conventions that determine if an output is legitimate; these preferences are very familiar to those working in UK universities and higher education institutes. UK-based academics can bring a symbolic authority to the research produced through partnerships, as well as facilitating access to these global research spaces – although interventions focused on opening access to research outputs and data could transform the nature of this contribution.

Research process expertise. Academics bring considerable skill in research framing and design, often the result of years of training. This can contribute to the robustness of the research process, although it is important to note that such expertise may rest on assumptions about what ‘good research’ is, that need to be explored between partners.

Access to funding streams. Universities have the knowledge, skills infrastructure and processes to track research funding opportunities as they arise, support bid development, and navigate research application systems. The standard criteria/requirements for research councils are based on the UK higher education sector and align most easily with UK-based academics. This increases the likelihood of success, but also means that UK-based academics hold much of the power, including how the partnership is formed, the research framed and resources allocated.



Engagement and influencing. Beyond contributing to specific research partnerships, UK academics are well positioned to be able to engage with strategic discussions about funding processes and research priorities, and the broader context that influences research partnerships. For example, peer review colleges and funding panels include academics; academics are journal editors and article reviewers, conference convenors and disciplinary experts. They are represented in research councils and have many opportunities to interact with funders, and can therefore influence funder practice.


However, although UK-based academics have relative power and access to resources in comparison to many of the other actors involved in international research collaborations, they also face many constraints.

Common challenges for UK-based academics in research partnerships

Funding dynamics. Within most funding streams the UK-based academic is cast as the Principal Investigator. This individual is likely to be the official funding applicant, inviting others to join them either at the application stage or once funding has been awarded. It is their institution that will lead on and submit the bid, it is their institution that will sign contracts and coordinate collaboration agreements, manage the project and therefore make daily decisions about how others participate in research, and be responsible for onward monitoring of impact. This context presents opportunity and responsibility, but also suggests an urgent need to unpack both the structural power relations that inform the types of partnership possible, and the power dynamics at play within specific partnerships.

Individual incentives. Many of the incentives that drive UK-based academics emphasise individual career progression (measured largely through publication and income generation) and reputation. Academics are expected to ‘own’ their body of research – often funding is allocated to the individual, and if they move to another institution they may take a funded project with them. They are rewarded for publications in their name, their public profile and presentations at conferences. This has implications for fair and equitable ownership of collaborative research, including intellectual property.

Institutional constraints. UK-based academics experience institutional constraints and the extent to which they can manage these depends on their seniority, disciplinary area, research approach and public profile. University research managers may control which partnerships can be entered into, and how they can be organised. There may be pressure on academics to prioritise certain areas of work, tied to sector-wide assessment processes (for example the Research Excellence Framework). The current funding environment, with its focus on impact and public engagement, is pushing academics to think about their research in ways that they have not previously considered. The upcoming Knowledge Exchange Framework, with its emphasis on commercialisation of research, is also likely to reshape institutional approaches to research partnerships.



Access and knowledge. Development challenges are framed differently depending on who is defining the challenge and from what perspective they are experiencing it. A framing developed by an academic in a UK-based university may or may not resonate with experiences in the global South. This can impact on the level of ownership and buy-in for the research, as well as its likely impact or utility. Academics therefore need to balance their own interests and understanding of ‘quality’ with active listening and collaborative development of research priorities.

Partnership skills. Equitable research partnerships depend on whether the people involved have the will and the skills to navigate complex power relations and work collaboratively. Academics may need to take on a facilitation role rather than a leadership role. This could involve creating space and opportunity for partners to share their aspirations for the partnership. It might mean identifying the skills and knowledges different actors bring and would like to develop, to ensure that the process enables each partner to play to their strengths and to learn collectively. This approach is often in direct contradiction to the expectations and framing of the funding streams. But, alternative practice is possible (listen to Jude Fransman and Andrea Cornwall discussing examples in the online case studies) and a powerful way to influence the wider resourcing environment.

Finally, it is important to recognise that fair and equitable partnerships will look different in different contexts, depending on the piece of research and its needs, the specific dynamics, and the opportunities and constraints that the other partners bring. Thinking about fairness and equity means embracing diversity, celebrating difference and building together. It means considering the specific funding proposal whilst also thinking about broader partnership development, and engagement with the wider system – these things will look different at different times, and different academics will have different opportunities and experience different obstacles.



Checklist

This checklist provides you with a set of questions designed to enable you to think about fair and equitable partnership in different areas of research practice – focused specifically on your role as a UK-based academic and your engagement in international research partnerships.

As you explore the different elements of the table you might like to consider the following three questions:

- ▶ What are your non-negotiables in this area?
- ▶ What would it be helpful to know/understand about your collaborator(s) in this area?
- ▶ What would you need to discuss together?

Area of practice	Key questions
Research agenda-setting and governance	<p>UK-based academics are well positioned to impact the wider environment in which research collaborations take place. Your actions could include:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▶ Actively reflecting on what you do in these spaces. What are your criteria for assessing funding proposals? How do you engage in discussions at research councils, and whose views you are representing? ▶ Capacity development of research partners. What are your opportunities to bring others into these spaces? How could you support their participation? ▶ Modelling alternative partnerships. Can you innovate within your current research partnerships? What does this teach you about how equitable partnerships translate into practice? Can you initiate culture change within your own institution to challenge current practice in research governance?
Enabling and supporting research partnerships	<p>Multiple differences between partners include research literacy, organisational position, size and institutional agendas. Key issues to consider are:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▶ Aspirations for the partnership. Clarity about whether the partnership is intended to be ‘transformational’ (to change understandings or practices) or ‘instrumental’ (to deliver research efficiently).



<p>Enabling and supporting research partnerships</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▶ Investing in the partnership. Taking care of the relationship will enable difficulties to be resolved in a timely, appropriate and respectful manner. Acknowledge power differentials and agree processes for decision making, communication and transparency. ▶ Identifying challenging moments. Some moments are particularly challenging in partnerships – for example, negotiating roles and budgets; managing in times of crisis; and ensuring that key information is available in accessible formats.
<p>Research design and implementation</p>	<p>Assumptions about what ‘good evidence’ is, what the research is for and desired outputs will all influence design.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▶ Why is it important to deliver this research in partnership? Answering this question will enable you to identify assumptions including expectations of roles, and understandings of research approach. To what extent do you envisage the research as a co-created endeavour? Are partners instrumental actors in the research designed by one actor – or is there an interest in multiple knowledges, and transformative potential? ▶ Agree key research parameters. How is the research question developed, what does good research mean? What does an ethical process look like? Who ‘owns’ the research data and decides whether and how it can be used in the future? ▶ Skills development and capacity strengthening. Each partner should be clear about what they are investing and how they are benefiting. The research process itself could enable learning; taking this approach can create more opportunities for alternative research practice and encourage a more adaptive approach to research design.
<p>Research communication, access, uptake, adaptation and use</p>	<p>Sharing findings in ways that are accessible and appropriate to different audiences will shape research uptake, use and impact.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▶ Deciding formats and authors. Recognise the skills you already have, and the fact that there is a trade-off between skills development (learning to write for different audiences) and impact (ensuring the output is timely and well received).



Research communication, access, uptake, adaptation and use	<ul style="list-style-type: none">▶ Decide on messaging. Agree how messages are selected and represented, outputs are funded, and audiences are prioritised; whose names are included on outputs; and who has intellectual property rights.▶ Accessing data. UK research council funding brings with it certain expectations about data management, but how accessible will data be for all research partners, and what formats would make it most accessible?▶ Creating spaces and dialogue. Good research uptake strategies include stakeholder mapping at the start of the research process and ongoing engagement activities. Communication strategies should include the countries where the research was located and target the relevant development actors.▶ Intellectual property agreements. There are potential tensions around intellectual property which impact on who can communicate the research when, and future research.
Beyond the research	<p>Research partnerships are shaped by assumptions which can be influenced by practice:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">▶ Influencing future partnerships. Each partnership will learn to negotiate the specific dynamics and challenges it contends with. How can this learning be shared with funders and other future partners?▶ Influencing research. Knowledge produced in different ways can lead to different understandings and perspectives – both for the specific research area, and more generally. What are the right channels to share this learning and inform future practice?▶ Collaborating into the future. Responding quickly when research calls emerge is one of the key challenges in funded partnerships. How can one practical experience enable ongoing and deeper collaboration, and what needs to be discussed, agreed and acted on to enable this to happen? (Listen to Jude Fransman discussing some of these questions in the online case study.)

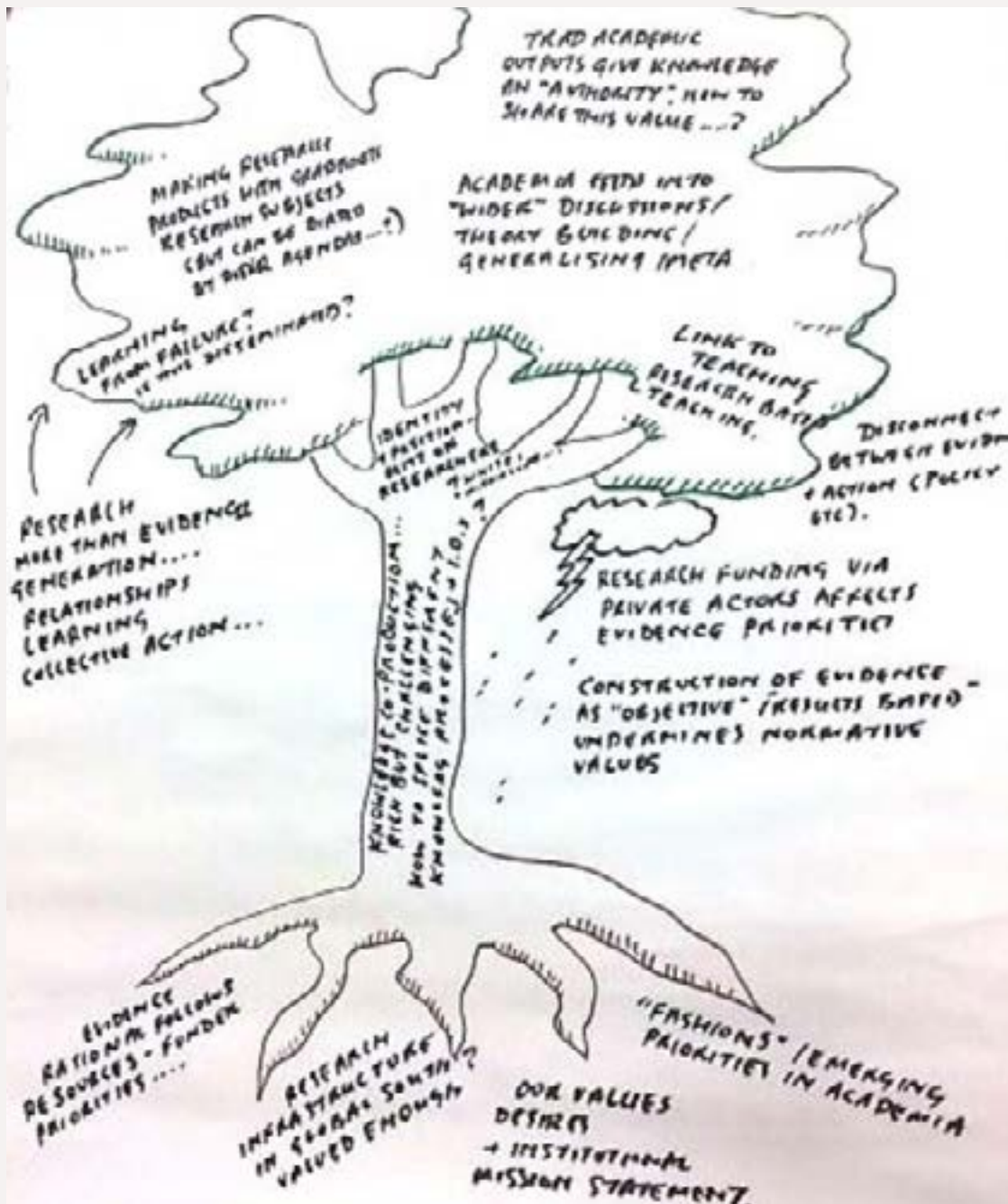


Two tools to support reflection

Tool 1: Embracing multiple knowledges - research trees

What

This exercise uses the metaphor of a tree to enable academics to identify their assumptions about research (and evidence used in and generated by research).





Why

Assumptions about research and evidence have an influence on why and how different actors enter into research partnerships, what knowledge is valued, who plays which roles and how evidence is generated. Through making assumptions visible, academics can explore motivations and actions in research partnerships, and what fair and equitable partnership might mean in practice.

How

Think about a tree – with roots, trunk, branches and fruit. A healthy tree needs strong roots, a sturdy trunk and a nourishing environment. Thinking about your research as a tree, ask what types of input will enable it to grow well and bear fruit, and what environmental threats might be present.

Developing the roots

Identify all the necessary elements which will help your research tree grow – this could include specific skills and experience, relationships, or different types of knowledge. Label your roots with all these different elements.

Trunk

Now think about the trunk of the tree. What principles do you need to develop that will enable your roots to create the outcomes you are hoping for in the research? This could include principles about how you will work with partners, research ethics or what criteria you will use to judge the quality of evidence. The trunk will shape and support your research process.

Branches and fruit

The branches refer to research activity – the actual research you are planning, which could include a range of approaches and methods. Finally, label the fruits which are the outputs of these different research activities – you could include different types of output, as well as different intended uses or audiences.

As mentioned above, a tree exists in an environment – what will be needed to help your tree grow, and what might threaten its healthy existence? This could include specific inputs, such as funding for travel, or more general environmental factors, such as concepts of what good research and research outputs look like.

Further discussion

In discussing your tree, you might like to consider:

- ▶ Where do we have influence in this picture; which aspects of the research process can we control or influence, and which do we just need to be aware of?

- ▶ What specific skills, knowledge and expertise are we bringing into the partnership – and what do we need to look for in others?
- ▶ What assumptions do we have about what good research looks like? Are these shared by other actors – what might they challenge?
- ▶ What areas of flexibility are there in how our tree grows? What are we open to changing, and what might threaten the whole nature of the research project?

Tool 2: Understanding impact - the 'Impact USB'

What

This exercise uses the idea of a USB data stick (and its limited capacity) to focus attention on what types of impact to prioritise in a research call.

Why

There are many ways of understanding what impact is and how it is achieved; partners will have different impact needs. This exercise enables academics to think about the different impacts their research partnership could contribute to. It is also a useful exercise to do in partnership with others, to surface different priorities and understanding of impact.

How

Start by brainstorming all the different types of impact you would like the partnership to have. This could include: original contribution to knowledge, capacity development of those involved, impact on a specific development policy or practice, economic growth or impact on personal career and reputation.





Using the metaphor of a USB data stick with limited capacity, how are you going to invest in each of these types of impacts. What will you prioritise and which impacts might be beyond reach of this research partnership?

For example, if your USB data stick has 16GB of storage, how would you allocate this across your different types of impact? What does this mean in terms of financial and human resources? What other implications does this have for how you plan and develop your research partnership, and what you might look for in other partners?

Further discussion

If you wanted to take the metaphor further you could start thinking about the types of outputs and activities that would be needed to support your impact ambitions. This could include peer reviewed articles, posters, roundtables, websites or community engagement events. What ‘data storage’ do each of these activities need and how will you allocate resources to them?

You could also consider who will be involved in creating this impact, and what they might need to enable it to happen; and how you might create more space on your USB data stick to include different types of activity.



Annotated resource guide


There are many materials that have been produced specifically to support academic–practitioner research partnerships. Some of these are specifically focused on partnerships for research in international development, while others are focused on different sectors but have relevant insights. Many function as ‘how to’ guides, supporting effective partnerships. However, few of these engage with questions of power and politics, and the nature of evidence, or with the wider research funding environment in which those research partnerships are situated; while fewer still explore partnerships involving academics based in either North or South. The resources below are very useful in supporting the specific dynamics and process of partnership.

Rethinking Research Partnerships (Christian Aid and Open University, 2017)

This toolkit and guide supports academics and NGOs to critically engage with the power and politics of research partnerships. The guide emerged from a seminar series funded by the Economic and Social Research Council which brought together UK-based academics and INGO staff to share, reflect on and analyse their research partnership experiences. The guide introduces the interaction between the politics of evidence and the dynamics of participation within partnerships. Following a standard research partnership cycle, the guide introduces and gives points for discussion about different aspects of the research partnership. It uses case studies and participatory tools to encourage critical discussion and dialogue, and is aimed at supporting academics and NGOs to develop more fair and equitable partnerships in practice.

Audience: The key audience is UK-based academics and UK-based staff of international NGOs. However, it is being adapted in practice by other audiences, and it was deliberately designed to inspire the adaptation and evolution of the resources.

Most useful: The fact that this guide evolved from the real-life experiences of UK-based academics suggests that many of the case studies will resonate with those working in the UK higher education sector. It links a practical approach with an emphasis on critical thinking and discussion which should appeal to UK-based academics. It is comprehensive, offering participatory tools across the research cycle, from analysing context, establishing and maintaining



partnerships, to designing, implementing and communicating research, and thinking beyond the partnership. It is unique in explicitly exploring power dynamics and how current assumptions in the UK context shape both the potential for roles and participation in partnership, and the nature and understanding of what makes good evidence and what counts as knowledge.

Where to find it: <https://rethinkingresearchpartnerships.com/>


Guide to Constructing Effective Partnerships (Elrha, 2012)

Elrha is a UK-based collaborative network which actively brokers, fosters and mentors collaboration between researchers and practitioners focusing on humanitarian issues. The guide aims to support collaboration between humanitarian and academic organisations, and was developed based on the experiences and lessons learned by people in both communities. It offers practical advice, pragmatic tips and case studies with learning points. The guide is intended to encourage humanitarian organisations to strengthen their attention to evidence, arguing for more systematic and applied research; and for these agencies and academics to become more skilled at working in partnership. Although the guide is very practical and useful, and well put together, it does not engage with wider questions on the politics of evidence, or with how context impacts on the potential for research partnerships.

Audience: The guide is aimed at those involved in academic-humanitarian collaborations, based on the recognition that they face specific challenges – around timelines, ethical codes and how the practice of each community is assessed.

Most useful: The guide is very practical and easy to navigate and use. It takes a step-by-step approach, offering pragmatic tips and case studies with learning points. It recognises the different cultures, timescales, priorities and institutional demands of each sector and uses real-world examples to explore challenges and suggest alternatives. While the focus is on the humanitarian sector, the step-by-step guide has more generic partnership applications. The six case studies show very different types of collaboration between diverse actors and are useful in understanding different structures, approaches and lessons learnt. This includes good detail on practical problem solving; and is complemented by a ‘learning chapter’ which offers reflections on key themes – with advice and signposts to further resources which can help others respond practically to these common challenges. Alongside the resource, Elhra also offer a research matching service, and their website hosts various partnership strengthening workshops.

Where to find it: <http://www.elrha.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/01/effective-partnerships-report.pdf> (it is also available as an online guide <http://www.elrha.org/ep/the-online-guide-for-effective-partnerships/background/>)



A Guide to Transboundary Research Partnerships (Swiss Commission for Research Partnerships with Developing Countries (KFPE), updated 2014)

This very useful guide was produced by KFPE and funded by the Swiss Academy of Sciences. It engages with the high-level principles which can enable collaborative research, along with practical tools which support good partnership working to happen. It offers 11 principles which enable “a continuous process of sound knowledge generation, building mutual trust, mutual learning and shared ownership” and poses seven key questions to consider in operationalising the principles. It is clear and concise, and well laid out – easy to navigate and read. It acknowledges that there are a range of different types of research in partnership, which require different types of interaction, communication and mutuality. The guide is accompanied by a series of 11 short animated videos on a dedicated YouTube channel which explain and promote the principles; they are also seeking further testimonials and insights from practice.

Where to find it: <https://11principles.org/>

How to Partner for Development Research (RDIN, 2017)

Research for Development Impact Network (RDIN) is an Australia-based network of practitioners, researchers and evaluators working in international development. The guide is a practical resource for Australia-based researchers and international development organisations. It is clearly laid out and well structured, broken down into manageable sections that blend together prose with simple diagrams and tables. The guide provides a step-by-step walk through of the key stages of partnership development, highlighting challenges and offering hints and tools to support equitable partnership; it distils learning from across the sector in Australia to identify features of good partnership that maximise the potential for quality research and contribute to development outcomes. It engages with questions like ‘what is partnership?’ and talks about the continuum from transactional to transformative partnership. Although it does not explore the interaction between partnership and the politics of evidence, it does give practical advice about how to engage with politics, institutional constraints, and values and principles in partnership. It also includes case studies of academic-NGO research partnerships.

Where to find it: <https://rdinetwork.org.au/resources/partnerships-in-practice/>



Rethinking Research Collaborative

About the collaborative

The Rethinking Research Collaborative is an informal international network of organisations – academics, civil society organisations, international non-governmental organisations and research support providers – who are committed to working together to encourage more inclusive responsive collaborations to produce useful and accessible international development research. It first came together to understand and develop principles and practice to support fair and equitable partnerships in response to global development challenges. It is planning a series of initiatives to encourage greater diversity of participation and leadership in international development research.

About these materials

These materials – an introduction, six modules and a set of case studies – provide insights and ideas to support research stakeholders to translate eight principles we have identified for fair and equitable research partnerships into practice. They were written by staff of Christian Aid's Centre of Excellence for Research, Evidence and Learning, and bring together original ideas with research carried out by the Rethinking Research Collaborative. They were funded by a grant from UK Research and Innovation (NS/A000075/1).

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Collaborative partners

