Working with Partners in the Global South in the Arts and Humanities:

Lessons from Network +

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Antislavery
Knowledge
Network

Acknowledgements

About AKN

The Antislavery Knowledge Network: Community-led strategies for creative and heritage-based interventions in sub-Saharan Africa is a GCRF AHRC (Arts and Humanities Research Council) Network Plus programme which seeks to explore how methodologies from the arts and humanities can address contemporary forms of slavery. With the help of our partners and through community engagement with a human-rights focus we intend to deliver development impacts. The core members of the Network link the UK with West Africa by joining three of the main centres on research into slavery in the UK (CSIS – University of Liverpool, WISE – University of Hull and Rights Lab – University of Nottingham) with the University of Ghana, Legon. Through this initial partnership we led a series of small pilot projects which brought us to phase 2, a programme of commissioned research projects. These projects have successfully expanded this network to include partners in eight African countries (Ghana, Niger, Mali, Sierra Leone, Democratic Republic of the Congo, Nigeria, Kenya and Uganda). Led by a wide range of researchers both in the UK an in-country and with the support of their partners, these projects are using their research to produce artistic outputs which will be collated in phase 3 (with the outputs from our pilot phase) to produce an exhibition.

The Network Plus is an award scheme devised by UK Research and Innovation and Global Challenges Research Fund leaders offers a unique approach to development aid funding by devolving a portion of their budget to universities to lead interdisciplinary programmes which address challenges in ODA countries. This is part of the overall UK development aid package and is distributed through BEIS and DfID. These projects must be challenge-led, have international collaborations and be interdisciplinary in nature. The first round of this funding, which the AKN is a part of, has been distributed to 5 UK universities (Leeds, Nottingham, SOAS, UCL, and Liverpool) which has resulted in dozens of primary and secondary partnerships spanning 24+ countries. There has been an additional round of the Network Plus funding which has led to 11 additional programmes, but these have been excluded at this time as they have only just started and have not yet had time to develop their networks fully.

For further information and summaries of all our projects please visit:
www.liverpool.ac.uk/politics/research/research-projects/akn/

Summary

This report draws on the experiences of project managers from the GCRF (Global Challenges Research Fund) Network Plus awards. It highlights key institutional challenges faced while setting up and delivering projects with multiple partners, many of which based in the global south. The operations group was set up so the project managers could troubleshoot some of the major barriers we faced and share best practice. Combined with direct input from our collaborating partners, the report outlines these learnings and develops recommendations for academics, funding councils and development agencies in order for them to think about how, despite 'ethical' intentions, their project management and finance systems, are often not equitable and risk inflicting unintended harm. Our aim is to address how, through arts and humanities research methods, we can approach development funding critically in order to engage in sustainable and equitable partnerships in the Global South.

Introduction

Global Challenges Research funding was initiated by the UK Government in 2015 with a goal to increase research capacity and capability in the UK and in developing countries by generating innovative solutions to development issues. This funding supports projects which innovate through interdisciplinarity and through partnership building. As recipients of this funding the Arts and Humanities Research Council through UK Research and Innovation developed a devolved funding scheme which filters money through UK institutions to ODA recipient countries called the Network Plus.[1] From the perspective of those projects that were successful in the initial round of Network Plus awards we have seen first-hand how the intentions of this funding have been realised and how, through the dedication of all participants, relationships have been built with overseas institutions regardless of their type and affiliation (i.e. Universities, NGOs, or religious bodies, etc.). This report uses these experiences to summarise challenges of this type of funding and develop a set of recommendations intended to inform current and future collaborative research projects.

The report draws upon experiences of the Network Plus project managers group, with input from our in-country partners and supported by secondary sources and focuses on the key challenges we have experienced in setting up and distributing GCRF funding. This report will consider how research projects and networks in the arts and humanities can help build strong and sustainable working relationships with researchers and organisations in the Global South. Through these challenges we aim to make reasonable recommendations as to address whether that which is 'ethical' is also 'equitable' in the context of relationships with Global South partners. It is our hope that this report will help academics, funding councils and the development community to reflect on how their systems and procedures can be designed to prevent and mitigate potential harms.

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1   The Arts and Humanities Research Council is British research council; non-departmental public body under the parent umbrella of UK Research and Innovation. https://www.ukri.org

Challenges with GCRF and devolved funding

In 2017, the ICAI review of the GCRF programme outlined a series of findings on the operational management of the scheme.[2] Among many comments and recommendations one of the main weaknesses identified by ICAI were the challenges working with Southern partners, which were unresolved. Though the GCRF has made good progress by explicitly valuing complementary skills and knowledge, setting a more equitable tone to partnerships and widening participation, the ICAI report noted that in the developing stages of the programme there was little effort to include partners from the Global South in the formation of research strategies and priorities leading to a systemic imbalance. The predominant model that has been devised for GCRF means that funding is filtered through UK institutions. The lead organisation can then *choose* to involve international universities as sub-grantees and is indeed *encouraged* to include Southern partners, but this does not automatically lead to equitable partnerships.

The Network Plus project managers group identified 5 key issues or challenges which illustrate the tensions between ethical research and equitable partnerships, and the specific factors relating to arts & humanities research.

1. Institutions not equipped to work with large set of international partners.

2. Language and terminology due to multilingualism as well as specialist language

3. Short lead in times which make engaging new communities difficult as this means reduced opportunity to build trust in partnerships

4. Administrative support functions do not hold the values of project teams. Institutional documents not fit for purpose.

5. Institutional practices create barriers to research and cause unintended harm.

By placing the financial and research management responsibilities onto the Northern institution the current model ensures that the money is filtered through them which leads to questions about how much is actually making its way to the Global South and through which mechanisms?

BEIS and the main delivery partners have entrusted this responsibility to UK institutions, but they do not seem to have considered fully whether UK institutions, which may have limited experience with working in the Global South, may also find this challenging. Lived experiences of the Network plus project staff have shown institutions are generally ill-equipped to deal with transfer funds abroad, making payments on time and processing contracts in an appropriate timeframe to meet with the needs of the funding. They also fail to understand the different financial systems and norms in the countries in which we have partners. In order to bring some continuity to how GCRF projects operate institutionally, project managers from the Network Plus projects themselves initiated an operational committee to identify and troubleshoot some of the main institutional blockages which have emerged while developing relationships.[3]

Building from the five key challenges listed above, the project managers group identified a number of core areas where, operationally, we have faced issues which have impacted upon the building of equitable partnerships:
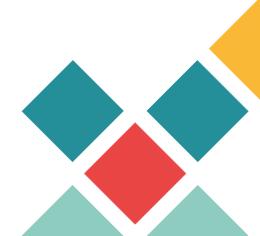
Applications

The model of the Network Plus projects requires a minimum of 40% of the budget be spent on the commissioning of grants. We are encouraged to use these grants to support partnerships with Low and Middle-Income Countries (LMICs), i.e. those based in countries and territories eligible to receive official development assistance (ODA). Each of the five-original network plus leads wrote and designed their own application forms. These forms with their supporting call documents were then distributed through already established networks and through the UKRI website. Though projects aimed to be fair in their application processes, there was a learning curve in developing an application that captured all the required information but was also accessible to researchers in ODA countries.

However, there were a limited number of LMIC-led applications received. This was because of the use of UK-focused academic and financial language and terminology, the issues of translation into languages other than English, limited lead in time and no additional resources to help Global South applicants prepare or find suitable UK partners for large grants. There were also no GCRF requirements to consider language and little institutional understanding of what issues this may create. When asked how partners found the application process one key in-country partner commented,

"The funding opportunities have been accessible except for the application processes sometimes being complicated to understand what is required because of the language and words used in the application. It would be great if the language and the words used could be more simple and easy to understand."

 There were also issues in getting the call out to new networks in the Global South caused by short application timescales. These actions, despite the stated intentions of the Network Plus, meant that many of the most highly evaluated large grant applications came from organisations with already established UK partnerships.

2   Independent Commission for Aid Impact. *Global Challenges Research Fund: A rapid review*. (2017). *https://icai.independent.gov.uk/wp-content/up-loads/ICAI-GCRF-Review.pdf*

3   Isobel Templer, Ines Soria-Donlan, Helen Bryant, Oana Borlea, Richard Axelby. The GCRF Managers Network. *https://gcrfmanagersnetwork.word-press.com*

Due Diligence and Contracts

Payments

Though the issue of applications was the responsibility of project teams the post-award issues, which project managers and their cohorts have identified has being among the most harmful to partnership-building, are the institutional processes which govern due diligence, contracts, ethics/safeguarding and payments. In each of these cases there is a complex bureaucratic system in place which is hard to penetrate causing long delays in setup. This meant that commissioned projects which were ready to go with activities and research participants were made to postpone and delay some of their outputs.

When setting up new partners on university systems in order for payments to be processed, the required documents which need completing include due diligence and contract signing. In the case of due diligence, questionnaires demand a lot of UK-relevant information that may not be applicable in other contexts. So, where policies were missing, projects often delayed submitting forms as they feared they would no longer be eligible for the funding if they were missing a document. The due diligence forms require a lot of time to complete and to ensure that all the correct supporting documents are included. This is much easier for UK institutions which have departments dedicated to responding to these types of queries but when working with LMIC partners it has been proven to be burdensome and time consuming, especially when organisations lacked appropriate experience, knowledge or infrastructure.

Contract negotiations can also cause delays and issues due to the inexperience of UK universities in acting as grant making entities. There has been confusion between sub-awards and collaboration agreements and difficulties with expanding UK versions of university templates to be fit for purpose. Natural delays in contract signing caused by having multiple signatories has been made worse due to institutional misunderstanding as to how the commissioning process works and who should be responsible for setting out the terms and conditions. In some cases, legal departments at universities took months to respond to project managers for assistance in developing appropriate terms or just sent standard collaboration agreement terms which are not suitable for this type of commissioned project funding. A suggestion on how to address this issue would be to make standard the use of Service Level Agreements (SLAs) for Universities such as those used in the commercial/private sector.

Making payments as a grant making procedure to partners also exposed limitations from an institutional perspective. Despite contracts including agreements regarding how and when payments are made, the reality is that these have often not been processed within the agreed time frame. This is largely due to underestimation of the length of time internal processes take, and the initial back and forth required for getting international vendors set up. This led, in some cases, to in-country partners pre-financing their activity as they awaited invoices to be paid, putting their own institutional budgets at risk. Though there may be certain expectations from the in-country partners perspective on how the partnership should be managed financially, UK institutions do their researchers a disservice by not meeting their own requirements and expectations which are set out in contracts. This affects trust between the researchers and leads to strained working relationships.

Communications

Ethics/safeguarding/risk

When setting out agreements or contracts and getting due diligence signed off, some researchers have experienced barriers due to language and terminology. The university required forms were only available in English and even though LMIC PI's and Co-Is may understand the language, contracts and due diligence forms are often signed and completed by specialist departments which may not have English as a first language (or at all). This often led to contracts being signed out of duty without true understanding which has had implications during the project especially in instances where the financial requirements have not been understood. In the case of due diligence, there have been issues with UK institutions not accepting non-English supporting documents. Only providing or accepting English versions meant an increased amount of support time was required to provide translations.

One recipient of the Network Plus devolved funding, whose partners are based in a francophone country, told us that there was an underestimation on the amount of work required. This included the necessity to translate all documents into French or English (including project document and budgets, due diligence form, collaboration agreements, reports and website texts) and translate all the main administrative correspondence to make sure that all the collaborators could be involved with project management.

The problem is there is no systematic attention to linguistic diversity on the part of the institutions hosting and managing these large awards. Currently there is no GCRF requirement to include multilingualism in the application or communications processes and little institutional understanding of how time consuming this can be. Many words used within the anglophone financial and development world are not easily translatable and fieldworkers often lack guidance from institutions on how to communicate concepts such as 'gender', 'accountability', 'resilience', and 'sustainability'.[4] These institutional governance procedures and Angolonormativity can be seen as exemplifying the power dynamic and (neo)colonial nature of UK university systems when working with partners in the global south.

Safeguarding means different things to different groups and working within the university setting means that this is largely addressed through the ethics process. But when it comes to safeguarding in a GCRF research context, there has been proven to be little understanding from an institutional perspective about what this means in practice and in different contexts. Current institutional safeguarding policies often ignore researchers, students or participants outside of the UK. Likewise, non-UK approaches to ethics and safeguarding are often not formalised or use different language and terminology which makes them difficult to include in formal ethics procedures. These ultimately have to be signed off by the host institution even if there is a commitment or principle of seeking approval at a local level. Processes for consent and identifying risk as well as definitions of vulnerability in-country are often different in LMIC communities and have sometimes meant that UK ethics committees have pushed back on research working with those designated as belonging to vulnerable groups.

As well as considering whether the research itself is ethical, one thing that has been made apparent is in respect to the institutional processes themselves and how these can impact on LMIC organisations when commissioning research. When considering ethics, safeguarding and risk, it is important to not only consider how the research being conducted needs to be compliant but also how our institutional approaches to things like finance and contracts, and how the extractive nature of the research itself, could be causing harm.[5]

4   *Respecting Communities in International Development: Languages and Cultural Understanding.* The Listening Zones report. June 2018. https://www.reading.ac.uk/web/files/modern-languages-and-european-studies/Listening_zones_report_-EN.pdf

5   Balch, A, Garimella, S, Mansaray, B, Renton, L, Smith, A and Vaughn, L. *Guidance on Safeguarding in International Development Research.* UKCDR (2020). https://www.ukcdr.org.uk/resource/guidance-on-safeguarding-in-international-development-research/

Lessons from Network +

Key Findings and recommendations

The points mentioned above have had direct and indirect impacts on the AKN and other Network Plus projects partnership building. In this section we have also incorporated comments from our partners and secondary resources in order to make focused recommendations for Universities, funders, and the development community as to how they can support more equitable partnerships. We will also argue how projects and partnerships rooted in the arts and humanities have enormous potential to support strong and sustainable working relationships. These recommendations encourage researchers and institutions to fully co-develop their systems and projects in order to create inclusive working arrangements which value the expertise of all parties in the research process.

The first point speaks directly to the first challenge listed above. This is **the importance in co-design and co-ownership when developing systems and including project and financial administrators/managers in the set-up of joint programmes**. In order to create user friendly internal systems, we should be engaging with our partners to ensure that new systems are being developed in a way that benefits all parties. This starts with changing the way we value experience such as researcher experience (researcher/PI) over lived experience (INGO/community group) and needs to be embedded culturally in call designs as well as research design. By including people from non-traditionally academic or research-based industries in the early stages of partnership building and systems development, we aim to break through the 'unspoken hierarchies of evidence' which marginalise knowledge production, especially from LMIC.[6] By creating an interdisciplinary team which recognises non-academic qualifications and experience including those from community participants, and non-academic support staff, UK institutions can develop systems which actually support equitable partnerships and as a result strengthen outcomes and impact and more effective change strategies with in their own projects.

It is apparent that administrative support and need is often side-lined in the initial phases of partnership development and then introduced in a top-down manner once things, like contracts, are already signed off.[7] Often, when it comes to negotiating between academic and institutional perspectives on issues that relate to project management, institutions tend to toe the line of contracts and institutional policies in the name of fairness and equality without considering equitability or the relationships that are being developed between the academics and their partners. Therefore, often adjacent support functions are side lined without consideration on how institutional involvement directly affects the research and therefore the partnership. This lack of flexibility and understanding from institutional support networks can cause an imbalance between the partners which can lead to tensions and lack of trust.

Another of the key challenges was short application and project activity timelines which were not conducive to new partnership development or engaging with new communities. This can mean that when funding becomes available many of the same people continue to receive funding as the relationships are already established. One-way funders can encourage new partnerships to develop is to **allow longer lead in times to develop relationships with a corresponding delay in the production of outputs until after this time.** Funding should be provided to support this period of partnership development and given as a reserve from the main budget, partners should then be allowed to reforecast based on outcomes of the collaborative working initiation, with the benefit of requesting a small percentage of additional funds to cover unexpected costs which may become apparent.

Funders could also make funding more accessible to new groups (under-represented NGOs, early career researchers, community social enterprise groups) especially those in ODA countries by **co-developing calls with capacity development in bid writing** which also allows for comments on application processes and questionnaires. GCRF speaks about capacity building within communities but this needs to be both ways, not just the North building capacity in the South but the North also learning from the South; not in an extractive way but through collaboration so each group can be seen as developing their systems jointly in order to work better together. One way we could affectively incorporate the experiences of our potential partners as a funder is to consider co-developing calls with a capacity-building element so that potential applicants have already had time to engage with the subject and to consider how their research may be included. This would also give us the opportunity to co-develop the application so that the right questions are being asked of the applicants in order to pull out the relevant information. We can then also use that time to explain any mandatory requirements which need to be included for eligibility.

 Because these programmes are administered through UK institutions that tend to use central support systems researchers often suffer from a lack of institutional empathy due to differing values and operational procedures which can contribute to unintended harm. Yet we rely on UK-based management practices, side-lining in-country expertise. In order to decolonise the systemic prejudices of UK administrative practices we should seek to **encourage training for administrators in-country to support local researchers within the partnership.** This could be sourced within project budgets as part of the initial partnership development phase as suggested above.

When hearing from our partners in-country, one thing they identified was the desire for further introductory training about our systems so as to reduce the learning curve when projects are live. Helping partners to understand and contribute to the processes that are being developed in UK institutions could also mean that UK based administrative involvement could be reduced. Allowing for a larger portion of administrative budget contributions to go in-country as well.

This leads us to the final recommendation, **recognise the power dynamics created by money.** AKN in-country partners have commented on the effect the UK institutional financial bureaucracy has had on their ability to effectively execute the project activity within the timelines set out in their proposals. In some cases, where working with Global North partners in a formalised capacity was a new experience, our partners found the financial reconciliation process of claiming expenditure in arrears burdensome as there were often not enough reserves to fully carry out activity. This meant that the organisations we were funding were forced to be flexible in their financial systems, something we were unable to do ourselves due to the inflexibility of internal systems. As identified by an experienced UK based international researcher in our network, this lack of understanding from UK institutions of the challenges LMIC researchers experience in engaging with this funding has a *direct* impact on our ability to create equitable partnerships. In order to avoid some of these issues this researcher underlined the value of co-designing projects with internal central support systems involved from the beginning. This way projects can be designed in a way that is more accessible for the groups with whom we wish to engage.

6   Newman, K Bharadwaj S, Fansman J. *Rethinking Research Impact through Principles for Fair and Equitable Partnerships.* Institute of Development Studies, 2019.
7   Ibid, 15

Conclusions

References:

Much of the literature addressing partnership-building in the international context does not fail to recognise the inherent inequality between North/South relationships due to the colonial history of international development aid. Whereas traditional development aid funding is more of a top-down approach, funding such as GCRF explicitly seeks to de-colonise international development aid by filtering it through to alternative groups which would not normally receive aid funding, such as researchers. It is a step in the right direction for governmental funding bodies to signpost some of its aid money in this way but due to ill equipped management systems this has not been as effective as it could have been, and highlights how systemic the issues are that require decolonising.

The arts and humanities are well situated to address some of the most apparent systemic problems as the methods used are often less restrictive and allow for more diversity in expertise in the backgrounds of participants. They also lend to a more critical approach which allows us to reframe the language of development. Together, scholars, researchers, activists and administrators from the global north and global south can use arts and humanities projects to draw on a deeper understanding of historical and geographical context, with cultural and linguistic diversity, to lead us towards a place that better illuminates those inequalities that persist. Though ongoing support and sustainability of programmes are directly affected by institutional administrative practices, work rooted in the arts and humanities can flesh them out using participatory and action-based research methods which are uniquely suited to collaborative working and allow us to improve our practices through critical reflection and evaluation. Through this we cast a critical eye over current policies which govern practise and work together with our collaborators in-country, whom are directly affected by the inefficiencies of these policies, in order to improve them.

Finally, this report aims to make a contribution to the 'community-based' approach which joins many of Network Plus projects – to support research that enables engagement with local communities in order to serve their needs and priorities. It is essential that the approach to partnerships delivers resources in an equitable way that allows for fairness in international development research.[8] This is done through engaging specific cultural communities to meet the challenges of neighbourhoods by providing space and helping them to embrace a vision of an inclusive community future—one in which residents can stay in a place and thrive as it is revitalized.[9] One way this has done is to provide equal opportunities of involvement for communities in the development of accessible activities and resources so that they meet the real life needs of the community.

Community engagement can be used in the context of international partnership development by applying the idea that communities know themselves best. Community engagement on its own does not necessarily constitute equality or equity, as it can be superficial and does not take into consideration ethics or power dynamics between beneficiaries, especially in situations where money is flowing from one institution to another. In order for the arts and humanities to be effective in partnership development and sustainability we must focus building relationships with local communities as change, especially in the GCRF context, will not happen if we only work with the organisations and researchers with whom we are already are engaged.

Conducting research and partnership building in an international context, as evidenced in this report, faces considerable difficulties due to multiple barriers from organisational systems and current policies, all of which may affect good will. Despite having the best intentions and an ethical framework for working practices, systemic processes can have a direct effect on relationships between researchers and the LMIC organisations with which they work. Projects based in the arts and humanities can help re-focus the conversation around how these processes have unintended impact on our partnerships by encouraging and providing the space to hold uncomfortable conversations about the harm these policies inflict and provide opportunities for reflection. By acknowledging the inward facing nature of our internal systems and their barriers to international partnerships we can focus on re-building systems which are more equitable.

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8   Kalima Rose, Milly Hawk, Daniel Jeremy Liu. *Creating Change through Arts, Culture, and Equitable Development: A Policy and Practice Primer*. PolicyLink, 2017.
9   Ibid, 6