Impact of Social Sciences Blog: Five lessons for researchers who want to collaborate with governments and development organisations but avoid the common pitfalls

Page 1 of 3

Five lessons for researchers who want to collaborate with governments and development organisations but avoid the common pitfalls

The appeal of collaborating with a government agency, or an organisation funded by one, seems obvious. It provides researchers with much needed resources and information, while also offering practitioners and policymakers a way of generating the evidence needed to design better programmes. In practice, however, it's not always easy to make collaborative research work well. **Susan Dodsworth** *and* **Nic Cheeseman** *outline some simple lessons for those looking to collaborate while avoiding the common pitfalls. Ensure the benefits are felt by all involved, maintain a degree of distance and objectivity, protect the quality of consent and your publishing rights, and always choose your partners carefully.*

Over the last decade, many academic researchers have found themselves working with development organisations and policymakers more frequently, and extensively, than in the past. A growing focus by governments – especially in the UK – on making academic research more useful has created fresh opportunities to shape policy decisions, but has also generated practical and ethical headaches.

Collaborating with a government agency, or an organisation funded by one, seems a great idea in theory because it provides researchers with much needed resources and information, while offering practitioners and policymakers a way of generating the evidence they need to design better programmes. In practice, however, it's not always easy to make collaborative research work well. When managed poorly, researchers may end up being seen as a nuisance by the partners they're trying to work with. Perhaps more importantly, in the rush to launch new collaborations, it is easy to overlook the importance of maintaining academic neutrality and respecting the rights of participants.

Although some of these challenges are well known, it's hard to find concrete examples of how to tackle them, because academics are not always encouraged to talk frankly about the practicalities of making collaborations work. In a new research note for *African Affairs*, we help to fill that gap. Drawing on our experience working with the Westminster Foundation for Democracy on the Political Economy of Democracy Promotion Project, as well as some examples from other research projects, we reflect on what it's taught us about managing the problems that collaborative research can create. Although we conclude that there is no "silver bullet" that can make those problems go away, there are a number of things that researchers can do to manage those problems in an effective and ethical manner.

1. Make it work for everyone

To date, a lot of the benefit of research collaborations between academics and development organisations has gone to western researchers. This doesn't have to – and shouldn't – be the case. The San people of southern Africa recently launched their own code of ethics for researchers who want to work with them, partly due to dissatisfaction with the benefits that research has provided to their community. Listening to these concerns and responding to them can help to make sure that everyone benefits from collaborative research.

Researchers also need to make sure they don't simply perpetuate bad habits. Some – but by no means all – researchers based in "the west" are used to working with researchers based in developing countries (and in particular, Africa-based scholars) in a certain way. The latter act as research assistants who collect most of the data but get little credit for it, and have little influence over what questions are asked or how to find answers to them. If collaborations are to avoid perpetuating power imbalances entrenched by colonialism, this needs to change. Some organisations such as the Department for International Development have invested in academic partnerships that are deliberately designed to bridge the "north/south" divide. These initiatives should be applauded – and scaled up.

2. Maintain independence

Impact of Social Sciences Blog: Five lessons for researchers who want to collaborate with governments and development organisations but avoid the common pitfalls

Page 2 of 3

A big risk in undertaking collaborative research is losing objectivity. This can occur for a number of reasons: because researchers have gotten too close, undermining their ability to offer an independent viewpoint; or because researchers who want their collaboration to continue avoid criticism of their partners.

One practical tactic to deal with this is to maintain a degree of physical distance. In our case it's been valuable to have a post-doctoral researcher present in the office of our partner on a semi-regular basis, but it's also been important that she is not there all the time. This makes it easier to maintain objectivity in our analysis – as does having a project lead who is less connected to WFD and so more insulated from any "groupthink".

It is also essential to avoid assuming that practitioners won't want to hear criticism. Our experience shows that this is often not the case. Like most people, many practitioners are willing to listen to criticism, as long as it's constructive. Indeed, sometimes practitioners want academics to offer the criticisms that they – as insiders – agree with but find difficult to voice.

3. Manage consent

Arguably, the most critical challenge linked to collaborations between researchers and development organisations is protecting the quality of consent. This has ethical and practical dimensions, because people receiving a particular good or service as a result of a specific donor or project programme may fear that they will be denied these benefits if they do not agree to take part in an associated research programme. Given this, academics can assure potential research participants that not participating will not harm them in any way, but to make this promise credible data collection needs to be designed very carefully. For example, researchers have to pay attention to timing, or perhaps more accurately, sequencing. If the bulk of research is undertaken after a development intervention is complete, it's easier to ensure those who decline to participate in research are not adversely affected.

Researchers, and their partners, also need to keep in mind that what's obvious to us isn't necessarily obvious to outsiders. Having separate groups of people deliver a development programme, on the one hand, and conduct research, on the other hand, is not likely to count for much unless the distinction between those groups is made clearly visible to potential participants.

4. Protect your (publishing) rights

Some development organisations routinely require academics working with them to sign non-disclosure agreements. These require researchers to submit publications to them for approval prior to them being made public. This is particularly common when research touches on issues of security. It is understandable for government agencies and development bodies to seek some measure of influence over how the research they help to produce is used, particularly when they are sharing confidential information. Yet it's also vital for academics to protect their rights to publish, even when their findings show partners in an unfavourable light. Balance, ultimately, is key. Contracts that require consultation prior to publication are reasonable. Contracts that give development organisations a broad veto over what can be published are not.

5. Pick your partner

There's a huge amount of variation in how different organisations, and different people within any given organisation, view the value of academic research. This makes it critical for researchers to be careful who they work with. The WFD has been a great partner, but this wasn't just a matter of chance. We wouldn't have agreed to work with them if they didn't value objective research.

Moving forwards

Collaborations between academics, practitioners and policymakers are on the rise, so it is important that we work out how to get them right. We hope our analysis encourages both sides to approach collaborations in a more frank and critical way. Collaborations have a lot of potential benefits, but those benefits will only be realised if we're honest about the pitfalls, and work together to avoid them.

Before we take advantage of the new funding opportunities on offer, we must ensure we do no harm.

Impact of Social Sciences Blog: Five lessons for researchers who want to collaborate with governments and development organisations but avoid the common pitfalls

Page 3 of 3

This blog post is based on the authors' article, "[The potential and pitfalls of collaborating with development organizations and policy makers in Africa](#)", published in African Affairs (DOI: 10.1093/afraf/adx041).

Featured image credit: [5](#) by Steve Bowbrick (licensed under a [CC BY 2.0](#) license).

Note: This article gives the views of the authors, and not the position of the LSE Impact Blog, nor of the London School of Economics. Please review our [comments policy](#) if you have any concerns on posting a comment below.

About the authors

Susan Dodsworth *is a Research Fellow at the International Development Department of the University of Birmingham. Since January 2016, she has been working on the Political Economy of Democracy Promotion Project, co-authoring a number of policy papers on parliamentary strengthening, political party assistance and civil society support. Her research interests include comparative democratisation, the politics of international development, and the interaction of state-capacity and democracy.*

Nic Cheeseman *is Professor of Democracy at the International Development Department of the University of Birmingham. In addition to numerous journal articles, he is the author of "Democracy in Africa: Successes, failures and the struggle for political reform" (2015). Nic's research focuses on comparative democratisation and the politics of Africa. He writes a fortnightly column for Kenya's Daily Nation newspaper, regularly provides analysis to the UK and US governments on political developments in Africa, and tweets [@fromagehomme](#).*

Date originally posted: 2018-02-05

Permalink: http://blogs.lse.ac.uk/impactofsocialsciences/2018/02/05/five-lessons-for-researchers-who-want-to-collaborate-with-governments-and-development-organisations-but-avoid-the-common-pitfalls/

Blog homepage: http://blogs.lse.ac.uk/impactofsocialsciences/