Partnerships in Practice

The Political Economy of Research Partnerships in International Development in Canada

A Summary of Initial Observations from a Multiple-Case Study

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CCIC is Canada's national coalition of civil society organizations (CSOs) working globally to achieve sustainable human development. Our members represent a broad range of CSOs working in international development and humanitarian assistance — from faith-based and secular groups to labour unions, cooperatives and professional associations. CCIC seeks to end global poverty and to promote social justice and human dignity for all.

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Academic research institutions and civil society organizations (CSOs) across Canada are motivated to collaborate on research partnerships as a way to produce rigorous research, improve practice in the field, and shape evidence-based international development policy. This report explores how to ensure such research partnerships remain fair, equitable, and effective. Building upon previous research emerging from the Next Generation: Collaboration for Development program, we examine the power dynamics of research partnerships, and the political and economic contexts that create both obstacles and opportunities for academic-CSO research partnerships.

Expanding beyond the existing literature on research collaborations that tends to focus on interpersonal relations, this study examines the dynamics that influence research partnerships at the macro level (national and international levels), the meso level (sector level), and the micro level (partnership level). The multi-case study of seven cases of academic-CSO research partnerships in international development across Canada reveals that partners are continually mediating a range of broader contexts that affect how they structure—and make meaning of—their partnership interactions.

Factors that influence partnerships at the macro level relate to how collaborators access federal funding. Partnerships are often designed to synch with the national and international priorities for development, which can alter research priorities. In certain cases, partners deliberately chose not to access federal funding at certain stages in the research partnership, instead opting to leverage private or other sources of funding.

Sectoral influences can also place pressure upon partnerships at the meso level. Issues around time commitment, differences in methodological protocols, and different requirements for knowledge dissemination outputs were cited as disciplinary and institutional challenges to partnerships. Despite these challenges, several CSOs noted the growing importance of partnerships to their position as thought-leaders in their fields as a measure of organizational sustainability.

Across the seven cases, partners exemplified best practices at the micro level to respond to external conditions. Above all, partners emphasized the importance of clear project design based on shared understanding of each other's work and motivations, and clear agreements around roles and responsibilities of partners and institutions. Finally, open and ongoing communication is enhanced by clear leadership roles and governance structures.

INTRODUCTION

The global development sector is facing increasingly complex and multifaceted challenges in Canada and internationally. Collaboration among academic research institutions and civil society organizations (CSOs) can play an important role in improving research, practice and policy in the field. This research can be simultaneously concerned with the elaboration of cutting-edge theoretical insights, while benefitting from tangible outcomes like mobilizing knowledge in practice and policy.

However, the value of such collaborations depends greatly on the degree to which all partners perceive the partnership as being fair, equitable, effective, and impactful. Partners across sectors are expected to transcend their own cultural and institutional preferences to some extent, which can be seen both as an opportunity for enriching one's field, as well as a challenging tension. Disconnecting from sectoral or institutional norms and modes can even be painful and risky at times to an organization's projects or reputation, or an individual's track to promotion. Power dynamics between and among different actors in the political economy of research-based knowledge production can further create opportunities or obstacles for academic-CSO research partnerships.

Canada has several structures that currently finance research partnerships across academic and CSO partners, and that mobilize federal funding either directly through government agencies and crown corporations, or through independent organizations.

While some of the factors related to effective research partnerships have been documented in a Canadian context, little research has been done to identify how partners experience political, social, and economic factors specific to the Canadian political economy of collaborative research-based knowledge production for development. This is one of the gaps in the existing academic literature that the Canadian Council for International Collaboration (CCIC) and the Canadian Association for the Study of International Development (CASID) seek to address in their joint research program Next Generation: Collaboration for Development and through this research.

In this multiple-case study research, we attempt to address the following questions:

- How do political and economic contexts and conditions affect fair, equitable, effective and impactful collaborations in and across micro (partnership/project-based), meso (sectoral/institutional), and macro (country-wide and international) levels in Canadian research partnerships?
- How do power dynamics play into academic-CSO research partnerships in Canada?
- How do power dynamics affect fair, equitable, effective and impactful collaborations with Southern partners?

Levels of analysis of research partnerships

Research collaborations are relational spaces that are not static, but are emergent as they interact with the norms, values, and interests of social and political systems at various levels. A systems analysis approach (Meadows 2008) considers the interrelated influences of structure and agency, allowing us to inquire into the dynamics of power operating in the context of research partnerships at micro, meso, and macro systems in which research collaborations are embedded (Rourke 2005).

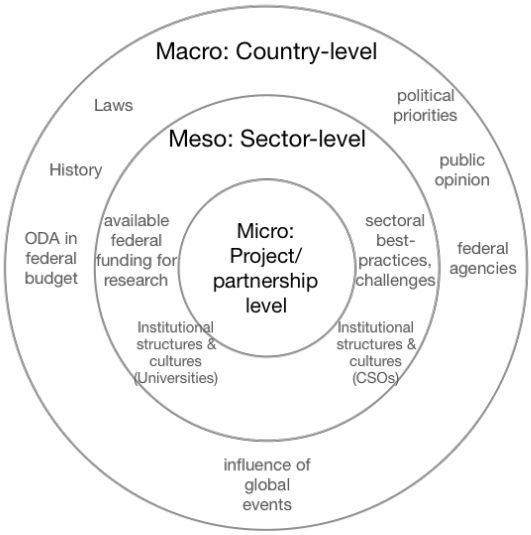


Figure 1: Levels of analysis in the political economy of research partnerships

The diagram in Figure 1 illustrates examples of the dynamics among each level. The **micro** level refers to the project or partnership level, wherein personal biases and assumptions, managerial competence, and the length and nature of relationships are at play.

The **meso** analysis is at the sectoral level, including the distinct structural and cultural domains that partners inhabit in either academic or civil society communities, as well as their shared domains in engaging with the norms and conventions of collaboration in the development sector.

The **macro** analytic level considers broader dynamics of the Canadian political, social and economic landscape, including national development priorities, legal frameworks, current events and social movements, federal institutions, availability of Official Development Assistance, and donors' rules and guidelines. These levels of analysis are not mutually exclusive; these levels of analysis are distinct, yet interact with one another.

KEY FINDINGS FROM SEVEN CASES

We selected **seven research partnerships** from a range of fields, different partnership methods, funding sources, research methodologies, and geographic emphases in Canada and abroad.

Through interviews and focus groups, we invited participants to explore areas of their research collaboration. Case study criteria, participant selection, data collection methods, measures to ensure validity and reliability, protocols for confidentiality and ethics, and data analysis methods are detailed in the sections that follow. Interviews were conducted with informed consent.

The following seven summaries demonstrate some of the different and similar approaches to partnerships structures, governance, funding, and research development across several research partnerships in Canada.

1. A large-scale partnership network for research on justice and international crimes

Research domain: Legal justice and prosecution of international crimes
Academic field: Law and justice
CSO sector: Legal clinics and social justice
Funding source: SSHRC
Partners and governance structure: 24 partners (22 Canadian; 2 INGO) across 12 organizations and institutions

Key take-aways and learning:

- As a large, multi-partner research collaboration, this partnership has the benefit of bringing a large range of expertise, opportunities and experience to the field, including through academic outputs, the effective practice of legal clinics, and promoting public awareness in Canada of international rights and crimes.

- The partnership is able to make a significant impact on the legal sector by driving targeted research programs that are focused enough to show influence and progress, but broad enough to allow many partners to plug in according to their specific areas of interest and expertise.

- Communication across many partners can be a key challenge, and some partners can end up in peripheral roles while others take on the bulk of the responsibility for research activities. An effective governance structure including multiple partners helps to maintain clear lines of communication and keep decision-making moving.

"Motivated by being a thought-leader…the CSO has partnered with like-minded academics to create the foundation of a long-standing research program…"

2. Working to align approaches to research for financing agricultural innovation

Research domain: Financial systems for agricultural innovations
Academic field: Economics
CSO sector: Finance & Agriculture
Funding source: Anonymized
Partners and governance structure: CSO is the project holder, partnering with a Canadian university

Key take-aways and learning:

- This CSO-led partnership enabled research findings about microfinancing for agricultural innovation to be implemented in practice, rather than remaining within academic domains. A rigorous monitoring and evaluation (M&E) design from academic partners helped demonstrate the efficacy of the applied research interventions.

- The partners navigated differing approaches to research design and development activities by understanding the different rationales governing each of their approaches and finding ways to reach consensus to achieve their different aims.

- Taking time to understand the partners' approaches prior to establishing the formal partnership can help future phases and projects to unfold smoothly.

3. Stimulating a research program around literacy in Sub-Saharan Africa

Research domain: African-based literacy research
Academic field: Education
CSO sector: Literacy
Funding source: CSO Core funding
Partners and governance structure: CSO and two Canadian universities; Memorandum of Understanding

Key take-aways and learning:

- Motivated by being a thought-leader in the international literacy field, the CSO has partnered with like-minded academics to create the foundation of a long-standing research program under their oversight.

- The Executive Director of the CSO has been crucial for prioritizing the research program within the CSO, for securing internal funding for research, and for providing a vision for the evolution of the research program into future stages.

- Senior academics have participated in this research primarily out of shared interest and like-minded commitments in the fields of literacy and education, despite few institutional incentives to be involved.

4. Generating new knowledge for poverty eradication and social innovation

Research domain: Sustainable livelihoods & income generation
Academic field:
CSO sector:
Funding source: Two projects with multiple funding sources (e.g. SSHRC, GAC)
2016-2018
Partners and governance structure: Executive director's direct involvement with CSO partners

Key take-aways and learning:

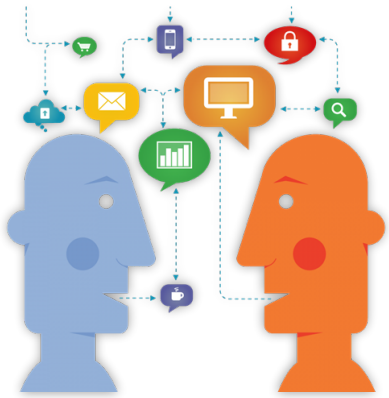
- The executive director of the university's lab has had direct involvement in initiating and sustaining the research project.
- The CSO identify research questions that would help to improve their programming, and that fits with the university lab's requirement of generating "new knowledge."
- The staff turn-over and transition within the CSO present challenges with retaining institutional memory and commitment to the research.
- Creating strong agreements between the lab and the organization has ensured project continuity.

5. Researching effective international volunteer practices for Canadian undergraduate students

Research domain: International volunteering in development
Academic field: International development
CSO sector: International volunteering
Funding source: SSHRC; Employment and Social Development Canada
Partners and governance structure: Main partnership between one university and one CSO, with involvement of several other organizations at various points

Key take-aways and learning:

- International volunteering has received a great deal of academic criticism in recent years. This partnership helps to explore the strengths and weaknesses of volunteering with more nuance and with greater rigour with the help of academic researchers.
- While this research is mostly academic-led, participation of CSOs is enabled both through formal means (e.g. bridge funding, participatory design, co-presenting at conferences), and informal means (regular visits and communication).



6. Applying food security indicators for effective development interventions

Research domain: Food security
Academic field: Food security & Nutrition
CSO sector: Poverty reduction
Funding source: GAC
Partners and governance structure: Research partnership between CSO and university

Key take-aways and learning:

- Academic partners benefited from the research partnership by being able to test out indicators and theoretical frameworks in real-world contexts to support global learning about food security assessment.
- CSO partners benefitted by bolstering the M&E activities and more rigorously demonstrating the impact of their work.
- Including both partners in the design stage of the research component of a development project can help optimize resources allocated to research activities for all partners.
- Partners learned that capacity building is an important outcome of research partnerships and activities.

7. Collaboration for climate change and sustainable development with Indigenous communities

Research domain: Climate change impacts in Indigenous communities
Academic field: Indigenous studies
CSO sector: Sustainability & social justice
Funding source: Not funded
Partners and governance structure: Research partnership between CSO and university

Key take-aways and learning:

- Indigenous academic and CSO partners draw on networks of communities to create unique and innovative participatory and community-based approaches to research and knowledge dissemination.
- Access to funding can present a challenge for research projects that do not easily fit within mainstream definitions of research and impact. Often funding does not facilitate the kinds of participatory and community-based approaches that this partnership involves.
- While new funding windows oriented to the possibilities of Indigenous research are opening, funders have yet to connect these emerging opportunities with a new range of partners.

> "...Capacity building is an important outcome of research partnerships... "

CROSS-CASE FINDINGS

Power dynamics in research partnerships are embedded in interconnected systems. Partners are continually mediating a range of environments at the micro, meso, and macro levels that influence how they interact in research partnerships.

MACRO LEVEL

Key findings at the national and international level

- Partnerships and research projects are designed, in part, to reflect national and international development priorities in order to access federal funding.
- Research partnerships increasingly rationalize and adjust research in response to international development agendas (e.g. UN's Sustainable Development Goals). However, Canadian research partnerships also contribute to these agendas.
- The sectoral and disciplinary contexts in which partners engage, in outside of the research partnership, influence the way that participants interacted with the partnership.

MESO LEVEL

Key findings at the sectoral, disciplinary, and institutional level

Academic sector:

- There is a lack of institutional incentives to participate in endeavours that may not result in primarily academic outcomes.
- Academics face pressures from their institutions to publish in top-tier journals, which are often not easily accessible to CSOs or Southern partners.
- The pressure to conform to strict methodological protocols can cause some tension with CSOs.
- Senior and tenured faculty with substantial autonomy in their institutions were overrepresented in this study; more junior faculty emphasized career risks when results do not contribute towards their tenure portfolio.
- There are requirements to engage Canadian graduate students on research partnership projects, thereby potentially bypassing a Southern scholar who may be better positioned or qualified for the role.

MESO LEVEL

Key findings at the sectoral, disciplinary, and institutional level

CSO sector:

- There is a lack of time, lack of funding, and lack of dedicated human resources to dedicate towards research partnerships.
- Staff turnover at the program and field levels can be common, affecting the institutional memory of research projects.
- The commitment of higher-level organization members (e.g. executive directors, CEOs) is key for research partnerships to thrive.
- The needs of CSOs can differ from those of academics in terms of knowledge-dissemination (e.g. monitoring and evaluation needs, impact and proof of concept studies, curricular materials, and promotional materials).
- CSOs identified the growing importance of positioning themselves as thought-leaders in their fields.

MICRO LEVEL

Key findings for project and partnership structures, processes and relationships

- Partners exemplified many best practices for what can be done in their interpersonal relationships, governance structures, and decision-making processes while responding to external conditions.
- Partners emphasized the importance of clear project design based on shared understanding of each other's work and motivations, in addition to clear agreements around roles and responsibilities of partners and institutions.

RECOMMENDATIONS

For academic institutions:

Redefine incentive structures to help catalyze a whole range of new partnerships that will generate real returns and value to the institution. Research partnerships with CSOs bring value to the quality and relevance of academic research. The examples in this report highlight how such partnerships help foster new networks and connections, offer real-time sources of evidence and data, help generate both peer reviewed articles and grey literature, enhance the focus and impact of programs on the ground, and help position both entities as thought leaders in the field.

It is important to find ways to recognize and reward research partnerships and the value that they can bring to research institutions. While tenured professors have much more freedom to explore such partnerships when areas of interest overlap, many institutions' faculty evaluation structures make it difficult for non-tenured faculty to engage in partnerships given both the pressures to publish and be promoted. Performance evaluations should include measures that also value and credit partnerships and publications with CSO practitioners – even if they are not valued as highly as peer-reviewed articles.

For CSOs:

Partner with academic institutions; it will generate more than a new rigour to your work. Research partnerships bring value to the quality of development projects beyond strengthening the methodological rigour of organizational M&E practices. They create opportunities to build and strengthen capacity, knowledge and practice of organizational staff and their Southern partners. They help foster new and interesting partnerships and collaborations, and expose practitioners to different networks that can help strengthen the rigour of their programs. And they help position the CSO as a thought-leader in their field.

To make the most, integrate research and research partnerships into your organizational DNA. Having dedicated budget lines, dedicated staff, and involvement of senior organizational members (e.g. Executive Directors, CEOs) helps to ensure that the benefits of the research activities are successfully integrated into the long-term programming, vision, and opportunities

For practice in research partnerships:

Formalize your relationship through an (informal or) formal agreement. Coming to a shared understanding of project priorities, approaches, goals and motivations early on can help to ensure that project structures, resources, and personnel are sufficient and appropriate to all partners' needs and expectations. When these aspects of the project

are clearly reflected in a memorandum of understanding (MOU) or a more informal partnership agreement between the respective institutions, it helps to build sustainability in the partnership and more clearly articulate realistic expectations about the commitments each partner is making and the roles they are taking on.

Establish clear and open lines of communication. The more partners are involved, the more challenging communication and decision-making can be. A clear decision-making process or strong governance structure with staff at different organizations can help promote participation in decision-making while not impeding the progress of the research agenda. New technologies make regular and face-to-face communications feasible when budgets may not always allow for in person meetings.

For funders:

Rethink your funding structures to create incentive structures that catalyzes traditional and non-traditional academic-practitioner partnerships. Funders can include involvement in research partnerships in their criteria for funding eligibility or for accruing points towards receiving funding. Non-mainstream and especially Indigenous research and knowledge mobilization should also be considered and prioritized.

Create a mix of directive and responsive research funding mechanisms. Federal-level funding is often quick to respond to Canadian and international priorities and agendas in development (e.g. feminist development priorities, SDGs, etc.). However, it seems to have fewer mechanisms to respond to the evidence-based and practices within the sectors themselves, or at least with the same speed of responsiveness. Funding structures need to both help drive research agendas on current topics, but also respond, to emerging research agendas.

For Canadian development policy:

Evidence-based policy and programs require investing in generating evidence. The development sector is feeling the squeeze of reduced funding in recent decades. Partners hope that their involvement in research and evidence-based practices can result in more and better development work from Canada, not less as has been the trend. To do this, the government needs to invest in research in the programs they fund, which will in turn generate a pool of evidence and analysis that will help further shape and inform better policy and practice.

Directly fund southern-based think tanks, research institutes and CSOs to conduct timely research. Opportunities for partnerships with Southern academics and CSOs can be better prioritized in development policies that currently require minimum involvement of Canadian CSOs and academics.