

# EFFECTIVE PARTNERSHIP APPROACHES IN INTERNATIONAL RESEARCH

## Introduction

The global development community has long acknowledged the importance of scientific research in tackling the world's most pressing challenges. In recent years, increased attention and investment has been placed on establishing and sustaining effective research partnerships for global development research. USAID, for example, currently utilizes multiple partnership models intended to increase the relevance and use of global development research, such as individual-to-individual partnerships, institution-to-institution partnerships, consortiums, and research networks.

As international donors continue to invest in research partnerships, it is important to assess how partnerships can be designed to catalyze and sustain high quality research that informs policy and practice and improves lives. This evidence brief aims to provide funders of international research with evidence-based strategies for designing effective partnerships, organized into four key focus areas:

1. Assessing the strengths and weaknesses of different partnership models.
2. Enabling conditions for successful research partnerships.
3. Designing partnerships for increased innovation output.
4. Designing partnerships for increased research uptake among policymakers and practitioners.

## Partnership Models

- Unilateral
- Multilateral - Individual-to-individual

Findings, gaps, conclusions, and recommendations across these four themes were developed by reviewing and synthesizing literature on research partnerships found in the [Research for Development Evidence Gap Map \(EGM\)](#), constructed as a partnership between USAID's Innovation, Technology, and Research (ITR) Hub and the Pulte Institute for Global Development at the University of Notre Dame. The research team extracted evidence from the EGM related to partnership models in low- and middle-income countries in the context of development interventions, utilizing key search terms related to policy impact and innovation output to select literature pertinent to the objectives of this brief. While partnerships that include institutions or researchers from both the Global North and Global South were not the sole focus of this analysis, many of the findings and recommendations focus on how North-South research collaborations can be more inclusive, equitable, and successful.

The review found an abundance of literature documenting the research outputs of funded research partnerships, but a dearth of evidence related to research utilization and impact. Further, there is an absence of studies conducting comparative analyses across partnership types, limiting the team's ability to endorse one partnership model over another. However, the evidence base provides useful information related to enabling conditions for transformative and equitable global development research that can be applied across partnership models.

## Partnership Mechanisms

- Informal Agreement
- Direct Funding, Cost Share, or In-Kind Resource Provision
- Contractual Agreement
- Memoranda of Understanding

<sup>1</sup>Eighty-nine documents were reviewed from the EGM for this brief, including 31 performance evaluation reports, 28 peer-reviewed articles, 8 industry publications, and 7 bi-lateral donor documents. The remaining documents were impact evaluations, white papers, case studies, and meta-analyses. Of these, 56 contained citable evidence for the purposes of this brief.

<sup>2</sup>This brief uses the North-South dichotomy to denote collaborative efforts between the resource-rich North and the resource-poor South.

## Strengths and Weaknesses of Different Partnership Models

International research partnerships can be reliable mechanisms to bring researchers, donors, and policymakers together to face common development problems and develop research agendas to address them.

### FINDINGS

In seeking to improve research outcomes, research institutions and researchers in the Global South need technology, funding, increased research capacity, and supportive environments for conducting quality research, all of which can be made possible through multi-institutional partnerships (1; 2). The need for multilateral research partnerships emerges precisely because **unilateral approaches providing direct funding to Northern or Southern researchers around development topics have not generated enough evidence of research impact in the Global South due to constraining factors in the research ecosystem** (1; 3; 4).

The literature describes **four broad types of multilateral research partnership models: individual-to-individual partnerships, institution-to-institution partnerships, consortiums, and research networks** (5; 6; 7). Within these models, several mechanisms for establishing partnerships also exist.

**Individual-to-individual partnerships** can take the form of formal, contractual agreements or informal research arrangements between one or more individual researchers and/or one or more practitioners or policymakers. While these types of partnerships can provide mutual incentives and benefits for the individuals involved and can be relatively quick and simple to organize, evidence shows they do not necessarily help build capacity at researchers' home institutions, nor are they necessarily effective at scaling innovations achieved through research (see, for example, 8; 9).

**Institution-to-institution partnerships generally entail a formal, contractual relationship between one or more institutions.** They can take the form of memoranda of understanding (MOUs) or "umbrella agreements", or more direct contractual agreements around a specific project (10; 11). Such partnerships tend to be longer-lasting and more substantive than individual-to-individual partnerships, with added advantages of resource, data, capacity, and technology sharing between the institutions (12; 13; 14; 15; 16; 17; 18). One disadvantage to this partnership approach is a longer and much more involved process in formalizing them, often with strong legal implications. Moreover, terms tend to favor the stronger institution, leaving less-developed institutions at risk of some form of exploitation and stagnation (10; 19).

Many donors, including USAID, have been encouraging a **consortium partnership approach to promote research in Global South countries that links public and private sectors to achieve research outcomes.**

This approach has often been effective in solving development problems (2; 20; 21; 22). Research outputs are shared among stakeholders and in some cases successfully scaled up to solve country-specific development problems (7; 22).

North-South institution-to-institution and consortium partnerships have often been formed that allow Northern institutions to provide financial, technical, and technological support to Southern institutions to carry out shared research agendas (23). The risk of this approach is that the **objectives of the partnership may be dominated by one institution, historically the institution from the Global North** (5; 16; 24; 25; 26; 27), and it does not always adequately incentivize individual researchers within those institutions to enable them to carry out the research questions.

**Evidence of the effectiveness of national, regional, or global research networks is mixed.** Research and evaluations found some evidence of knowledge and innovation exchange between network members, as well as some impact on setting national priorities (28; 29; 30; 31; 32). Other evaluations raised concerns about low researcher and policymaker engagement, lack of motivation, poor sustainability, and lack of evidence of network impact on policy and development outcomes (1; 17; 31; 32; 33). Key recommendations included providing adequate incentivization for active participation in networks, including funding and capacity building opportunities, as well as investing more in building the evidence base. In addition, housing a research network within a strong higher education institution rather than within a governmental entity may be a way to increase a network's effectiveness (31; 34).



AidData Summer Fellow Madeline Clark works with Center for Environmental and Agricultural Policy Research, Extension, and Development (CEAPRED) staff in Kathmandu, Nepal to collect field data on CEAPRED projects. Photo: Alena Stern

## GAPS

**Nature of the Evidence:** There is a scarcity of evidence designed to explicitly compare different partnership types. Most documents in the EGM assess the productivity of institution-to-institution or consortium-based collaborations rather than individual-level collaborations or unilateral research projects. While the various models of multilateral partnership and unilateral approaches have advantages and disadvantages, it was not possible to fully compare the effectiveness of the models because the evidence is ill-structured to support such an analysis.

**Local Context:** While many points of evidence signal both advantages and disadvantages of various partnership models, a significant number also underscore the importance of a supportive context—*independent of model*—for research and research partnerships to understand local research needs, opportunities, and constraints inherent to the local research ecosystem, and to strengthen the capacity and ecosystem needed for quality research in a globalized world (22). Elements of a supportive context include research and grant administration capacity, investment in building individual research capacity, institutional leadership support for and investment in research, connectivity infrastructure, access to existing literature, equity and inclusion, and adequate equipment (7; 8; 17; 35; 36).

**Sustainability:** Demonstrating the success of a partnership model at the time of an evaluation does not guarantee the partnership will be successful in the long run. Sustainability has proven to be an issue in international research cooperation (31; 33; 37).

**Geographic Coverage:** Evidence of partnership models and approaches for global development work in the EGM is

largely focused on certain geographic clusters—most notably Southeast Asia, East Africa, and West Africa. The EGM contained less evidence on similar partnerships outside of these regions.

## CONCLUSIONS

- There is a significant body of evidence on the effectiveness of multilateral partnerships in achieving research outcomes, such as improved research capacity, expanded access to technical and financial resources, improved research infrastructure and equipment, increased participation of women in research, and ultimately the development of innovations to solve problems.
- Of at least equal, if not greater, importance as partnership type in ensuring quality research implementation and uptake is understanding the local research ecosystem and providing support in shaping a favorable context. This factor is related to but independent of partnership type.
- Perhaps the most significant challenges associated with multilateral partnerships surround the issues of ownership and relevance of research agendas as they pertain to local actors. The USAID/Kosovo transformational leadership project evaluation found that the lack of university ownership of the project gave rise to sustainability concerns among stakeholders, especially since the stakeholders have little say on project objectives and outputs (38). Similar concerns were raised in the Danish government funded Building Stronger Universities (BSU) project (1).

## RECOMMENDATIONS

### Recommendation #1: Invest in research deliberately designed to compare partnership models in various contexts

While sufficient evidence exists to understand the promise of multilateral partnership models, the ability to draw strong causal conclusions between various types of partnership models remains limited due to the nature of the evidence. Donors can support research around various models of collaborative research in more contexts and then draw lessons learned from these efforts to contribute to the evidence base.

### Recommendation #2: Understand and help alleviate the constraints of the local research ecosystem

When exploring multilateral partnerships, it is important to understand the constraints of the local research ecosystem, including support systems and local politics. Multilateral partnerships alone are unlikely to contribute to research outcomes that can help address a development issue unless the partnership project explicitly addresses such ecosystem constraints. This is also important for the sustainability of such an initiative.

### Recommendation #3: Prioritize local ownership of research agendas

One significant challenge to multilateral partnerships described in the literature, regardless of partnership type, is the imbalance that such partnerships can create in decision-making and ownership between Northern and Southern researchers and institutions. Donors can take additional steps to ensure research collaborations are contributing to research agendas promoted by local researchers and based on local developmental needs, while also ensuring adequate incentives for Northern researchers to participate and relate research to donor programming priorities.

<sup>3</sup>Recent Examples include the European Commission and National Institutes of Health's International Rare Diseases Research Consortium, the European Union's CIRCASA Project, International Rare Diseases Research Consortium, the World Food Programme's Global Research Consortium for School Health and Nutrition, and the Red Cross and Red Crescent Research Consortium (RC3).

## Enabling Conditions for Successful Research Partnership

In global development research partnerships, the literature reveals certain characteristics of equitable and sustainable research collaborations that can be applied across partnership modalities.

### FINDINGS

**Research partnerships are overly driven by Northern research priorities.** Research partnerships funded by Northern donors can sideline and undermine local and long-term research agendas and devalue domestic research (5; 16; 25; 26; 27). Funded research driven by Northern priorities can result in semi-forced partnerships in which Southern researchers are less invested than if they had helped shape the research questions (7; 22; 27; 38; 39; 40).

**Donor contracting mechanisms can drive inequities between North and South researchers and institutions.** In donor-funded research partnerships, the prime implementer has control of the funding, final decision-making authority, more frequent opportunities to interact with, inform, and influence the donor, and earlier access to key information. Commonly, donor contracting mechanisms delay the execution of sub-contracts, creating months-long periods during the initial research design phase of programs when the prime implementer is the only funded organization working on the program. Based on these factors, funded research can be transformational for prime implementers, increasing their capacity, influence, and reputation while maintaining the status quo for subcontractors. Since Northern institutions are typically much better positioned to be prime implementers due to their existing capacity to respond to donor solicitations and manage donor funds, North-South partnerships risk benefiting Northern institutions more than Southern institutions (17; 23; 27; 36; 40).

**Knowledge transfer and capacity exchange are valuable components of research partnerships, but must be supplemented with investments in infrastructure and support systems within Southern institutions (7; 35).** While gaps may exist in research capacity at certain Southern institutions, these institutions are more commonly held back by inadequate resources for equipment and institutional support. Many successful partnership projects have invested in upgrading laboratory equipment or other technologies at Southern institutions (41; 42).

**Academic incentives are a key barrier for engaging in global development research for researchers in the Global North and Global South.** University faculty at Northern and Southern institutions prioritize their academic engagements based on the incentive structures of their institutions (8; 25). Many faculty at Southern institutions consider teaching their primary role, with research engagements only possible if conducted outside their full-time work hours. For faculty at Northern institutions, incentives rarely exist for policy-oriented research (43).



U.S. and Indonesian students working together in the IBRC genetics lab. Photo: Elizabeth J. Sbrocco

### GAPS

**Partnership Sustainability:** The current body of literature places importance on sustainability issues in research partnerships, but there is minimal evidence of proven strategies for sustaining partnerships after project funding ends. Some recent work has emerged discussing such sustainability (see 34; 44), yet more research is needed on how private sector and host government engagement can create future funding streams, as well as how programs can ensure long-term upkeep of research equipment and infrastructure.

### CONCLUSIONS

- Well-intended efforts to catalyze North-South partnerships can advance Northern institutions while not having the same positive impact on Southern institutions if the Northern institutions are the direct recipients of donor funding.
- Southern institutions are commonly boxed out of opportunities to set research agendas and design programs. When Southern institutions are included in research consortia as subcontractors, their primary contributions tend to be data collection and analysis.
- Capacity strengthening components of research partnerships are too often driven by Northern priorities and contexts and do not address key needs of Southern institutions.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

### Recommendation #1:

**Fund Global Southern institutions to lead research agenda setting and study design**

In global development research, the research agenda is typically set by the funding organization and the research design is typically developed by the prime contractor, most commonly an institution from the Global North. Therefore, by the time partnerships are formed with research institutions from the Global South, the research agenda and design are commonly already finalized, limiting the roles of local institutions to data collection and analysis.

### Recommendation #2:

**In North-South partnership programs with intended capacity exchange components, require the prime implementer to originate from the Global South**

To decrease inequities between Northern and Southern research institutions, Southern institutions need to be allowed to much more frequently lead North-South research consortia. When Southern institutions receive prime awards, they have more control over funding, more opportunities to inform and influence funding agencies, and more control over programming. When the research partnership has a capacity exchange component, making a Southern institution the prime implementer helps ensure capacity strengthening activities are driven by demand.

### Recommendation #3:

**Invest in improvements to infrastructure, equipment, and institutional support at Southern institutions.**

Providing funding for research equipment and institutional support has been shown to increase research quality, and also serves as a key incentive for researchers at Southern institutions.

### Recommendation #4:

**Develop a framework for the sustainability of partnership projects and measure long-term impact.**

The sustainability of collaboration and continuation of research activities after funding ends is a noticeable challenge for international collaboration. More research is needed on how to sustain research partnerships after project funding ends. Donors must invest in long-term impact evaluations of partnership projects to assess sustainability and capture project benefits that take longer to be achieved.

## Designing Partnerships for Increased Innovation Output

USAID defines innovation output as products, processes, tools, and approaches that have the potential to achieve significant improvements in the lives of people. This section aims to provide strategies for designing research partnerships when innovation is a stated partnership objective. The majority of findings in this section come from evidence related to livelihoods and agriculture interventions.

## FINDINGS

**Research initiatives that produce impactful innovations consistently partner with national and local governments and with the private sector (9; 21; 22; 36; 45; 46; 47).** Public-private partnerships play a critical role in the dissemination and adoption of new innovations (21; 22; 48). Initiatives that foster long-term partnerships with national governments also benefit from being able to access and use nationally representative data (45).

**Global development innovations are more impactful and sustainable when intended end users are consulted throughout the research process (9; 16; 26; 33; 48; 49).** Empowering end users to inform the research process increases the likelihood that innovations are responsive to on the ground needs and that end users have the interest and skills necessary to utilize the innovation long term.

**Highly relevant and useful innovations can have limited impact if their development and rollout is not accompanied by effective capacity strengthening.** Research partnerships that produced successful innovations dedicated substantial attention and effort to providing technical training to stakeholders at various levels. (1; 39; 46; 47; 48).

**Research partnerships are more likely to produce impactful innovations when operating with a clear and agreed upon definition of innovation (2; 9).** When innovation is used as a loose term in some partnership projects, it does not actually represent a meaningful target, as any output the project generates is considered innovation.

## GAPS

**Flow of economic benefit of innovation investments in the Global South.** Much of the evidence base failed to examine what entities economically benefited in the long term from development investments in innovation. However, one program evaluation highlighted that even though funding came largely from aid agencies to promote economic development in the Global South, nearly 90 percent of economic returns from such innovations were re-invested directly back into Northern academic institutions, contractors, and firms (50). Additional attention should be paid in the evidence base to tracking the economic benefit of innovation and ensuring it is equitable to the Global South.

## CONCLUSIONS

- Government agencies, private sector actors, and end users are all critical stakeholders in innovation development and need to be included and treated as core partners from the beginning of the research cycle.
- Research partnerships intended to develop innovations need to be built with the final goal in mind. Partnership composition must include partners well positioned to generate and sustain innovation demand and use.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

**Recommendation #1:**  
**Research partnerships should have a clear and measurable definition of innovation when innovation output is a stated partnership objective.**

In the literature, partnership projects use the word “innovation” very loosely, which can create the scenario where any project output is considered an innovation. Project-level definitions of innovation are important so that project implementers have meaningful targets and project evaluations can measure success.

**Recommendation #2:**  
**Keep the scale of research initiatives at the national level or smaller to incentivize government and private sector participation and buy-in.**

Innovations produced through international research partnerships are more likely to be adopted when local governments and private sector actors are key contributors throughout. Research partnerships should strive to include national and local government agencies and key private sector actors in research consortia. Catalyzing interest and sustaining engagement from these key groups is more likely when innovation targets local needs.



American and Indonesian researchers work together at the Medan Provincial food and drug agency. The USAID PEER-Health is a global partnership that connects USAID-funded scientists with researchers funded by the National Institute of Health (NIH) in the United States. In Indonesia, the grants will support Indonesian scientists working on newborn survival, tuberculosis, emerging pandemic diseases and drug quality.

Photo: USAID/Kendra Chittenden

**Recommendation #3:**  
**Include end users throughout the research process.**

Innovations must be responsive to end user needs and are more sustainable when end user buy-in is achieved early in the process. Engaging end users early and consistently allows researchers to avoid potential pitfalls in the innovation design.

**Recommendation #4:**  
**Build partnerships that can effectively transition from the research phase to the dissemination phase.**

Successfully introducing innovations requires teams to transition from research and development activities to activities that focus on innovation roll out and sustained uptake. The partners responsible for research and development are currently not commonly well incentivized to take on dissemination and adoption tasks such as information sharing, technical training, and end user accompaniment. Partnership models should account for the eventual need for sustained on the ground implementation support.

## Designing Partnerships for Increased Research Uptake among Policymakers and Practitioners

Research utilization and translation have become key priorities for the global development community, as far too often research either does not reach end users or does not provide actionable findings for policymakers and practitioners. This section aims to provide strategies for increasing the impact of funded research partnerships on policy and practice.

### FINDINGS

**For academic researchers, incentives to publish commonly outweigh incentives to translate research findings into recommendations for policy and practice (26; 43; 47).** For tenure-track faculty in particular, institutional incentives rarely exist for policy-oriented research.

**Community based participatory research can increase the appropriateness of research questions and the applicability of research results (26; 33; 49; 51; 52).** Treating communities as meaningful partners from the beginning of the research cycle can increase the usefulness of the research and reduce barriers to research uptake.

**When discussing research uptake, local communities are rarely considered research end users.** Strategies for research translation and dissemination typically focus on actors such as government agencies and NGOs, but disseminating findings among local communities can decrease social inequities and transform research into an iterative process that increases impact over time (51; 52).

**Research partnerships are more likely to influence policy and practice when research agendas are co-produced with a variety of local stakeholders, including government agencies, private sector actors, and NGOs (34; 35; 40; 52).** USAID's LASER PULSE program has developed the [Embedded Research Translation](#) approach, a promising practice based on previous learning that frames global development research as a cyclical co-design process between researchers and a wide range of stakeholders.

### GAPS

**Achieving inclusive and equitable community participation:** While the literature stresses the importance of participatory approaches that engage local communities, more research is needed on how to ensure inclusive and equitable participation within the communities engaged. Too often, opportunities designed for gaining community input require individuals to travel to a central meeting location, take time off work, or delay household responsibilities. Because of these barriers, community-based participatory research can often exclude the most vulnerable populations within a community.

**Measuring research impact:** More work is needed on how to measure the impact of research outputs. Strategies exist

for measuring impact of publications by tracking citations, but it remains difficult to link a study or research product to a specific change in policy or practice. One promising approach to filling this gap is the Translational Science Benefits Model that public health and clinical scientists can use to measure the impact of their work in a variety of policy and practice settings (53). Additional approaches to examine research impact beyond traditional metrics use mixed methods, such as surveys, interviews, and Altimetric scores (8; 26; 54).

### CONCLUSIONS

- To effectively engage academic researchers in policy research, donors need to understand university incentive structures and create opportunities for faculty engagement that work within these structures. These opportunities must be specific to the institutions that are involved, as incentive structures can be highly institution- (and even position-) specific.
- Global development research is more relevant and impactful when local communities are engaged throughout the research cycle and consistently treated as end users with whom research results are shared.



PEER Principal Investigator Dr. Huong (center), former U.S. Ambassador Ted Osius and Thailand's former Ambassador to Vietnam Manopchai Vongphakdi.

Photo: Courtesy of Department of State

## RECOMMENDATIONS

### **Recommendation #1:**

#### **Facilitate discussions around academic incentives**

During the partnership negotiation process, donors and other actors can help facilitate a discussion on desired research outputs and results that can adequately incentivize researchers to contribute to policy relevant research. Providing sufficient resources to allow for those incentives to take effect can ensure greater commitment.

### **Recommendation #2:**

#### **Require community engagement as part of the research process**

The evidence shows that community engagement will not necessarily occur as part of the research process. If community engagement is a desired component of the research process, donors should consider making it a requirement, and then providing adequate time, capacity building, and resources to ensure such engagement comes to pass.

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